R.N.I. No. MAHENG/2007/22934 Reg. No: MCS/181/2019-21

FOR THE HOSPITALITY PROFESSIONAL

Hospitality BIZ

www.hospitalitybizindia.com
AUGUST 2026
VOL 18 | ISSUE 9 | PAGES 36
PRICE: ₹150

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Centre sanctions INR 5,756 crore for tourism infrastructure, opens new opportunities for hospitality sector

HBI Staff | Hyderabad

The Centre has approved 117 tourism infrastructure projects worth ₹5,756.62 crore over the last two financial years, signalling a major push towards destination development, connectivity enhancement and niche tourism growth across India.

The investments span heritage, spiritual, eco-tourism, beach, tribal and MICE destinations, creating new opportunities for hotels, resorts, homestays and tourism-linked businesses in both established and emerging markets.

According to information shared by Union Tourism Minister Gajendra Singh Shekhawat in the Lok Sabha, the projects are being implemented through schemes including Swadesh Darshan 2.0, PRASHAD, Challenge-Based Destination Development, Assistance to Central Agencies, DA-JUGA, and the Special Assistance to States for Capital Investment (SASCI) programme.

The largest allocation of ₹3,295.76 crore has been sanctioned under SASCI, supporting convention centres, heritage destinations, eco-tourism parks, waterfront developments, museums, wellness retreats and border tourism infrastructure. Swadesh Darshan 2.0 accounts for projects worth ₹1,565.62 crore, while the Challenge-Based Destination Development Scheme has approved projects valued at nearly ₹688 crore.

For the hospitality industry, the investments are expected to accelerate demand generation in Tier-II and Tier-III destinations, particularly in spiritual, heritage and experiential tourism markets where hotel development activity has already been gaining momentum.

Alongside physical infrastructure, the government is strengthening the tourism ecosystem through the Incredible India Digital Platform, expanded e-Visa facilities for travellers from 174 countries, a 24×7 multilingual tourist helpline and improved air connectivity under the UDAN scheme. The Ministry of Tourism has also intensified efforts to promote high-growth segments such as wellness, medical tourism, adventure tourism, destination weddings and MICE travel.

The latest round of investments reinforces tourism's growing role as an economic growth driver, with infrastructure development increasingly viewed as a catalyst for hotel investments, employment generation and regional development across emerging destinations in India. ■

AHAR challenges Maharashtra FDA crackdown, plans representation to FSSAI and Union Health Ministry

HBI Staff | Hyderabad

A fresh confrontation is brewing between Maharashtra's hospitality industry and the state's food safety regulator, with the Indian Hotel & Restaurant Association (AHAR) preparing to approach the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAIFSSAI) and the Union Health Ministry over recent enforcement actions by the Maharashtra Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

The move comes amid an intensified statewide crackdown on food safety and hygiene violations by the FDA, which has led to multiple inspections, licence suspensions and seizures across hotels, restaurants, clubs and food establishments in recent weeks.

While AHAR has maintained that it supports stringent action against unhygienic food businesses, the association has raised concerns over the legality and implementation of certain FDA notifications, arguing that enforcement must remain consistent with the provisions of the Food Safety and Standards Act, 2006.

According to AHAR, some of the recent notifications issued by the Maharashtra FDA have created uncertainty among licensed food business operators and are allegedly being misused by individuals to exert pressure on establishments.

The association plans to seek clarification from FSSAI and senior officials at the Union Health Ministry on whether the notifications are aligned with the national food safety framework and to request safeguards against their alleged misuse.

Vijay K. Shetty, President of AHAR, said the industry is not seeking reduced accountability but greater consistency in enforcement.

"The action by FDA is creating fear and panic among hoteliers. The reputation and goodwill created by our forefathers over so many years is also getting shattered. We do not ask for lesser accountability. We ask for equal accountability. A plate of food carries the same responsibility whether it comes from a five-star kitchen or a roadside cart. Let the State choose one standard and hold every food provider, licensed and unlicensed alike, to it. Anything less is not regulation. It is selective enforcement dressed as reform," Shetty said. ■

FHRAI Convention 2026 to spotlight tourism growth in Varanasi

HBI Staff | Hyderabad

The Federation of Hotel & Restaurant Associations of India (FHRAI), the apex body representing India's hospitality industry, is set to host the 56th FHRAI Annual Convention from 21st to 23rd August 2026 at Taj Ganges, Varanasi, under the inspiring theme "Ananta Kashi: Leading the Future of Tourism through Spirit, Culture, Cuisine and Craft."

Supported by the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, with Uttar Pradesh Tourism as the Partner State, the three-day convention will be one of India's largest and most influential hospitality and tourism gatherings. The event will bring together policymakers, industry leaders, investors, entrepreneurs, hospitality professionals, tourism stakeholders, and thought leaders to deliberate on the future of India's tourism and hospitality sector.

The prestigious convention is expected to witness the participation of Yogi Adityanath, Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, as the Chief Guest, along with Gajendra Singh Shekhawat, Union Minister of Tourism & Culture, Government of India; Satish Mahana as Guest of Honour Speaker, Uttar Pradesh Legislative Assembly ; Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu, Chief Minister of Himachal Pradesh; Kanak Vardhan Singh Deo, Deputy Chief Minister of Odisha; Jaiveer Singh, Minister of Tourism & Culture, Government of Uttar Pradesh; Ravindra Jaiswal, Minister of State (Independent Charge), Government of Uttar Pradesh; Rohan Khaunte, Minister for Tourism, Government of Goa; Bhuvnesh Kumar, IAS, Secretary, Ministry of Tourism, Government of India; Suman Billa, IAS, Additional Secretary & Director General, Ministry of Tourism, Government of India; Amrit Abhijat, IAS, Additional Chief Secretary, Tourism, Culture and Religious Affairs, Government of Uttar Pradesh; along with several other senior policymakers and distinguished industry leaders.

The convention will also feature an impressive line-up of global hospitality leaders and industry stalwarts, including Puneet Chhatwal, Managing Director & CEO, IHCL (Taj Group); Anil Chadha, Managing Director, ITC Hotels; Dimitris Manikis, President & Managing Director – EMEA, Wyndham Hotels & Resorts; K.B. Kachru, Chairman – South Asia, Radisson Hotel Group; Nikhil Sharma, Managing Director & COO – South Asia, Radisson Hotel Group; Zubin Saxena, Senior Vice President & Regional Head – South Asia, Hilton; Sudeep Jain, Managing Director – South West Asia, IHG Hotels & Resorts; Rahool Macarius, Market Managing Director – Eurasia, Wyndham Hotels & Resorts; Jatin Khanna, CEO, Sarovar Hotels; Vikram Lalvani, Managing Director & CEO, Sterling Holiday Resorts; Vishvapreet Singh Cheema, President, Lemon Tree Hotels along with several other leading voices from India's hospitality ecosystem.

The inaugural ceremony on 21st August will feature welcome addresses by the leadership of FHRAI and eminent industry personalities. The evening will also host the FHRAI Bharat Gaurav Awards, honouring distinguished personalities for their outstanding contribution to the cultural and artistic heritage of Varanasi. Delegates will also witness vibrant cultural performances celebrating the city's timeless traditions, followed by the inauguration of the exhibition and a networking gala dinner.

Throughout the three-day convention, delegates will participate in high-impact business sessions covering key issues and emerging opportunities shaping the future of the hospitality industry, including:

- Building resilient hospitality brands and future-ready business strategies
- Spiritual, wellness and experiential tourism
- Weddings and destination celebrations
- Sustainable hospitality design and infrastructure
- MICE tourism and India's emergence as a global events destination
- Gastronomy and culinary tourism
- Ease of Doing Business and tourism policy reforms
- Technology, AI and digital transformation in hospitality
- The evolving future of restaurants and food service businesses
- Emerging opportunities for travel agents and tour operators

Beyond business deliberations, the convention has been thoughtfully designed to showcase the spiritual and cultural grandeur of Varanasi. Delegates will experience curated visits to Swarved Mahamandir Dham, Shri Kashi Vishwanath Temple, the iconic Ganga Aarti at Namo Ghat, and the unforgettable Subah-e-Banaras Cruise Ride, offering an authentic immersion into one of the world's oldest living cities.

The convention will conclude with the Valedictory Session, featuring the FHRAI Excellence Awards for Hospitality Students and the Hospitality Industry, recognising outstanding contributions towards strengthening India's tourism and hospitality ecosystem.

Surendra Kumar Jaiswal, President, FHRAI, said,"The 56th FHRAI Annual Convention will serve as a landmark platform for meaningful dialogue on the future of Indian tourism and hospitality. Hosted in the spiritual capital of India, the convention reflects our vision of combining heritage with innovation while creating opportunities for industry collaboration, policy discussions and sustainable growth. We look forward to welcoming delegates from across India and abroad to Varanasi for this prestigious gathering."

Garish Oberoi, Chairman , Convention Organizing Committee Hony. Secretary- FHRAII, said, "It is our privilege to welcome delegates from across India and around the world to the 56th FHRAI Annual Convention in the sacred city of Varanasi. This convention has been thoughtfully designed to encourage meaningful dialogue, foster partnerships, and inspire new ideas that will shape the future of India's hospitality and tourism sector. We look forward to providing every participant with an enriching blend of business, culture and unforgettable experiences." ■

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Food Safety!

For an industry that loves talking about farm-to-fork produce, sustainable sourcing and chef-led experiences, hospitality is suddenly confronting a far more basic question: Is the food safe?

Recent inspections across luxury hotels in Bengaluru reportedly uncovered expired milk, rotten meat, fungal vegetables and storage lapses. The surprise wasn't that violations existed; rather it was that they were found in some of the country's most prominent hospitality establishments.

But the bigger story lies beyond the raids. For example, in Telangana, nearly 400 food samples reportedly failed quality checks in 2025-26. Yet not a single penalty was imposed and not a single conviction was secured during the period. Violations are being detected, but accountability seems to be stuck somewhere.

This exposes a larger problem. As a society, we Indians have become experts at adjustment. We adjust to traffic, poor infrastructure and delayed services. Increasingly, we seem willing to adjust to adulterated milk, analogue paneer, reused cooking oil and questionable ingredients entering the food chain. Outrage lasts for a news cycle, but our adjustment lasts much longer.

For hospitality, this is a moment of reckoning. Guests may forgive a service lapse or a delayed check-in. However, they are far less forgiving when trust in food is compromised. After all, trust is not built in a grand lobby or through a loyalty programme. It is built in kitchens, cold rooms, storage racks and safe procurement practices.

Which brings us to Maharashtra FDA Commissioner Tukaram Mundhe. His enforcement drive has reportedly led to the suspension of licences of nearly 100 food establishments across the state. While his actions have drawn criticism from some quarters, they have also highlighted a question worth asking: Does India need more officers like Mundhe?

As India positions itself as a global tourism and hospitality destination, food safety deserves the same urgency as investment and infrastructure because our next generation deserves better than learning to "adjust" with unsafe food.

When it comes to food, accountability, not adjustment, should be on the menu.

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Printed and Published by Sheldon Eric Santwan On Behalf Of Saffron Synergies Pvt. Ltd, Printed At Indigo Press (India) Private Limited, 1c/716, 21 Bharat Crown Compound, A.G. Pawar Marg, Dadoji Konddeo X Road, Ghodapdev, Byculla (East), Mumbai 400 027 And Published From Saffron Synergies Pvt. Ltd. 902, Cozy Apartments Chs Ltd. Yari Road, Versova, Andheri (West), Mumbai 400 061. **Editor : Sheldon Eric Santwan**

Real Innovation Context | Tourism Infrastructure Development For Hospitality Growth 2026

By **Prof. Satish Jayaram,** PhD – Co-Creator | Cornell Certified CHRO Leader | Principal WGSHA

Authors Tidd & Bessant suggest a simple way to examine whether innovation truly works. Product, Process, Position and Paradigm; their 4Ps provide a logical framework. This piece examines hospitality growth across emerging destinations through these four lenses. Will innovating at Destination India benefit it from investments in tourism infrastructure? India 2026 – 2030 - 2047 has an exciting product lifecycle trajectory than ever before. And Brand Bharat must surely be on the way, mostly so, as true!

1. **Product Perspective:** Blue ocean, never-before, unsaturated eco-grids, spiritual, rural, culinary and cultural experiences are enhancing its product portfolio. Introspective consumption facilitated by initiatives like Swadesh Darshan represent a sustainable domestic market; greater than international arrivals. Niche, bespoke, unique services and experiences whether wildlife, nature or even tribal - anthropological discoveries of human civilization development are worth incubating. Branded chain expansions across Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities provide consistent options; where basic infrastructure existed once. Tourism may be slow but is steadily the single largest sustainable economic contributor for slow burn investments. Change needs adoption of customer facing technologies to meet complex expectations. The writing on the wall justifies building robust investment portfolios to curate great memories!
2. **Process Perspective:** Infrastructure investment outcomes are visible in the UDAAN drive, growing airports, ports, public infrastructure developing multi-market accommodation and local dining QSR options nationwide. Middle class audiences are now moving through high-speed train connectivity; a fundamental process enabling logistics and transportation. It justifies manufacturing and vendor network investments - fully rewarded by dynamic consumption and digi-wallets! A process enables accessing reservations, tickets, deals and options via seamless smart phone-enabled digital networks. It already deploys tech-enabled business model networks via spontaneous consumption. What has been made relevant is in line with dynamic demands. Aggregators and gig-ecosystems are changing the rules of engagement, irrespective of bundling and unbundling processes. UPI activated shopping processes provide access to virtually everything that a tourist requires on any Indian journey.
3. **Position Perspective:** Invest India's sector portfolio promises youth driven, vibrant economic growth, because USD 60 billion is a good target to achieve. Growing investments despite talent crunches and supply constraints are being navigated simply. Clearly, placing the investment ecosystem as the core promise provides a powerful outcome. Contributing sectors thrive whether pharmacy, manufacturing, textiles, infrastructure, SMEs, digital infrastructure or AI enabled data centres. Growing education, skilling, services powered by animation, visual effects, gaming with creativity leave us a compelling story to tell. Sustainability, climate tech, energy transition, healthcare and medical value tourism are the icing on the cake. Tourism tax reforms and implementation will only make coming deals sweeter. Future proofing for a USD 600 billion business in perspective justifies the INR 2500 Cr. outlay as a starting point this year.
4. **Paradigm Shift:** But attitudes need rapid change, remember the stereotyping of the quintessential Indian traveller? Social skills, community building and a deeper penetration of mindsets in early school ecosystems is the answer. Local, authentic, language-agnostic solutions at the grassroot level for life-skill education are critical. Higher education solutions will not deliver the goods as quickly as a national skilling - culture sensitive ecosystem can. But does our population respect these foundational pre-requisites when availing tourism experiences today? Are minimum common public behaviours practiced in hygiene and sanitation? Do travelling populations represent the new, bold, branded, unabashed and educated India that must remain incredible? Is there public and collective accountability for the neo-Indian experience despite change? Are we getting reformatted, by old habits again?

Finally, risks associated with slow social change are real. Sometimes infrastructure investment results are obscured by the hope of scaled future volume. Real empowerment needs investment, in education and skilling. Local populations must uphold socially integrated commitments supplementing emerging tourism businesses. The 5th P is people, our population of consumers and stakeholders, genuinely committed to driving, sustaining and bequeathing a tourism friendly nation to our youth for 2047… ■

The views expressed within this column are the opinion of the author, and may not necessarily be endorsed by the publication.

News Bulletin

Ironhill India acquires US brewery chain, Ccreates INR450-crore global hospitality platform

HBI Staff | Hyderabad

In a landmark cross-border hospitality deal, Ironhill India has acquired and revived Pennsylvania-based Iron Hill Brewery & Restaurant, creating a unified hospitality platform with combined revenues of approximately INR 450 crore and a presence across India and the United States.

The acquisition is a rare example of an Indian hospitality company rescuing and acquiring an established American food and beverage brand. Ironhill India invested around USD 7 million in the transaction, including USD 4 million to revive and reopen five US outlets that had ceased operations following bankruptcy proceedings.

The merger brings together Ironhill India's brewery-led hospitality business with Ironhill USA's nearly three-decade legacy in the craft beer and restaurant sector. The combined entity plans to expand to 43 outlets by 2030, including 27 locations in India and 16 in the United States. The deal also gives Ironhill India access to the global Ironhill trademark, established brewing expertise and operational systems developed in the US market.

Teja Chekuri, Co-Founder and Managing Director, Ironhill India, said the merger formalises a shared vision that had already been taking shape between the two organisations. "This merger gives us the strategic framework and global platform to pursue that vision at a scale neither organisation could have achieved independently," he said.

Sree Harsha Vadlamudi, Co-Founder and Board Director, Ironhill India, described the partnership as a long-term growth play that combines the strengths of two dynamic hospitality markets.

Under the merged structure, both businesses will operate under common brand, product and service standards. Brewing and culinary teams will collaborate as a global innovation hub, developing menu concepts and brewing formulations for both markets.

The revival has already led to the reopening of five US locations and the restoration of nearly 500 jobs and vendor relationships, underscoring the broader economic impact of the transaction.

The company expects significant revenue growth and plans further international expansion through 2026 and 2027, signalling growing global ambitions among Indian hospitality brands. ■

Kiplings: A Slice of Europe

Asmita Mukherjee | Hyderabad

In a city where cafés seem to sprout up faster than monsoon mushrooms, standing out takes more than good coffee and an Instagram-friendly corner. Kiplings at Inorbit Mall, Hyderabad manages to do just that. With its charming blue-and-white palette, soft moccasin sofas, wooden decks and inviting bakery displays, the café has the polish of an upscale European eatery. Yet unlike many of its design-forward peers, the menu remains surprisingly approachable and wallet-friendly.

Complementing the culinary experience is a thoughtfully designed space overlooking the serene waters of Durgam Cheruvu Lake. The setting feels bright and airy, making it easy to lose track of time over a leisurely meal or coffee.

The first thing that draws diners in is the counter laden with freshly baked loaves, pastries and cakes. It is the kind of display that makes ordering dessert feel inevitable rather than optional.

The menu leans comfortably into crowd-pleasing favourites. The Fish & Chips arrived crisp and golden, with flaky fish fingers tucked beneath a crunchy coating, while the Chicken Tenders were crispy on the outside and juicy inside, which was soul-satisfying. The Korean Chicken Wings, glazed in a sweet-spicy sauce, packed plenty of flavour and proved to be one of the standout appetisers. A bowl of Tomato Chicken Soup offered comforting, homestyle flavours, while a side of Classic French Fries arrived exactly as they should, hot, crisp and impossible to stop nibbling on. The menu's selection of burgers and sandwiches further reinforces Kipling's position as an all-day café designed for both casual meals and leisurely catch-ups.

The beverages of Kiplings are equally compelling. The Pistachio Latte was creamy and delicately nutty, while the French Dark Hot Chocolate delivered deep cocoa notes with a luxurious richness. The indulgent Nutella Brownie Shake felt less like a beverage and more like a dessert in disguise, packed with chocolatey decadence.

But the real finale arrived from the dessert counter. The Hazelnut Caramel Chocolate Slice was a study in textures and flavours, layers of rich chocolate sponge, silky caramel, roasted hazelnut praline and smooth chocolate mousse finished with a glossy glaze. Every bite delivered a satisfying contrast between crunch, creaminess and intense chocolate notes.

The Classic Opera Cake paid homage to the beloved French confection, layering almond sponge with coffee buttercream, rich chocolate ganache and chocolate glacé. Elegant and restrained, it offered the kind of sophisticated sweetness that pairs beautifully with a cup of coffee.

Perhaps, the most visually striking of the trio was the Raspberry Chocolate Almond Praline Slice. Decadent chocolate mousse met tangy raspberry compote and crunchy almond praline atop almond sponge, all encased in a gleaming chocolate coating. The interplay of tart berries and rich chocolate created a balanced finish that never felt overly sweet.

The philosophy behind the brand is perhaps best summed up by Krishna Kumar, Co-founder & CEO, Isthara Parks Private Limited: "Kiplings began with a simple thought – that in today's fast-moving world, people deserve spaces where they can truly pause, connect, and enjoy the company of those around them. We wanted to create more than a café; we wanted to build a neighbourhood destination where exceptional food, artisanal craftsmanship and genuine hospitality come together effortlessly."

That neighbourhood café ambition appears to be resonating. With Hyderabad marking the beginning of its journey, Kiplings is already gearing up for expansion, with outlets planned in Mumbai and New Delhi around October 2026. As the brand grows, its focus remains on creating spaces where good food, warm hospitality and meaningful experiences come together.

Kiplings gets the balance right. It looks polished without feeling pretentious, serves comforting food without overcomplicating it and offers a café experience that feels indulgent without leaving diners with a hefty bill. ■

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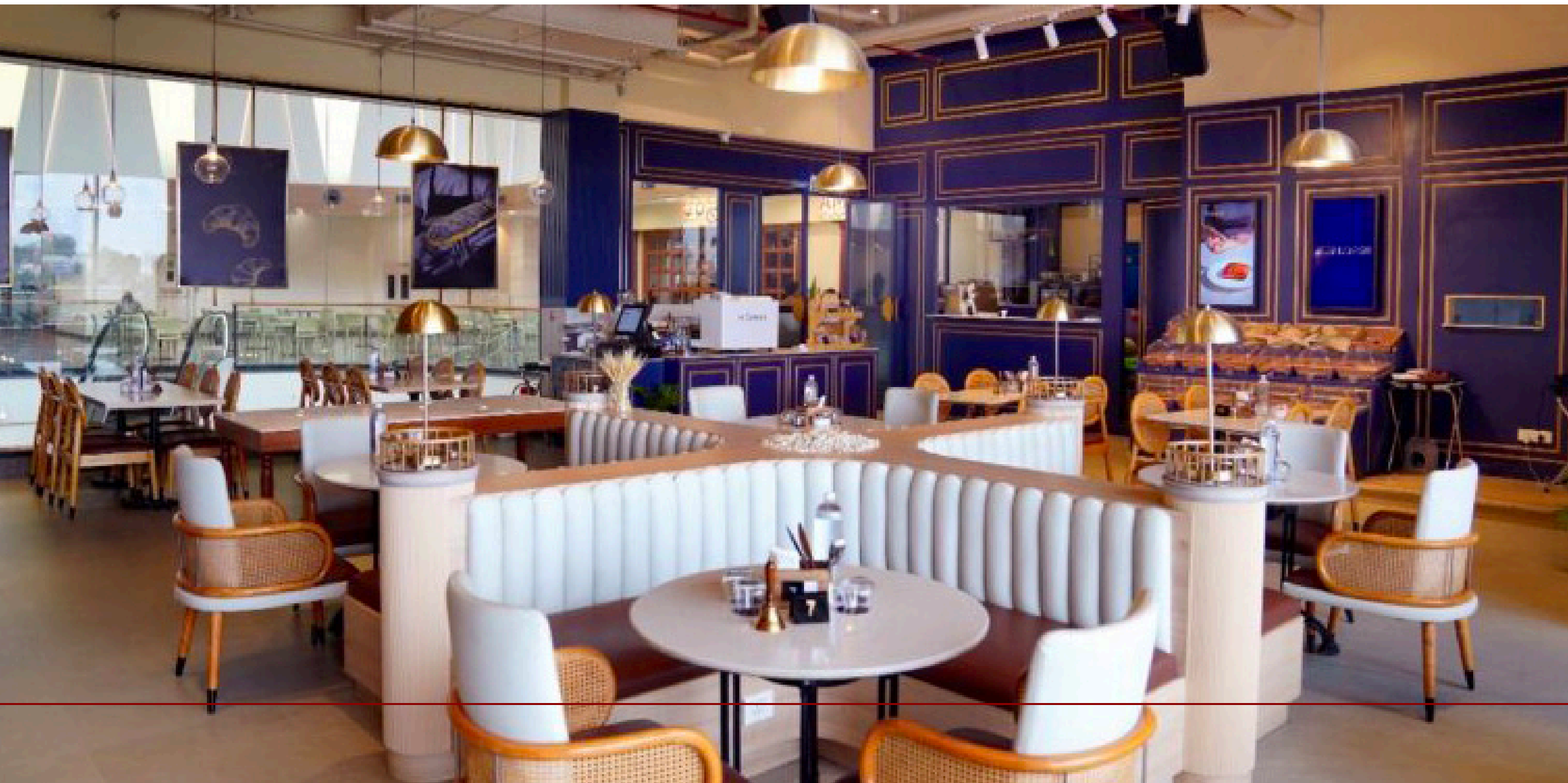

'ZANA In The Wild' bets on experiences, weddings and MICE for growth

Jitendra Bisoyi
Cluster General Manager, ZANA Luxury Escapes & Country Inn Hotels & Resorts

Asmita Mukherjee | Hyderabad

Jim Corbett has evolved from being a seasonal wildlife destination into one of North India's most competitive leisure and destination wedding markets. Improved road connectivity, rising demand for short-haul luxury getaways and the growing popularity of nature-based experiences have expanded the market beyond traditional safari tourism. As a result, resorts are increasingly looking to differentiate themselves through curated experiences, stronger food and beverage offerings and diversified revenue streams.

Focus Areas

For ZANA In The Wild, Jim Corbett, the strategy is centred on creating a hospitality product that extends beyond the national park experience. The property is positioning itself as a luxury retreat where experiential travel, personalised service, destination weddings and corporate retreats contribute alongside traditional leisure demand.

According to Jitendra Bisoyi, Cluster General Manager, ZANA Luxury Escapes & Country Inn Hotels & Resorts, the resort's positioning is built around what the brand calls "distinctive luxury".

"Our core proposition is 'Distinctive luxury' – an experience that blends the thrill of the wilderness with refined comfort and thoughtful experiences that our guests would not find anywhere else. While Jim Corbett has many safari-focused resorts, ZANA In The Wild offers guests far more than just a gateway to the national park. We have created a destination where every aspect of the stay is curated, from immersive experiences to distinctive culinary concepts and crisp hospitality defined as the 'ZANA Way,'" said Bisoyi.

His comments reflect a broader shift across the hospitality sector, where travellers are increasingly prioritising experiences over accommodation alone. Resorts across leisure destinations are investing in wellness programmes, culinary offerings, immersive activities and personalised services to drive guest engagement, increase ancillary spend and encourage repeat visits.

At ZANA, this translates into a series of curated touchpoints throughout the guest journey. From complimentary welcome hi-tea and healthy morning rituals to live music, themed dining experiences and signature activities, the focus is on creating memorable experiences that strengthen guest loyalty and extend length of stay.

Outlining the property's growth roadmap, Bisoyi said the next phase would focus on building a balanced business mix while enhancing profitability.

"Our focus over the next few years is centred on sustainable and profitable growth while strengthening ZANA's position as one of Jim Corbett's leading luxury resorts. A key priority is increasing high-value direct bookings and further developing our wedding and MICE business to create stronger weekday demand alongside our established leisure segment," added Bisoyi.

Strategy for Growth

The strategy mirrors an industry-wide effort by hotels to reduce dependence on online travel intermediaries while growing higher-margin segments such as weddings, meetings and corporate retreats. These segments not only contribute significantly to room revenue but also drive spending across banqueting, food and beverage, décor and event-related services.

To support this strategy, the resort is investing in product enhancements and event infrastructure.

"We are introducing interactive food carts and carnival-style dining concepts that add a fun, experiential element for families, social celebrations and pre-wedding events. We are also undertaking a comprehensive upgrade of our banquet infrastructure with premium crockery, cutlery, glassware and buffet presentation," informed Bisoyi.

Leisure

While leisure travellers continue to form the core customer base, the management expects destination weddings, celebrations and corporate retreats to account for a larger share of business in the coming years.

"Leisure travellers will continue to remain our strongest segment, particularly affluent couples, families and multi-generational travellers seeking premium nature-led escapes. However, we see significant growth opportunities in destination weddings, intimate celebrations and small-to-mid-sized corporate retreats, particularly in strengthening weekday occupancy," he added.

MICE

Corporate offsites and leadership retreats have also emerged as an important demand driver for leisure destinations following the resurgence of in-person meetings and team engagement programmes.

"MICE is an important pillar of our long-term growth strategy as it helps create a more balanced business throughout the year. Corporate offsites, leadership retreats and team-building programmes allow us to improve weekday occupancy, particularly during shoulder periods," said Bisoyi.

Experiential Travel

Experiential travel remains central to the property's positioning strategy. As travellers increasingly seek authentic and memorable experiences, hotels are finding that emotional engagement often has a greater impact on guest satisfaction than traditional luxury attributes alone.

"Today, guests increasingly remember how a destination made them feel rather than simply the room they stayed in. Our approach is therefore to curate the complete guest journey with thoughtful details and authentic experiences woven throughout the stay. These seemingly small details transform an ordinary resort stay into something memorable, strengthening guest loyalty while clearly differentiating us within the competitive Jim Corbett market," noted Bisoyi.

Balance Sheet

From a performance perspective, the resort is targeting annual occupancy levels of 68-72% over the next 12 months, supported by stronger contributions from MICE and wedding business alongside sustained leisure demand, informed Bisoyi.

"With the introduction of several new guest experiences and product enhancements, we expect our ADR and RevPAR to improve by 10–12% year-on-year, further strengthening the property's overall revenue performance," added Bisoyi.

Ancillary Business

Beyond room revenue, ancillary businesses are expected to play an increasingly important role in driving profitability.

"Destination weddings and exclusive buyout events remain our most significant ancillary revenue opportunity, generating strong returns across accommodation, banqueting, customised dining, décor and experiential event offerings. Beyond weddings, premium experiential dining, private barbecues, curated garden dinners and day-use pool packages offer additional opportunities to drive incremental revenue while enhancing the overall guest experience," concluded Bisoyi.

As competition intensifies in leisure destinations, ZANA In The Wild is focusing on a balanced growth strategy driven by leisure travel, weddings, MICE and experiential offerings, reducing dependence on safari-led demand while strengthening long-term revenue streams. ■

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Azure Hospitality is investing aggressively in the revival and expansion of its flagship Pan-Asian dining brand, Mamagoto, with plans to double the brand's size over the next two-and-a-half years, backed by investments in store redesigns, menu innovation, technology-led customer engagement, and market expansion.

The company has already invested between INR 5 crore and INR 8 crore over the last 18 months towards the redevelopment of the Mamagoto brand, including outlet renovations, menu engineering, new brand touchpoints and the rollout of the Mamagoto 2.0 concept.

While speaking to **Asmita Mukherjee, Vineet Kochar, Chief Operating Officer, Azure Hospitality Private Limited**, said the transformation was driven by changing consumer expectations and growing awareness of Asian cuisines among Indian diners.

Azure Hospitality bets on Mamagoto 2.0, plans to double brand size in 2.5 years

Brand Evolution

Kochar said Mamagoto, one of the early pioneers of Pan-Asian dining in India, recognised the need to evolve as consumers became more knowledgeable about regional Asian cuisines.

"Consumers today travel more, discover more and are far more aware of the culinary traditions of different Asian markets than they were a decade ago. Their expectations from a Pan-Asian restaurant have consequently evolved," he said.

According to Kochar, the refreshed identity is designed to build on Mamagoto's legacy while broadening its culinary repertoire to include stronger representations of Japanese and Korean cuisines. These categories have witnessed growing popularity among Indian consumers.

"This evolution is not about moving away from what Mamagoto has always stood for. It is about remaining relevant while staying true to the spirit of the brand. We have started implementing these changes across Delhi NCR and will progressively take them to other markets," he informed.

The latest phase of the brand's evolution was marked by the launch of Mamagoto 2.0 in Bengaluru's Indiranagar, a market that the company considers strategically important.

Bengaluru Focus

Kochar described Bengaluru as one of India's most experimental dining markets and said Indiranagar's vibrant food culture made it a natural choice for the relaunch.

"With more than 40 dishes, Mamagoto 2.0 brings together our signature Pan-Asian offerings along with Sri Lankan, Japanese and Korean influences. We wanted to create a platform where we could continuously experiment, understand consumer preferences and keep introducing new flavours," he said.

Calling the Bengaluru outlet a "food lab" for the company, Kochar noted that guest feedback would continue to shape future menu development.

"The response has been very encouraging. Both dine-in and delivery have performed well since launch, reinforcing our confidence in the market and in the potential of the new concept," he added.

Growth Strategy

Azure Hospitality currently operates across 15-20 cities through a portfolio that includes Mamagoto, Dhaba, Sly Granny and Foxtrot.

Rather than pursuing rapid geographic expansion, the company is focusing on strengthening its presence in key markets such as the National Capital Region (NCR), Bengaluru, Hyderabad and Maharashtra.

"Growth for us is not about adding locations for the sake of scale. It is about building greater depth in markets where our brands already have strong resonance," Kochar said.

At the same time, the company continues to evaluate opportunities in emerging tier - I and tier - II markets.

"India's dining ecosystem is evolving rapidly. There is tremendous potential beyond the metros, and our approach is to expand thoughtfully so that every new location adds meaningfully to the larger Azure Hospitality ecosystem," he said.

Indore and Ahmedabad are among the cities currently on the company's near-term expansion roadmap, he informed.

Customised Scale

With competition intensifying in India's organised restaurant sector, Azure Hospitality is relying on a strategy that balances standardisation with localisation.

Kochar said each Mamagoto outlet retains the brand's core identity while incorporating market-specific menu and design elements.

"We consciously avoid a cookie-cutter approach. Every Mamagoto has around five to ten dishes that are unique to that location, while the broader menu is adapted to local preferences. The interiors are also customised to reflect the character of the market," he explained.

He emphasised that scale in the restaurant business increasingly depends on the ability to personalise experiences.

"There has to be familiarity when a guest walks into Mamagoto, but there also has to be something new to discover. Innovation cannot be a one-time exercise. It has to be an ongoing process across menu development, design, service and guest experience," he said.

Menu Innovation

Menu innovation remains central to the company's customer retention strategy.

Kochar said Mamagoto's menu philosophy is built around maintaining a balance between familiar favourites and new discoveries. "We retain the classics that guests have loved for years because they form the foundation of the brand. At the same time, we continuously introduce new flavours and influences to encourage exploration," he said.

The company follows a consumer-led approach to menu development, using food tastings, limited-period offerings and promotional menus to test new concepts before introducing them permanently.

"Innovation should always be built on a strong foundation. We will continue to protect the dishes that define Mamagoto while evolving the rest of the menu to keep the experience fresh and exciting," he added.

Hyderabad Priority

Among the markets identified for deeper expansion, Hyderabad occupies a prominent position in Azure Hospitality's long-term strategy. "Hyderabad is a very important market for us and one where we see significant potential for future growth. We are actively evaluating additional locations and expect the city to remain a key focus area as we deepen our presence across select markets," Kochar said.

Technology Push

Beyond physical expansion, Azure Hospitality is investing in technology as a key pillar of Mamagoto's future growth. Kochar revealed that the company plans to launch a technology-enabled loyalty programme before the end of the year, aimed at strengthening customer engagement and improving guest understanding through data.

"We are building a completely technology-driven loyalty ecosystem that will help us create more personalised experiences and develop deeper relationships with our guests," he said.

The company is also exploring the use of artificial intelligence

and technology-enabled learning platforms for staff training and development. "As we scale, investing in people becomes equally important. Technology and AI can help create more structured and effective training systems while ensuring consistency across locations," Kochar informed.

He stressed that returns from these investments should be viewed from a long-term brand-building perspective rather than purely through short-term financial metrics.

"The objective is to create a stronger, more relevant and more scalable brand. Investments in technology, people and customer experience will help drive sustained growth over time," he said.

Future Vision

Down the line, Azure Hospitality expects technology, customer data and new formats to play a critical role in scaling Mamagoto. "Our ambition is to double the size of the brand over the next two-and-a-half years. This growth will be driven by market expansion, investments in technology, new formats and a more data-driven understanding of consumer behaviour," Kochar said.

At the same time, he stressed that technology would complement rather than replace the human element of hospitality."Data, technology and AI will become increasingly important, but we remain a hospitality business at our core. Our decisions will continue to be rooted in listening to guests, understanding their needs and staying close to the customer. The future lies in combining technology with intuition and customer-centricity," he concluded. ■

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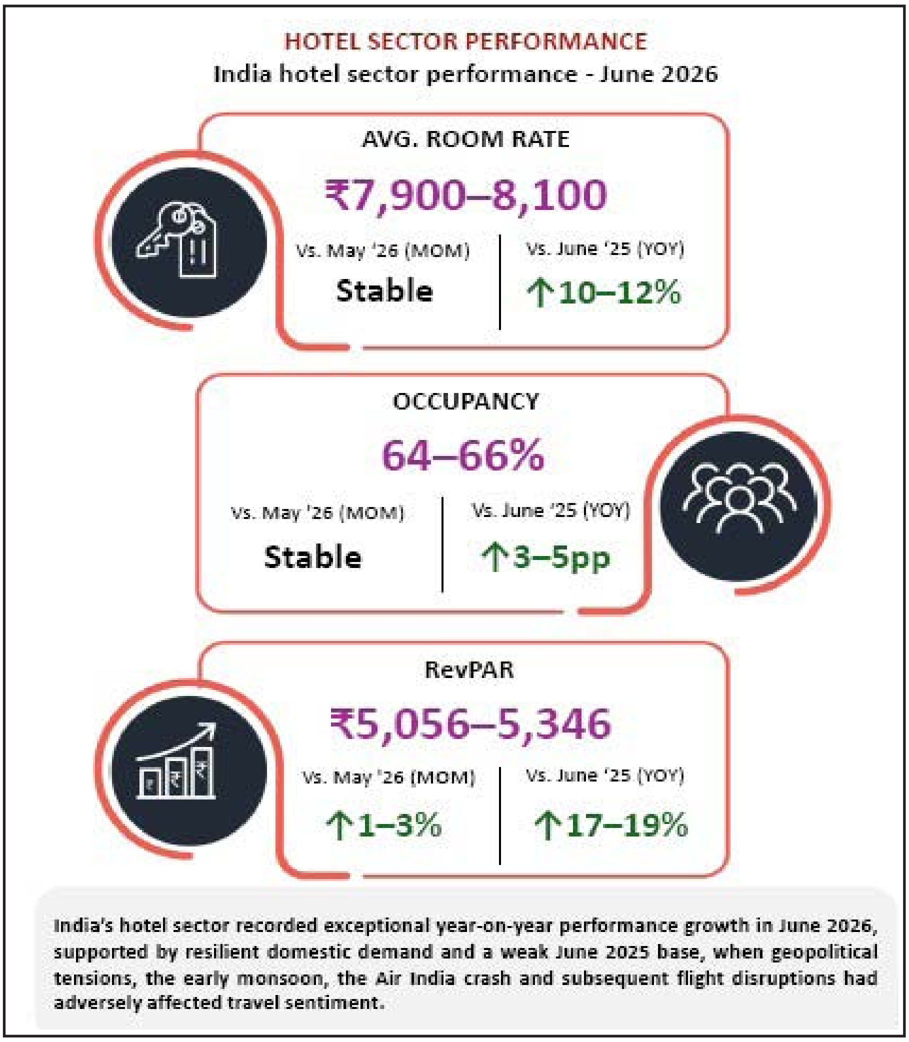
Hotel sector rebounds strongly in June; signings cross 28,000 keys in H1 2026: Report

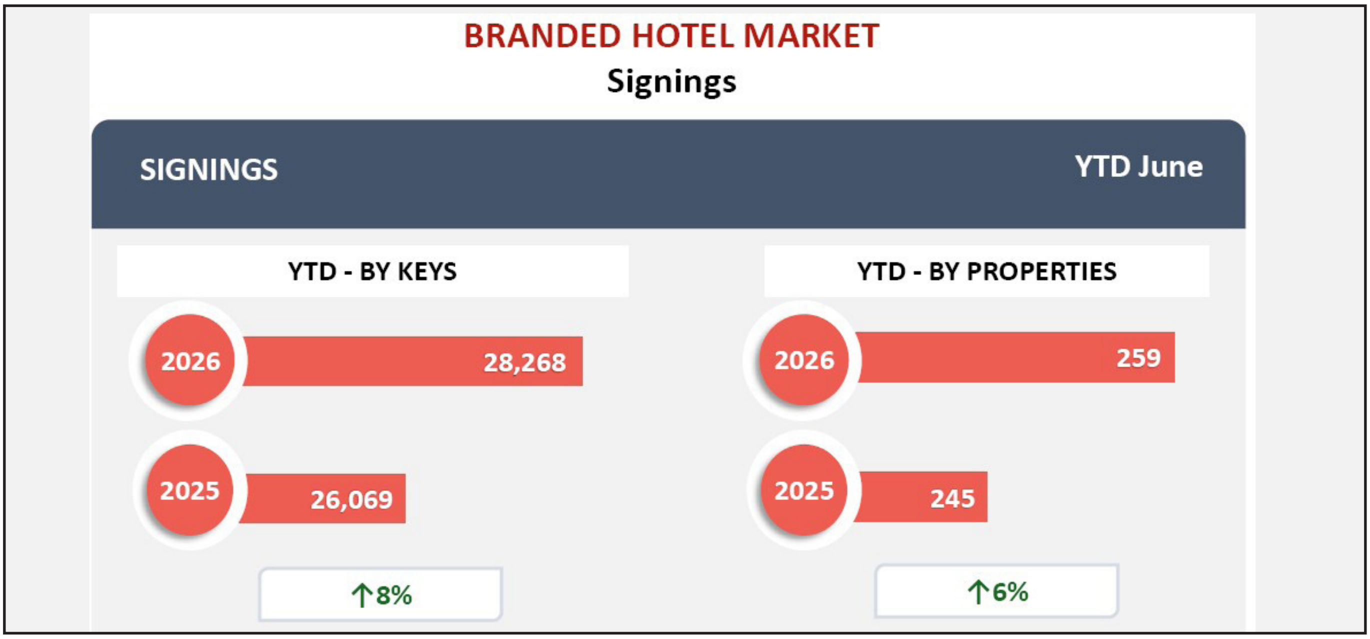
HBI Staff | Hyderabad

India's hotel industry staged a sharp recovery in June 2026, posting double-digit revenue growth on the back of resilient domestic demand and a favourable base effect after disruptions caused by geopolitical tensions, early monsoon conditions and aviation-related challenges last year. According to the latest HVS ANAROCK Hotel Monitor, national occupancy stood at 64-66 per cent, up 3-5% points year-on-year, while average room rates (ARR) remained strong at INR 7,900-8,100, registering a 10-12% increase over June 2025. Revenue per available room (RevPAR) surged 17-19% to INR 5,056-5,346.

Among key markets, Bengaluru led ARR growth with a 17-19% jump, followed by Chandigarh (13-15%), Pune and Gurugram (12-14% each), while Hyderabad recorded an 11-13% increase. On the occupancy front, Chandigarh and Ahmedabad posted the strongest gains of 8-10% points, with Hyderabad improving by 7-9% points.

The branded hotel development

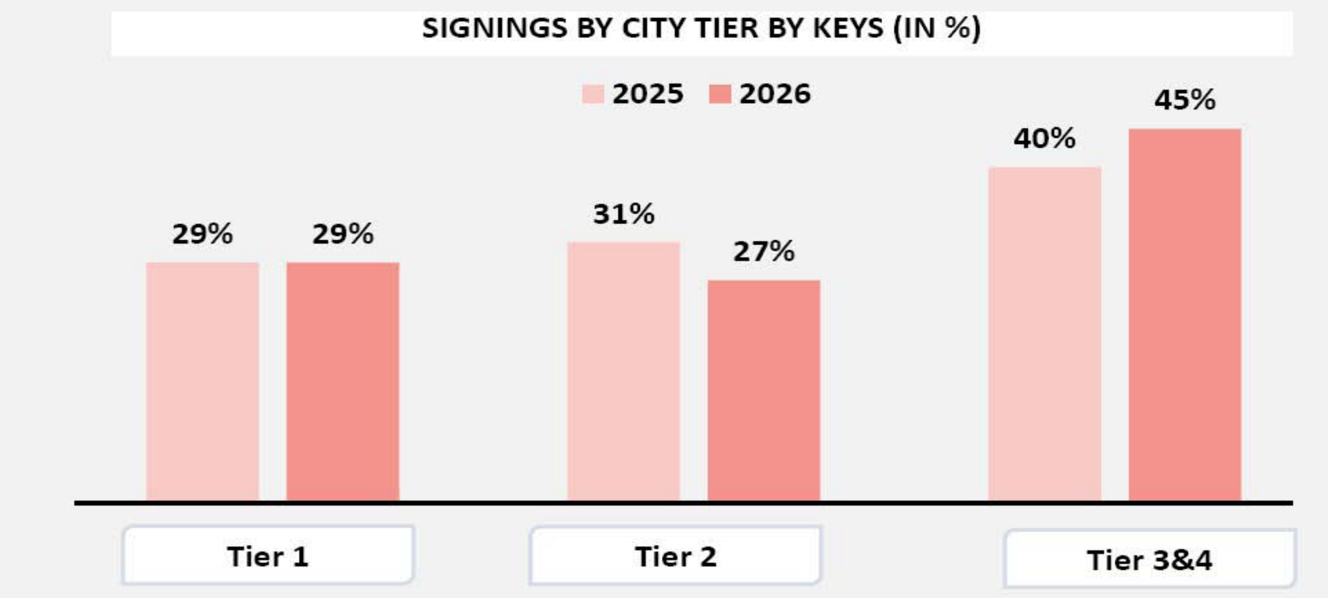




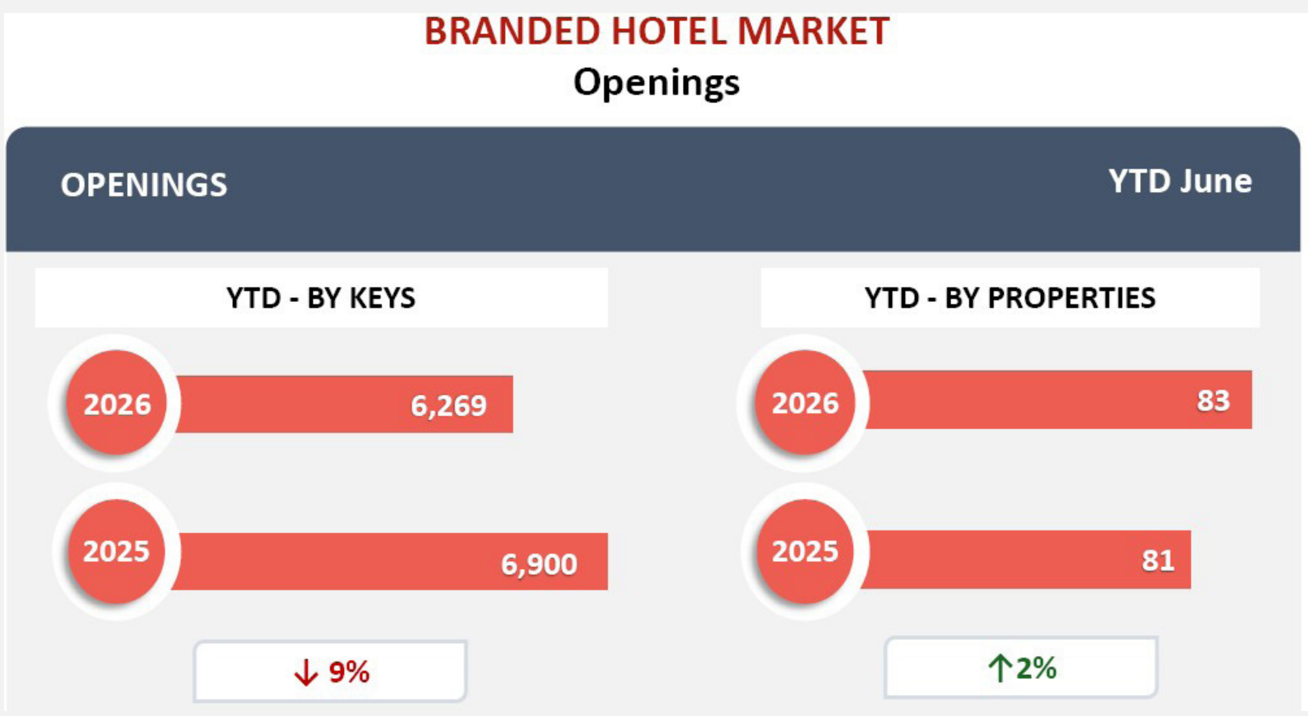
pipeline remained robust. Hotel signings reached 28,268 keys across 259 properties in the first half of 2026, reflecting growth of 8 per cent in keys and 6 per cent in properties over the previous year. Tier-II and Tier-III/IV markets together accounted for 71% of all signed keys, underlining continued investor confidence beyond major metros.

However, openings lagged demand growth. Only 6,269 branded hotel keys opened across 83 properties during the period, down 9% year-on-year, highlighting ongoing supply constraints.

Despite a seasonal slowdown in Q2 compared to the record first quarter, the sector maintained positive momentum, with RevPAR rising 11-13% year-on-year, signalling sustained strength in India's hospitality market. ■



Source: HVS Anarock Research; Data collated by HVS from 20 hotel operators and media reports as of 24th July 2026; Tier 1 cities consist of Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Chennai, Kolkata, Hyderabad, Goa, Jaipur, Gurugram; All data is for the calendar year; Data subject to change. Variations may arise across operators due to differences in reporting timelines and data cut-off periods; Openings include full and partial openings.



'Our focus has shifted from hosting events to creating experiences'

India's celebrations market is evolving rapidly, with guests seeking personalised, experience-led events rather than just venues. In an interaction with **Asmita Mukherjee, Kratika Gupta, Co-Founder of A-La-Chaat and Cherish Exclusive**, shares insights on changing consumer preferences, the rise of experiential hospitality, and the growth strategy behind building integrated venue and catering brands.

What are the biggest shifts shaping India's premium celebrations and events market today?

Over the last few years, we've seen a clear shift in what guests expect. Earlier, people would focus mainly on the venue. Today, they want an experience. They want every element—from the décor and food to the service and entertainment—to feel personal and memorable.

Social media has also played a big role. Clients are looking for celebrations that not only create beautiful memories but also leave a lasting impression. As a hospitality brand, our focus has shifted from simply hosting events to creating experiences that people remember long after the celebration is over.

What is the business model behind Cherish Ballrooms and A-La-Chaat, and how do the two brands drive growth together?

The idea was always to create a complete hospitality experience rather than operate individual businesses. Cherish Ballrooms provides premium event venues, while A-La-Chaat brings a unique culinary experience to those celebrations. The two brands naturally complement each other. Many clients who book our venue also choose our catering because they trust us to deliver the same quality throughout their event. It allows us to maintain consistency, simplify execution, and create a seamless experience for our guests.

How do Cherish Ballrooms and A-La-Chaat complement each other in driving growth, profitability, and customer retention?

For us, it's all about creating value for the client. Instead of coordinating with multiple vendors, clients have the convenience of working with one team that understands their vision from start to finish.

This not only improves operational efficiency but also builds stronger relationships with our clients. Many families come back to us for multiple occasions because they know they'll receive the same attention to detail every time.

How do you measure ROI on investments in luxury hospitality, where guest experience is the key differentiator?

In luxury hospitality, ROI goes far beyond numbers. Of course, occupancy and revenue matter, but we also look at repeat business, guest feedback, referrals, and the relationships we build over time.

When guests recommend us to their friends and families or return to celebrate another milestone with us, that's the biggest return on our investment. A great guest experience always creates long-term value.

How do you balance innovation, operational excellence, and profitability while delivering premium experiences?

Innovation doesn't always mean doing something extravagant. Sometimes it's about making small improvements that genuinely enhance the guest experience.

We constantly look at ways to improve our menus, service standards, and operations, but every decision has to be practical and sustainable. The goal is to deliver a premium experience without losing focus on quality, consistency, and operational discipline.

What was the strategic thinking behind positioning A-La-Chaat as a luxury street food brand?

Street food is something every Indian connects with emotionally. We felt there was an opportunity to present these familiar flavours in a way that matched the expectations of luxury events.

With A-La-Chaat, we wanted to retain the authenticity of Indian street food while elevating everything around it—from presentation and ingredients to hygiene and service. It's about giving guests a nostalgic experience in a refined setting.

Where do you see the biggest investment opportunities in India's experiential hospitality sector over the next five years?

I believe the biggest opportunity lies in experiences rather than infrastructure alone. Guests today are willing to invest in celebrations that feel unique and thoughtfully curated.

Whether it's destination weddings, boutique venues, experiential dining, or premium catering, the demand is growing for hospitality brands that can deliver something beyond the expected. Personalisation and service excellence will continue to be the biggest differentiators.

What is your growth strategy for Cherish Hospitality, and what will define its next phase of expansion?

Our focus is on growing responsibly while maintaining the quality and service standards that define our brand. We want to strengthen our existing businesses, expand into new hospitality concepts, and continue creating experiences that people genuinely connect with.

For us, growth is not just about opening more venues—it's about building a brand that people trust. If our guests leave with happy memories and choose us again for their next celebration, we know we're moving in the right direction. ■

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Being Busy Doesn't Mean You're Making the Profits You Should

By Alouk H. Mishrra, CEO – Foodesign Systems Associates | Founder – AMInnovations Hospitality Pvt. Ltd.

Walk into any successful restaurant on a Friday evening and you'll probably see a familiar sight—every table occupied, guests waiting, the kitchen working at full pace, and the service team constantly on the move. By every visible measure, the business appears to be thriving.

But here's a question worth asking.

Does being busy automatically mean the business is making the profits it should?

Recently, while reviewing the financial and operational performance of a hospitality business, the discussion centred around monthly revenue, break-even, food cost, manpower, salaries, rent, utilities and EBITDA. Every number had an explanation. Yet one important question remained unanswered:

"Are we truly operating at our profit potential, or are we simply satisfied with being busy?"

This is where I believe the hospitality industry needs to shift its thinking.

Most business reviews focus on numbers that describe what has happened. Sales increased. Occupancy was high. Covers improved. Food cost remained within budget. Payroll was under control.

These are important measures.

But they don't necessarily tell us whether the business is generating the maximum profitability it is capable of achieving.

In my experience, many hospitality businesses unknowingly accept certain operational realities as "part of the business."

Over-ordering to avoid stock-outs.

Higher manpower because "that's how hospitality works."

Recipe variations between chefs.

Increasing purchases without questioning consumption.

Wastage, complimentary offerings, production losses and operational leakages gradually becoming normal rather than being challenged.

None of these issues may appear alarming individually. Collectively, however, they can quietly erode profitability month after month.

The bigger concern is that many of these opportunities are never discussed—not because owners don't care, but because they often remain hidden beneath routine operational reviews.

One of the biggest misconceptions in hospitality is that experience alone guarantees commercial excellence.

It doesn't.

Running a successful restaurant, hotel, café or catering business requires tremendous passion and operational capability. Maximising its profitability requires something more—a disciplined understanding of how every operational decision influences commercial performance.

That is the difference between managing costs and building profits.

The hospitality industry has become exceptionally good at measuring activity.

Perhaps it is now time to become equally good at measuring opportunity.

Before your next monthly review meeting, ask your management team one simple question:

"What are the three biggest opportunities to improve profitability without increasing sales, raising prices or compromising guest experience?"

If the answer comes immediately, you're already thinking beyond day-to-day operations.

If the room falls silent, perhaps you've just discovered your biggest opportunity.

Because being busy is an operational achievement.

Building sustainable profitability is a business achievement.

The two are not always the same. ■

The views expressed within this column are the opinion of the author, and may not necessarily be endorsed by the publication.

INFRASTRUCTURE FUELS HOSPITALITY

Asmita Mukherjee | Hyderabad

India's hospitality industry is preparing for a fresh growth cycle as the Centre's approval of tourism infrastructure projects worth INR 5,756 crore under various schemes is expected to strengthen connectivity, unlock investment, and accelerate demand across both established and emerging destinations.

The infrastructure push comes at a time when India's hotel sector is already riding a strong growth trajectory. According to an industry data from HVS ANAROCK indicates that branded hotel signings continue to outpace historical trends, while occupancy, average room rates (ARRs), and RevPAR have remained resilient across key markets. Industry stakeholders believe public investment in roads, airports, regional connectivity, tourism amenities, and destination development could significantly expand the country's tourism footprint over the next three to five years. Asmita Mukherjee writes…

Demand Multiplier

For hotels, infrastructure investment is no longer viewed merely as a tourism initiative but as a direct demand generator.

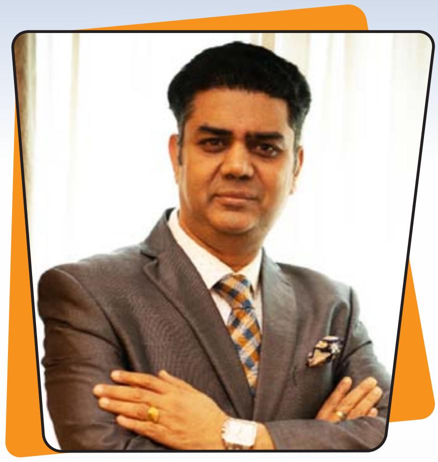
Saurabh Choksi, General Manager of Sayaji Hotel, Pune, described the investments as "demand multipliers."

"Improved infrastructure directly enhances accessibility, which

in turn drives higher tourist inflows. Over the next three to five years, we can expect stronger occupancy levels, particularly in Tier II and Tier III destinations, with room rates firming up as demand outpaces supply. For luxury hotels, this translates into opportunities to reposition offerings at premium price points while maintaining healthy RevPAR growth," Choksi said.

A similar sentiment was echoed by Gaurav Shiva, General Manager, The Orchid Hotel Mumbai, who believes improved connectivity and destination development will support healthier rate growth."The government's continued investment in tourism infrastructure is a strong catalyst for the hospitality sector. Improved connectivity and destination development will drive both domestic and international travel, resulting in higher hotel demand. These investments are expected to strengthen overall travel demand, enabling hotels to achieve healthier average room rates and sustainable revenue growth," he said.

At heritage hospitality destinations, operators see infrastructure as a key enabler of premiumisation. Lalit Mundukar, General Manager, Fort JadhavGADH, Pune, said improved accessibility is changing how travellers evaluate destinations. "Public investment in tourism infrastructure fundamentally improves a destination's attractiveness. Once



Saurabh Choksi
General Manager, Sayaji Hotel, Pune

Gaurav Shiva
General Manager, The Orchid Hotel Mumbai

Lalit Mundukar
GM, Fort JadhavGADH, Pune

Mahendar Rawat
GM, The Orchid Shimla

Jagdeep Guleria
Assistant General Manager, The Orchid Manali

accessibility is no longer a barrier, guests begin evaluating the quality and uniqueness of the experience rather than the effort required to reach it. This allows heritage properties like ours to command stronger average room rates," Mundukar said.

Connectivity Counts

Across geographies, hotel executives unanimously identified connectivity as the foundation of tourism-led development.

Whether through new highways, airport expansion projects or the UDAN regional connectivity scheme, improved access is expected to reduce travel friction and encourage investors to consider destinations that were previously viewed as difficult to reach. "Connectivity is the backbone of tourism development," Choksi said. "Road upgrades, airport expansions and the UDAN scheme reduce travel friction, making emerging destinations viable for hotel investments. For investors, improved connectivity de-risks projects by ensuring consistent demand flow."

In Maharashtra, operators are already seeing the impact. Mundukar pointed out that improved road connectivity from Pune and Mumbai has significantly strengthened demand for weekend getaways, destination weddings and corporate retreats at Fort JadhavGADH. However, For hill destinations, the conversation extends beyond basic connectivity to reliability.

According to Mahendar Rawat, General Manager, The Orchid Shimla, improved road networks and air connectivity are essential for sustaining tourism growth. "For investors, reliable connectivity reduces operational uncertainties and increases confidence in the long-term viability of hospitality projects. As accessibility improves, we are likely to see greater investment across both established and emerging destinations," Rawat said.

Jagdeep Guleria, Assistant General Manager, The Orchid Manali, stressed the need for all-weather infrastructure. "Improved tourism infrastructure will strengthen long-term hotel demand and occupancy. However, destinations like Manali also require reliable all-weather connectivity to realise these benefits," Guleria noted.

Rise Of Experiences

While infrastructure may improve access, hoteliers believe future growth will be driven by experience-led tourism. Industry stakeholders see heritage tourism, wellness, eco-tourism, destination weddings and experiential travel as the segments best positioned to benefit from destination development initiatives. "India's biggest competitive advantage lies in offering authentic, place-based experiences rather than standardised tourism products," said Mundukar. "Heritage tourism, wellness travel and destination weddings represent the strongest long-term opportunities because they create emotional connections that cannot be replicated elsewhere."

At Fort JadhavGADH, this strategy has translated into immersive experiences built around Maratha heritage, local cuisine, cultural performances and curated activities.

In the Himalayan region, experiential and nature-driven travel are gaining traction.

Rawat observed that travellers increasingly seek authentic local experiences, wellness escapes and opportunities to connect with nature rather than conventional sightseeing.

Similarly, Guleria identified eco-tourism, wellness and experiential travel as the strongest long-term growth opportunities for destinations such as Manali.

But for urban hotels, the opportunity looks somewhat different. "MICE and destination weddings are currently the strongest drivers of business potential," Choksi said. "Corporates are increasingly seeking integrated venues for conferences, while weddings have evolved into multi-day luxury experiences."

Shiva also highlighted MICE as one of the fastest-growing segments for city hotels, supported by India's expanding corporate sector and rising business travel demand.

Beyond Metros

The next phase of hotel development is increasingly expected to emerge outside traditional gateway cities. Industry executives believe improving infrastructure is narrowing the gap between metropolitan centres and smaller destinations, encouraging developers to explore opportunities in Tier II and Tier III markets.

"That shift has already begun," Mundukar said. "Today's travellers are increasingly willing to choose lesser-known destinations if they offer memorable experiences supported by dependable infrastructure."

Choksi noted that hotel development pipelines are already moving toward emerging markets. "Success in these markets will depend on connectivity, destination branding and the availability of skilled manpower, suppliers and allied services," he said.

Rawat also expects travellers to increasingly explore destinations beyond traditional metros, although he cautioned that sustainable destination management, safety and preservation of local culture will remain critical.

The trend aligns with broader industry forecasts that identify secondary and tertiary cities as key contributors to India's future hotel supply growth.

Branding Matters

As infrastructure projects improve access, hoteliers argue that destination branding must evolve simultaneously. Industry leaders contend that modern travellers often choose a destination before selecting a hotel, making coordinated destination marketing essential. "Destination branding is as important as physical infrastructure," Mundukar said. "Properties like Fort JadhavGADH benefit when Maharashtra is promoted as a heritage and cultural destination rather than individual hotels marketing themselves independently."

Rawat stated that coordinated branding efforts involving tourism boards, governments and hospitality stakeholders can create stronger destination recall and attract new visitor segments.

Digital promotion is becoming increasingly important in influencing travel decisions, particularly among international travellers.

"International travellers today rely heavily on digital discovery platforms," Choksi said. "A strong, unified destination identity creates awareness and credibility."

Policy Priorities

Despite optimism around the infrastructure push, industry leaders believe several structural challenges must still be addressed to unlock large-scale private investment. Faster project approvals, streamlined regulations, improved urban infrastructure, stronger destination management and hospitality skill development emerged as recurring themes.

"The opportunity today is not about creating more vision; it is about creating greater certainty for investors," Mundukar said.

Executives also called for greater focus on last-mile connectivity, public amenities, waste management, sustainable tourism practices and simplified hospitality clearances.

Choksi advocated tax rationalisation for hospitality projects, sustainability-linked incentives and integrated destination management authorities, while Shiva highlighted the need for stronger global destination marketing, simplified visa processes and policies that encourage private investment.

For heritage properties, Mundukar believes targeted incentives could play a transformative role. "Additional incentives for conservation, adaptive reuse and simplified regulatory processes would encourage greater private investment. India's heritage is one of its greatest tourism assets, and preserving these landmarks while ensuring their commercial sustainability will strengthen the country's position as a leading global tourism destination," he said.

Growth Catalyst

Tourism stakeholders agree that while infrastructure alone cannot drive tourism growth, sustained expansion is difficult without it. With INR 5,756 crore committed to tourism infrastructure projects, the focus now shifts to converting improved connectivity into stronger destination appeal, diversified demand and long-term hospitality growth across emerging destinations. ■

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India's hospitality sector is becoming a key growth platform for premium spirits brands, with luxury hotels, bars, restaurants and airport lounges increasingly driving brand discovery, premiumisation and consumer engagement. As consumers prioritise experiences over products, liquor companies are deepening partnerships with hospitality operators to build stronger brand connections. Asmita Mukherjee writes…

Premium spirits find a new stage in India's hospitality boom

Changing Tastes

Industry experts believe that the shift reflects a broader transformation in India's alcohol consumption landscape. Consumers are drinking more consciously, seeking authenticity, craftsmanship and meaningful experiences rather than simply purchasing a bottle. As a result, hospitality venues are playing a larger role in shaping purchasing decisions and influencing brand preferences. "India is no longer simply an emerging market for international spirits, it is becoming one of the most culturally influential premium consumption markets in the world. Consumers today are drinking differently. They are becoming more intentional, more globally aware, and far more experience-led in the way they discover brands," said Mayank Yadav, Founder of My Barrel & Beyond, which markets Emberstone Irish Whiskey in India.

For premium spirits brands, hotels and restaurants are no longer viewed merely as points of sale. Instead, they have become spaces where consumers interact with a brand's story, heritage and craftsmanship for the first time. Hospitality environments provide brands with an opportunity to connect with guests through service, ambience, food pairings and storytelling in ways that traditional advertising often cannot.

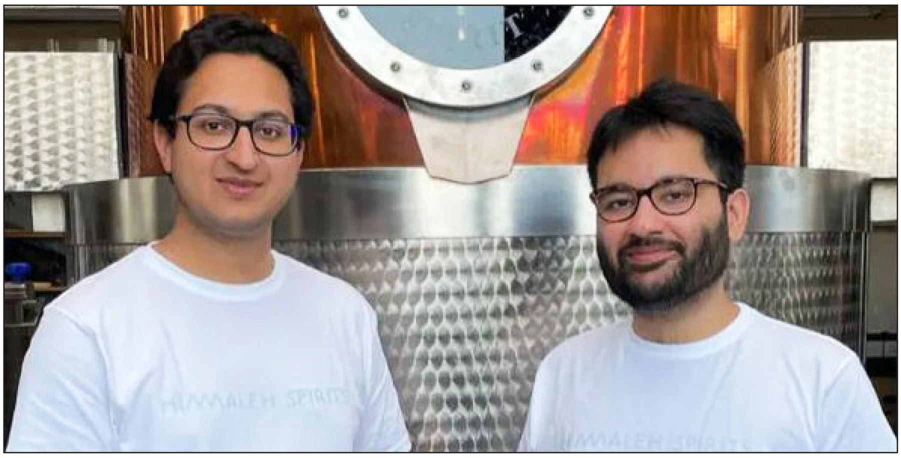
"For Emberstone Irish Whiskey, hospitality is incredibly important because great whiskey has always belonged to atmosphere, conversation, and ritual. Hospitality spaces allow consumers to experience that philosophy naturally, through mood, service, storytelling, music, food, and human connection rather than traditional advertising alone," Yadav said.

Beyond Sales

The growing significance of hospitality partnerships is equally evident among Indian craft spirit producers. As the country's premium beverage market matures, collaborations between liquor brands and hospitality operators are becoming increasingly strategic and experience-led. According to Ansh Khanna and Samarth Prasad, Co-Founders of Himmaleh Spirits, luxury hotels, premium bars, restaurants and airports have evolved from simple distribution channels into powerful brand-building platforms.

"These venues allow consumers to experience our spirits in the right setting, whether through signature cocktails, curated food pairings, or premium retail experiences. The impact has gone beyond sales. We've seen stronger brand visibility, enhanced premium perception, and increased consumer trial, often translating into repeat retail purchases," they said.

Industry executives note that the hospitality sector offers premium spirits brands an environment where consumers can discover products organically. Rather than being exposed to conventional marketing campaigns, guests experience brands through curated serves, bartender recommendations and immersive food and beverage experiences. The result is a stronger emotional connection between consumers and brands, something that is becoming increasingly important in a highly competitive premium spirits market.



Ansh Khanna and Samarth Prasad
Co-Founders, Himmaleh Spirits and luxury hotels

Mayank Yadav
Founder of My Barrel & Beyond

Experience Economy

Experiential hospitality is emerging as one of the most powerful tools for premium spirits companies seeking to engage consumers. Bar takeovers, mixology showcases, curated tastings, chef collaborations and whiskey dinners are increasingly becoming central to brand-building strategies across the hospitality sector. Industry stakeholders say modern consumers are no longer satisfied with simply purchasing a product. They want to understand its origins, craftsmanship and story while participating in experiences that feel authentic and memorable. "Experiential hospitality has become the modern language of premium spirits. Consumers today do not simply want products explained to them, they want experiences they can feel part of. They want discovery, storytelling, craftsmanship, and human connection," Yadav said.

According to him, the most successful hospitality collaborations are those that seamlessly integrate a spirit into the overall guest experience rather than placing the product at the centre of attention. "The strongest collaborations are those where the whiskey becomes part of the emotional identity of the experience itself. A bartender introducing the liquid with genuine knowledge. A signature serve inspired by Irish warmth and contemporary Indian hospitality. A beautifully paced evening where the whiskey complements the atmosphere instead of dominating it,"he said.

Himmaleh Spirits has witnessed a similar trend. Khanna and Prasad believe experiential initiatives are increasingly influencing purchase decisions and helping brands build long-term loyalty. "Bar takeovers, mixology events, signature cocktails, and curated tastings allow people to experience our products in an authentic, memorable way while understanding the craftsmanship and story behind each bottle. They don't just influence purchase decisions—they create advocates who return to the brand and recommend it to others," they said.

Local Stories

Alongside premiumisation, another major trend shaping hospitality partnerships is the growing emphasis on local identity and regional storytelling. Hotels and restaurants are increasingly seeking beverage programmes that reflect local culture, ingredients and culinary traditions, creating opportunities for both international and domestic brands.

Industry observers note that today's consumers are looking for experiences that feel rooted in place. This has encouraged hospitality operators to move beyond generic beverage offerings and embrace more locally relevant concepts. "One of the most exciting shifts in global hospitality today is the blending of international craftsmanship with local cultural identity," Yadav said. "The future of premium hospitality will belong to brands that can remain globally authentic while becoming locally meaningful."

For Indian craft spirit brands, this shift represents a significant opportunity to showcase regional ingredients, flavours and heritage on a larger stage. "At Himmaleh Spirits, we collaborate with hospitality partners to create signature cocktails, curated tasting experiences, and food pairings that showcase the flavours, botanicals, and heritage of the Himalayas. These collaborations not only elevate the guest experience but also help position Indian craft spirits as premium products with a unique sense of place and provenance," Khanna and Prasad said.

Industry stakeholders believe the convergence of local sourcing, premiumisation and experiential hospitality will increasingly define beverage programmes across hotels and restaurants in the coming years.

Future Growth

Going forward liquor brands see hospitality partnerships becoming more immersive, collaborative and experience-driven. Rather than focusing solely on visibility, companies are seeking deeper cultural relevance through curated experiences that align with evolving consumer expectations.

"The future is not about transactional placements, it is about building cultural presence. We see growing opportunities around private whiskey societies, chef collaborations, listening bars, destination-led experiences, immersive tasting journeys, luxury travel partnerships, and highly curated social occasions," Yadav said.

Khanna and Prasad expect hotels and restaurants to play an even larger role in shaping premium beverage experiences through exclusive collaborations and bespoke offerings."Hotels, bars, and restaurants will increasingly collaborate with craft spirit brands to create exclusive expressions, signature cocktail programs, immersive tasting experiences, and regionally inspired menus that offer guests something truly unique," they said.

Premium spirits brands are increasingly leveraging hotels, bars and restaurants as strategic platforms for brand building, consumer engagement and premiumisation, with experiential collaborations emerging as a key growth driver for both the beverage and hospitality sectors. ■

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With travellers becoming more discerning and competition intensifying, hotels are increasingly focusing on guest loyaltyand operational consistency to drive long-term growth. **Deep Mohan Singh Arneja, General Manager, Courtyard by Marriott Agra**, believes sustained success depends on operational discipline, pricing integrity and consistent guest experiences rather than short-term revenue gains. Speaking to **Asmita Mukherjee**, he said that while Agra benefits from strong tourist demand, maintaining a hotel's reputation requires a clear strategy and flawless execution.

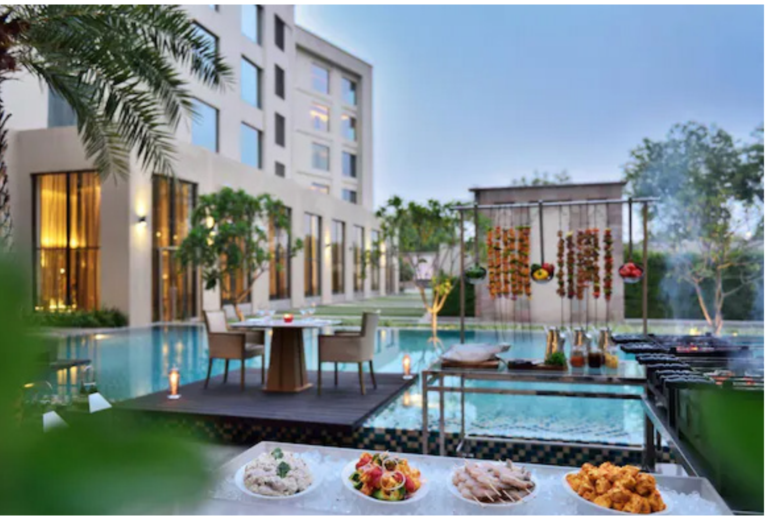
'Discounting is easy; recovering credibility is not'

Beyond occupancy

Arneja noted that while peak travel periods naturally support occupancy levels, the true test of a hotel's resilience emerges during shoulder seasons. "Agra is often described as a destination with guaranteed demand, but anyone who has worked here long enough knows that demand alone does not build a hotel's reputation—how you manage that demand does," he said.

According to him, modern travellers arrive better informed, have higher expectations and are more conscious of value than ever before. As a result, occupancy is no longer simply about filling rooms but about maintaining relevance in an increasingly competitive market.

Reflecting on the property's recent upgrades, Arneja said the hotel deliberately chose a measured approach rather than overstretching operations to maximise short-term revenue. "At times, we have chosen to slow down rather than stretch operations. I've learnt—both through experience and observation—that a hotel's reputation behaves much like trust. It is accumulated quietly and lost very publicly," he stated.



Emphasising the importance of guest experience over volume, he added, "A full house impresses for a night. A remembered stay carries the brand forward."

RevPAR with context

While revenue management remains a critical focus area across the industry, Arneja cautioned against viewing RevPAR as a standalone indicator of success.

"RevPAR is important—there is no debate there. But it is also one of the most misunderstood metrics when isolated from context. Strong RevPAR does not come from constant intervention; it comes from clarity of positioning and confidence in one's product," he explained.

Drawing from his experiences across various markets, he observed that some of the world's most respected hotels distinguish themselves through consistency rather than constant reinvention.

"In some of the most respected properties I've experienced, the focus was not on daily excitement but on daily reliability. They were not trying to surprise the guest every morning—only to make sure they never disappointed them," he said.

Arneja further stressed the importance of maintaining pricing integrity, particularly during renovation and refurbishment cycles.

"Discounting is easy; recovering credibility is not. Especially during refurbishment phases, we remain honest about what we can deliver and price accordingly," he said.

Quoting a principle that has influenced his commercial philosophy, he added, "The most important thing about business is business. For me, that means emotion belongs in service, not in commercial decisions."

Driving ancillary revenue

With hotels increasingly relying on ancillary revenue streams to strengthen profitability, Arneja believes success lies in creating opportunities rather than aggressively selling products and services. "Ancillary revenue has become central to hotel profitability, but pushing it rarely works. The more refined approach is to design opportunity, not pressure spend," he said.

At Courtyard by Marriott Agra, food and beverage operations have benefited from focusing on authenticity and local relevance rather than chasing temporary trends.

"Food and beverage performs best when it reflects a sense of place and confidence rather than trend-chasing," he noted.

The hotel has also witnessed steady growth in social gatherings and smaller events, driven largely by guest confidence in execution and service delivery. "Guests spend more when they feel understood, not when they feel persuaded. When hospitality becomes intuitive, revenue follows naturally," Arneja said.

Evolving guest expectations

The changing profile of the modern traveller is another area that Arneja believes hoteliers must continuously adapt to.

"Today's guest, domestic or international, is far more aware than before. They notice details, question inconsistencies, and form opinions quickly," he observed. At the same time, he noted that travellers increasingly seek simplicity and seamless experiences. "They seek effortless check-ins, familiar warmth, and genuine human interaction," he said.

Long-stay guests, in particular, have emerged as valuable sources of insight and advocacy. "When engaged well, they offer more honest feedback than surveys ever will. Over time, they also become ambassadors—quietly, credibly, and far more effectively than marketing campaigns," Arneja explained. Highlighting the importance of guest loyalty, he added, "The strongest brand voices are guests who return even when they don't have to."

Consistency as a differentiator

As Agra continues to attract both international tourists and domestic leisure travellers, Arneja believes many hotels risk diluting their identity by attempting to cater to every segment simultaneously. "The temptation is always to over-serve—add more, promise more, stretch more. I've come to believe the opposite," he said.

According to him, successful hotels differentiate themselves through focus and consistency rather than complexity. "Distinct hotels are not built by doing everything; they are built by doing the right few things consistently," Arneja stated.

He pointed out that different traveller segments seek different outcomes, whether experiences, comfort or assurance but delivering consistently on core promises remains the key differentiator. "Consistency is the quietest form of confidence," he remarked.

Talent challenge

Like many hospitality leaders across the country, Arneja identified talent attraction and retention as one of the industry's most pressing concerns. "If there is one uphill task in hospitality today, it is people. Talent attraction and retention are genuine industry challenges—but they cannot be solved by policy alone," he said.

He believes organisational culture plays a far more important role in retaining talent than rules or processes. "People don't stay because of rules; they stay because of environments," he noted.

At Courtyard by Marriott Agra, the focus has been on building a culture centred around continuous learning, empowerment and trust. "Training is continuous, empowerment is real, and control mechanisms exist to support—not suffocate—performance," Arneja explained. While leadership visibility remains important, he stressed that culture ultimately shapes guest experiences. "A well-trained team performs. A well-trusted team protects the guest experience when no one is watching," he added.

Long-term value creation

Summing up his philosophy, Arneja described hotels as more than physical assets or commercial enterprises. "At the end of the day, hotels are not just assets—they are promises," he said.

According to him, long-term success comes when service, food and beverage, infrastructure and people operate with a shared purpose. "A desirable product is built when space, service, food, and people move in the same direction. That alignment requires patience, discipline, and belief," he stated.

As hospitality businesses navigate a rapidly evolving operating environment, Arneja believes the fundamentals remain unchanged. Hotels that focus on trust, consistency and authentic guest experiences will ultimately build stronger brands and more resilient businesses. "The journey is not always smooth, but when done right, the hotel stops chasing demand—and demand starts returning on its own," he concluded. ■

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Telangana's food safety enforcement under scanner as 398 samples fail quality checks

HBI Staff | Hyderabad

Telangana's food safety enforcement framework has come under scrutiny after official data revealed that 398 food samples failed quality checks in 2025-26, yet the state reported zero penalties and zero convictions during the period.

According to data tabled by the Union Health Ministry in the Lok Sabha, Telangana analysed 3,576 food samples during the year, with 11.1% found to be non-conforming. Violations included misbranding, use of expired ingredients and food adulteration. Despite the findings, no civil cases resulted in penalties and no convictions were recorded. The state's enforcement performance lags significantly behind its southern counterparts. Tamil Nadu tested 44,603 samples and reported 1,359 penalty cases and 857 convictions, while Kerala analysed 16,746 samples, resulting in 1,026 penalties and 330 convictions. Andhra Pradesh, which tested 5,798 samples, reported 196 penalty cases and 16 convictions, while Karnataka recorded 248 penalties and 33 convictions from 13,349 samples.

Food safety officials attributed the lack of penalties to a large backlog of cases awaiting adjudication before district additional collectors. More than 100 food safety violation cases are reportedly pending in Hyderabad and Rangareddy districts alone.

The data also highlights manpower shortages within Telangana's food safety department. Of 81 sanctioned Food Safety Officer posts, only 44 are filled, leaving 37 vacancies, nearly 46% of the sanctioned strength. Officials said the shortage has impacted inspections, sample collection and follow-up enforcement activities.

The findings come amid increased scrutiny of food safety standards across restaurants, hotels and food businesses in Telangana. Industry observers note that while testing and inspections have intensified, delays in adjudication and staffing constraints continue to hamper effective enforcement. ■

'We are targeting threefold growth by 2030'

From being a relatively small contributor to the company's global business a decade ago, India has emerged as one of TOTO's top six markets worldwide. With its manufacturing facility in Halol, Gujarat, serving both domestic and international demand, the company is now targeting threefold growth by 2030. In an exclusive interaction with **Asmita Mukherjee**, **Shiozawa Kazuyuki, Managing Director of Japanese sanitaryware major TOTO India** discusses how India is becoming increasingly important to the company's global growth ambitions.

How strategic is India to TOTO's global growth plans?

India is an increasingly important contributor to our global growth story and a key market for the company, supported by its growing economy, large young population and significant long-term market potential. Over the past few years, we have seen remarkable growth in our electronic bidet seat products, including NEOREST and WASHLET, reflecting growing awareness and acceptance of Japanese sanitaryware technology, innovation and product offerings among Indian consumers.

From being virtually absent from TOTO's global performance landscape a decade ago, India has now emerged as one of our top six markets globally. India also plays an important role in supporting both domestic and export demand, with our manufacturing capabilities enabling us to supply advanced, water-efficient products to international markets, including Europe and Japan.

We are targeting threefold growth by 2030. Our strategy will focus on expanding the sales network, broadening the product range across different price points without diluting our premium quality positioning, and introducing new offerings in the coming years. Considering the size and potential of the Indian market, we believe India can make an even greater contribution to our global business in the future.

Are there plans to expand manufacturing or increase local sourcing in India?

Our Halol manufacturing facility in Gujarat plays a strategic role in TOTO India's operations. It is currently operating at a high level of capacity utilisation, supported by growing demand from both domestic and export markets. The facility enables us to manufacture technologically advanced, water-efficient sanitaryware solutions while efficiently catering to both the Indian and international markets. Our current focus is on optimising existing operations, maintaining global quality standards, and driving future growth through operational excellence and continuous process improvements.

At present, we do not have immediate plans to expand our manufacturing capacity in India, as our priority remains maximising the efficiency and capabilities of our existing Halol facility.

How does TOTO ensure consistent global quality standards in India?

At our Halol manufacturing facility, we follow best practices and adhere to global and international standards, including ISO 9001, ISO 14001, MIS, TIS, IAPMO and JIS, along with a safety-first approach. Since beginning operations in 2014 the facility has evolved from manufacturing basic products when operations began in 2014 to producing premium products suitable for India and international markets, including Europe, the US and Japan. We are also proud to have one of the cleanest TOTO plants globally.

Our skilled workforce in India is trained by Japanese experts, helping us maintain TOTO's global quality and operational standards. We also have service teams across regions, supported by trained staff to provide prompt and consistent after-sales service.

What new products or smart bathroom innovations are planned for the Indian market?

We offer contemporary and innovative solutions such as NEOREST smart toilets and WASHLET electric bidet seats as part of TOTO CLEANOVATION, our approach to advancing cleanliness, comfort and wellness through technology. Our latest offerings include the RP Wall-Hung Tornado Toilet in Matte Finish in different colours, G Selection Shower collection with CALMING SHAWL feature, expanded matte finish options across faucets, showers and basins, along with colored basins inspired by seasonal themes. These products combine premium aesthetics with advanced functionality, catering to evolving consumer preferences for sophisticated and personalised bathroom spaces.

Our smart bathroom innovations are designed to deliver both luxury and hygiene. NEOREST smart toilets and WASHLET electric bidet seats offer advanced features such as AUTO FLUSH, AUTO OPEN-CLOSE LID, electronic bidet functions, touchless controls and a HEATED SEAT function, which is particularly valued in northern India during winter. Additionally, technologies such as EWATER+, TORNADO FLUSH, CEFIONTECT and RIMLESS design help enhance cleanliness and water efficiency.

Our TOTO WILL 2030 is centred on strengthening TOTO's presence, by expanding our sales network, broadening our product portfolio and making our innovative bathroom solutions accessible to a wider range of consumers while maintaining our premium quality standards. We will focus on strengthening our sales network and expanding our product portfolio by offering more options across different price segments while maintaining our premium quality standards.

Who is TOTO's key target audience in India today?

Our key target audience in India includes premium consumers, particularly high-net-worth individuals, as well as B2B stakeholders such as architects, builders, premium developers and the hospitality sector. Our focus remains strong across premium residential developments, bungalows and luxury hospitality projects, where demand for advanced and premium sanitaryware solutions continues to grow. At the same time, we are expanding beyond tier-I markets into tier-II and tier-III cities and suburban areas, while broadening our offerings across different price points without compromising on quality.

To strengthen our reach, we are expanding our dealer network. Our channel partner and distributor network continues to grow steadily. We are also enhancing engagement with architects, designers, plumbers and developers through events and collaborations, while hosting showroom initiatives in partnership with other Japanese brands. In addition, we are focusing on India's 100 Smart Cities, which reflect the country's evolving urbanisation and changing consumer preferences.

From a marketing and distribution perspective, we currently work with a strong network of dealers across India, including smaller associate dealers, and plan to further strengthen distribution and service capabilities in emerging markets. Our strategy is aimed at addressing different ends of the premium spectrum, particularly in tier-II and tier-III cities, while continuing to serve premium residences, bungalows and hospitality projects.

What is your strategy to grow TOTO's B2B business across hospitality and infrastructure?

Our B2B strategy focuses on strengthening relationships with architects, builders and premium developers, while strengthening our presence beyond Tier I markets into Tier II and Tier III cities. We are also intensifying our distribution and service capabilities in smaller, growing markets to support wider market access.

Hospitality is an important segment for TOTO, supported by strong relationships with premium hotels. We are targeting new premium hotels as well as infrastructure opportunities across airports and metro stations. Our focus also extends to premium residences, bungalows and commercial projects, with project sales contributing a higher volume to overall revenue compared with retail sales.

Given the high-tech and precision-engineered nature of our products, direct engagement is an important part of our strategy. We focus on face-to-face interactions with architects, designers and developers, who play a key role in educating end customers and helping us build the market for advanced bathroom solutions.

Are there any new investment plans for India in the near future?

India remains a strategically important market for TOTO, and we continue to strengthen our presence through our 'Make in India' commitment. Our manufacturing facility in Halol, Gujarat, plays a pivotal role in this strategy by manufacturing technologically advanced, water-efficient sanitaryware solutions for both the domestic market and exports. Since commencing operations in 2014, the facility has evolved from manufacturing basic products to producing premium sanitaryware for India as well as international markets, including Europe, Japan and the US, while adhering to our global quality standards. Our focus remains on optimising our existing manufacturing capabilities, expanding our market presence and supporting long-term growth in India through operational excellence and continuous innovation.

How are luxury hotels influencing the demand for smart and sustainable bathroom solutions?

Luxury hotels are playing an important role in increasing awareness and encouraging adoption of smart and advanced bathroom solutions by offering guests first-hand exposure to technologies that prioritise hygiene, comfort, convenience and design. Features such as touchless faucets, automatic flush systems and WASHLET/electronic bidet functionalities are gaining traction across premium hospitality environments, helping shape consumer expectations for similar experiences in residential spaces.

Hospitality is a key segment for TOTO, supported by its established relationships with premium hotels. We are targeting new premium hotels, alongside opportunities across airports and metro stations, as demand for premium hygienic and advanced bathroom solutions continues to grow.

Consumers in today's world are constantly on the lookout for bathrooms that are not only hygienic but functional, aesthetic, and luxurious. Our products are designed to bring together comfort, design and function through innovative technology and high-quality materials. Each design is thoughtfully engineered for optimal relaxation, safety, and a luxurious aesthetic, ensuring that every bath is a truly indulgent experience. Our focus on innovation positions us well to meet growing demand and strengthen our brand in India. Our products combine high-quality design with user-friendly features, delivering the ideal blend of luxury and utility. ■

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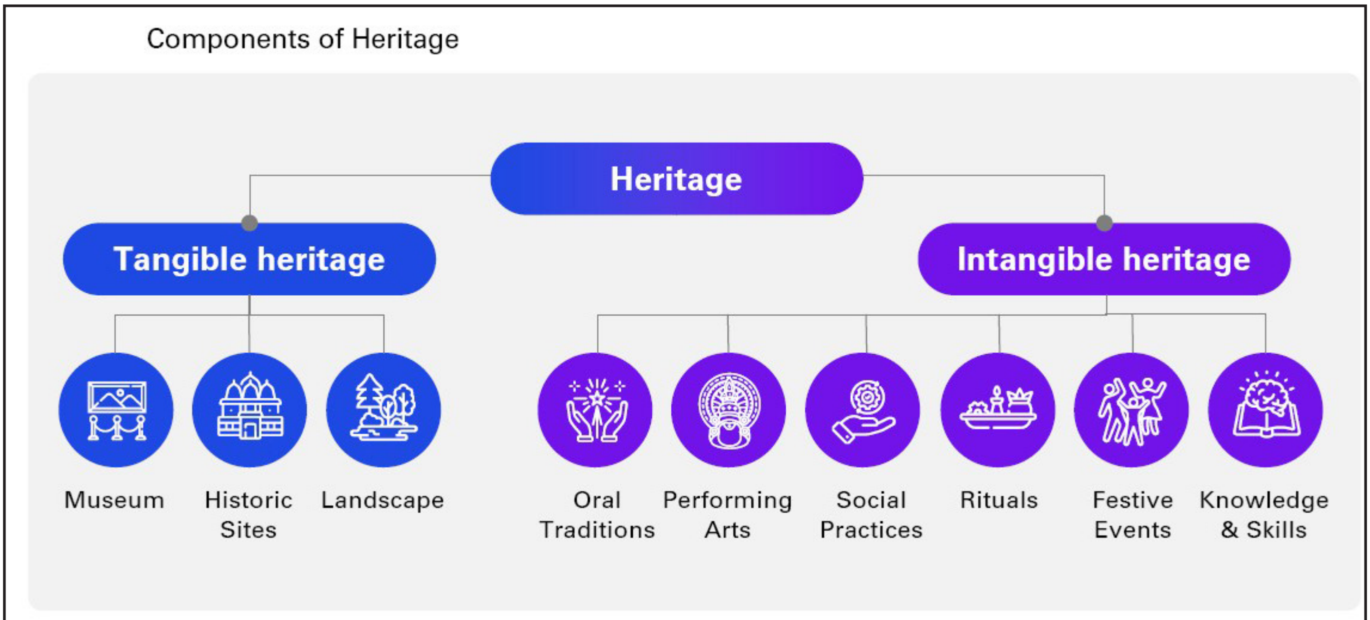
Food, culture and storytelling drive heritage tourism growth: Report

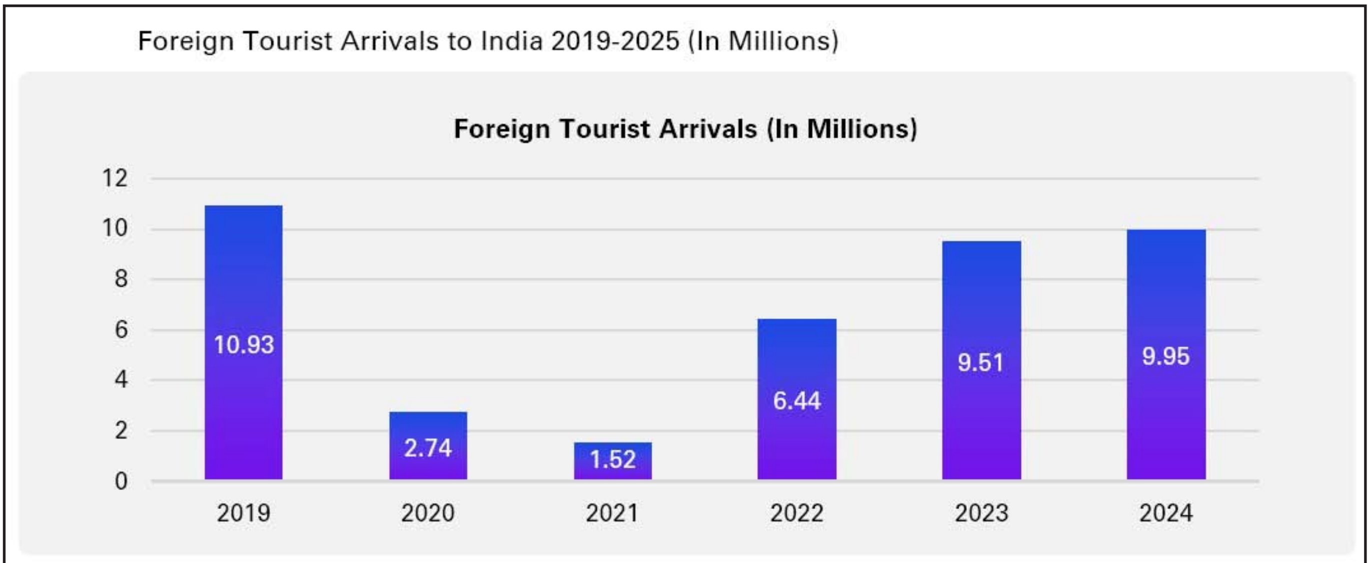
HBI Staff | Hyderabad

Heritage tourism is fast emerging as a major economic driver within the global travel ecosystem. According to the PHDCCI-KPMG report Heritage Reimagined: Driving Immersive, Tech-Enabled and Experience-Led Tourism, the global heritage tourism market is estimated at USD 624.6 billion in 2025 and is projected to reach nearly USD 937 billion by 2033, reflecting the growing importance of culture-led travel worldwide.

India enters this growth phase with formidable heritage assets and a large tourism base. The country recorded 2.948 billion domestic tourist visits and 9.95 million foreign tourist arrivals in 2024, while its heritage portfolio includes 44 UNESCO World Heritage Sites, 3,686 archaeological sites, 145 centrally protected ticketed monuments and 16 UNESCO-recognised Intangible Cultural Heritage elements. As destinations compete to attract higher-spending, experience-driven travellers, heritage is increasingly being viewed not merely as a conservation priority



Source: KPMG in India analysis 2026 based on secondary research



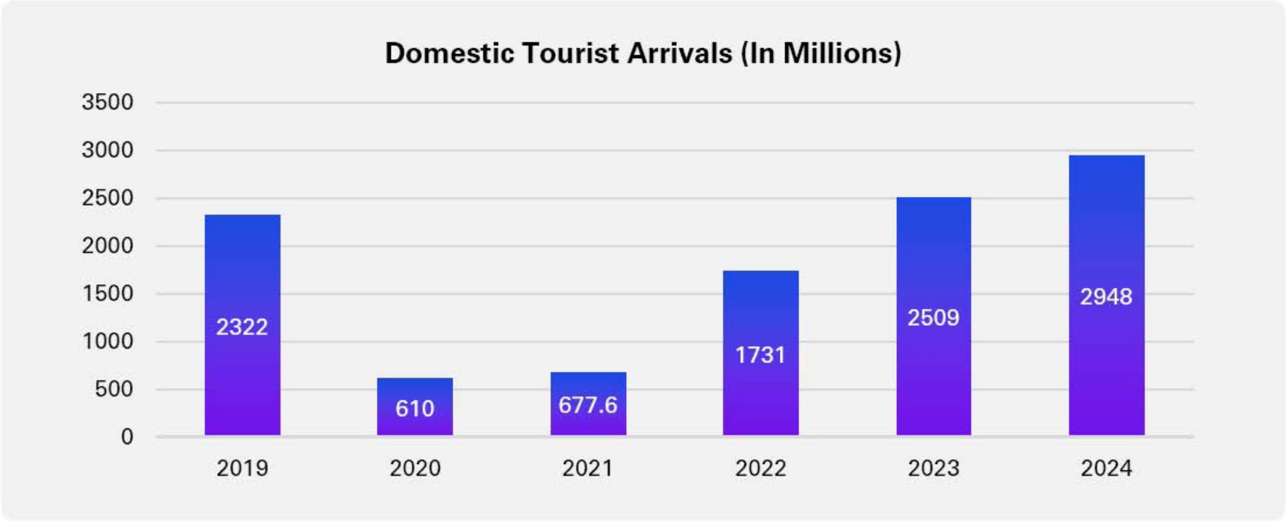
Source: India Tourism Data Compendium 2025, Ministry of Tourism, Government of India; Annual Tourism Snapshot 2025, Ministry of Tourism, Government of India but as a strategic lever for destination competitiveness, visitor engagement and tourism-led economic development.

The latest PHDCCI-KPMG report highlights how the sector is evolving from traditional sightseeing to what it terms "story living" immersive experiences that combine heritage assets with local culture, gastronomy, storytelling, community participation and technology.

The report highlights a clear shift in traveller preferences; from sightseeing to immersive experiences. Heritage walks, food trails, local markets, craft workshops and cultural performances are increasingly shaping travel decisions. Food, in particular, is emerging as a powerful expression of heritage, giving visitors a deeper connection to a destination's history, culture and communities.

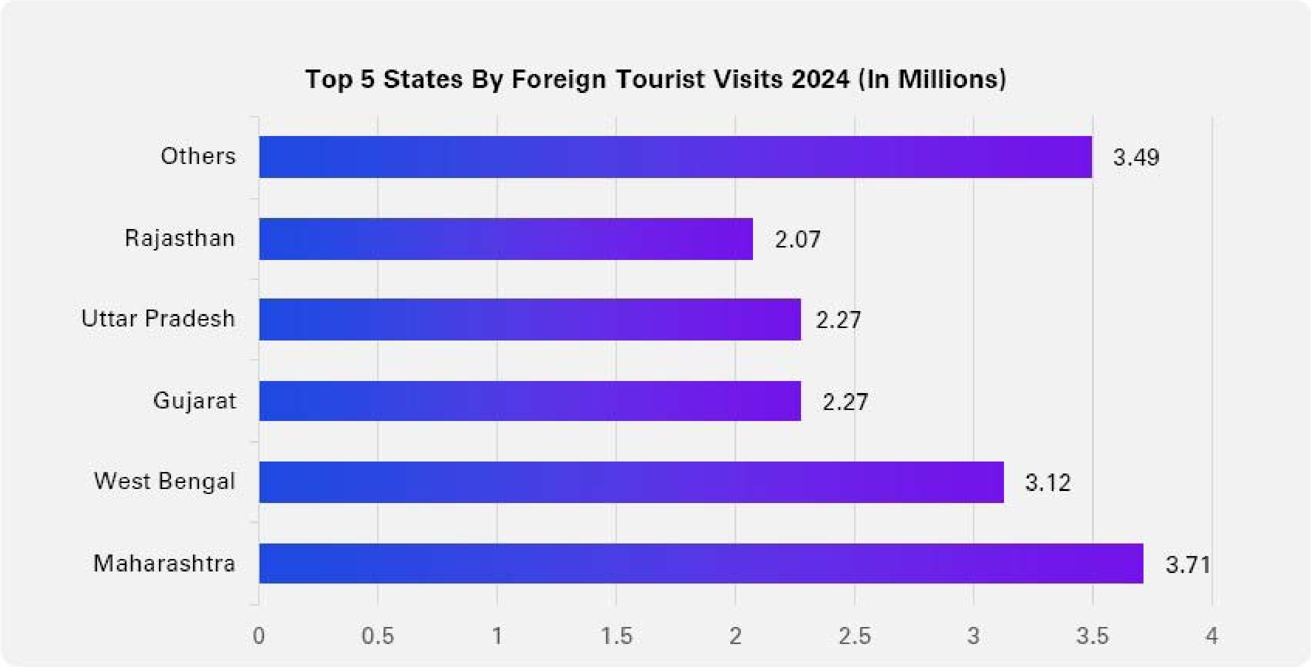
For the hospitality sector, this presents a significant opportunity. As demand grows for authentic, experience-led travel, heritage hotels, destination dining, culinary trails and curated cultural experiences are becoming key drivers of visitor engagement, longer stays and higher spending. The report suggests that the next phase of heritage tourism growth will be led by destinations that successfully combine culture, cuisine and storytelling to create memorable experiences. ■

Domestic Tourist Visits in India 2019-2024 (In Millions)



Source: India Tourism Data Compendium 2025, Ministry of Tourism, Government of India

Major 5 States/UTs in Foreign Tourist Visits, 2024



Source: India Tourism Data Compendium 2025, Ministry of Tourism, Government of India

Food heritage must be recognised as a cultural asset to unlock India's tourism potential: Experts

Asmita Mukherjee | Hyderabad

India's culinary heritage can become one of the country's strongest tourism assets, but only if it is documented, preserved and integrated into policy and hospitality education, industry leaders said at a panel discussion during the 15th International Heritage Tourism Conclave, organised by the PHD Chamber of Commerce and Industry (PHDCCI) at the Salar Jung Museum in Hyderabad.

The session, 'Food as a Tourism Asset', moderated by Chef Thomas Zacharias, Founder, The Locavore, brought together Chef Manjit Gill, President, Indian Federation of Culinary Associations (IFCA); Chef Madhu W. Krishnan, President, Bocuse d'Or India; Sanjay Thakur, Principal, Institute of Hotel Management (IHM), Hyderabad; and Rubin Cherian, General Manager, Novotel Hyderabad Convention Centre, to examine how India's diverse food traditions can strengthen destination branding, heritage conservation and experience-led tourism.

Opening the discussion, Chef Zacharias observed that food is often the most enduring memory travellers take home from a destination. While monuments remain important, he said, travellers are increasingly planning journeys around local cuisines, indigenous food traditions, markets and regional culinary experiences.

He also noted that during his travels across the country, he repeatedly encountered concerns from traditional cooks and community elders that many recipes and food practices may disappear within a generation if they are not documented and passed on.

Calling for policy intervention, Chef Manjit Gill, President, IFCA, said India has failed to accord food the status it deserves as an element of cultural heritage.

"Food must be recognised as the culture and heritage of this country. Otherwise, these traditions will disappear, and we will all be responsible for that loss," he said.

Gill argued that while global cuisines are systematically documented and taught in hospitality institutions, Indian regional cuisines continue to lack academic structure.

"We have learnt Western cuisine because it is taught as a subject. But where are the textbooks on Indian food? We have no tools to teach Indian cuisine and no structured books to read and study it."

He stressed that preserving India's culinary legacy cannot depend on individual efforts alone.

"One individual cannot do this. We can contribute our time and ideas, but somebody has to take ownership. Universities, institutions and the government must come together to create documentation and educational material so that future generations can learn India's own culinary traditions."

Gill urged policymakers to formally recognise culinary heritage within India's cultural preservation framework.

Sharing his personal experiences, Chef Madhu W. Krishnan, President, Bocuse d'Or India, highlighted the emotional relationship between food and travel, saying culinary experiences often become the defining memory of a journey.

Recalling her childhood, she described waiting for his grandfather's annual arrival from Kanpur carrying boxes filled with local sweets and savouries.

She also recalled family road trips where half the luggage space was intentionally left empty so fresh produce could be brought back home.

"Even today, I leave nearly half my suitcase empty whenever I travel because I know I will return with food. Food memories have always been linked with travel."

According to Krishnan, destinations are remembered not only for their attractions but also for flavours that create emotional connections long after the journey ends.

Responding to concerns about documentation, Sanjay Thakur, Principal,IHM Hyderabad, said hospitality institutions have a critical role in preserving indigenous culinary knowledge and are already taking steps in that direction.

While acknowledging Chef Gill's concerns, Thakur said institutes under the National Council for Hotel Management have begun documenting Indian regional cuisines and developing educational resources.

"Institutions like IHM Hyderabad are trying to bridge this gap. Hospitality education has evolved significantly, and we are making efforts to preserve regional culinary knowledge through documentation and academic initiatives."

He said future hospitality professionals should not only master international cuisines but also understand India's traditional food systems, ingredients and regional culinary practices.

Offering the hospitality industry's perspective, Rubin Cherian, General Manager,Novotel Hyderabad Convention Centre, said memorable food experiences often become inseparable from travel itself.

Recalling a visit to Thailand, Cherian said one particular dessert continues to remind him of the entire journey.

"When I think of mango sticky rice, I immediately think about travelling to Thailand with my wife and friends. I remember the street food, shopping, experiences and everything associated with that trip."

He said such experiences demonstrate the emotional role food plays in destination branding.

"Food literally connects people to their memories. When travellers remember a destination, they often remember what they ate as much as where they went."

The panellists agreed that culinary tourism presents significant opportunities for India's hospitality and tourism sectors, particularly through curated food trails, regional storytelling, indigenous cuisines and community participation.

They emphasised that protecting traditional recipes, promoting local ingredients and documenting culinary practices can help diversify tourism offerings while creating economic opportunities for local communities.

The discussion concluded with a collective call for stronger collaboration among government agencies, hospitality institutions, chefs, tourism stakeholders and academia to preserve India's culinary heritage. ■

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IHCL creates select service business vertical to drive growth across emerging hospitality brands

HBI Staff | Hyderabad

Indian Hotels Company Limited (IHCL) has announced the formation of a dedicated Select Service Businessorganisation, bringing together its high-growth brands Ginger, Tree of Life, amã Stays & Trails and Qmin under a unified leadership structure as part of its long-term growth strategy.

The move follows the recent inclusion of ANK Hotels and Pride Hospitality into the IHCL ecosystem and is aimed at accelerating scale, innovation and profitability across multiple hospitality segments.

Announcing the development, Puneet Chhatwal, Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer, IHCL, said the company's emerging brands and businesses have achieved significant scale and are now poised for the next phase of growth.

"The new and emerging brands and business of IHCL have achieved significant scale with the recent inclusion of ANK Hotels and Pride Hospitality. Under the newly formed Select Service Business vertical, IHCL brings together a portfolio of 260 Ginger hotels, over 40 Tree of Life resorts, more than 360 bungalows under amã Stays & Trails and over 100 Qmin outlets. This will serve as IHCL's non-linear growth engine, driving scale, innovation and profitable growth across diverse hospitality segments," Chhatwal said.

The newly created vertical will oversee a portfolio spanning midscale hotels, experiential leisure resorts, premium homestays and food and beverage businesses. The portfolio currently comprises approximately 260 Ginger hotels, 40-plus Tree of Life resorts, 360-plus amã Stays & Trails bungalows, and more than 100 Qmin outlets.

According to IHCL, the consolidated structure is expected to enhance operational synergies while enabling each brand to pursue distinct growth opportunities within its respective segment.

Chhatwal added that the company expects the Select Service Business to emerge as a key contributor to IHCL's Accelerate 2030 strategy.

"These high-growth brands with distinct market positioning will capitalise on emerging opportunities, enabling the Select Service Business to deliver an enterprise revenue CAGR of over 25 percent under Accelerate 2030," he said.

As part of the restructuring, Deepika Rao has been redesignated as Executive Vice President, Select Service Business, IHCL. She will lead the newly formed vertical along with a dedicated leadership team responsible for driving performance across the four brands operating under five separate legal entities.

The leadership team includes Aveek Sengupta, Brand Leader – Tree of Life; Anika Gupta, Senior Vice President Development and Brand Leader – amã Stays & Trails; Gazal Chowdhri, Brand Leader – Qmin; alongside functional leaders overseeing operations, commercial strategy, marketing, finance and human resources.

The creation of the Select Service Business underscores IHCL's focus on expanding beyond its traditional luxury and upscale hotel portfolio into high-growth segments such as branded homestays, experiential travel, midscale hospitality and food services. Industry observers view the move as a strategic step to unlock value from brands that cater to evolving traveller preferences while supporting the company's ambition of sustained double-digit growth over the coming years. ■

'Premium tequila consumption in India is concentrated in a few key cities'

As India's premium spirits market matures, premium tequila, in particular, is finding traction through luxury hotels, cocktail bars and curated drinking experiences, where education and storytelling are becoming as important as the product itself. **Arjunpreet Singh Sahni, Founder, Vivaano Spirits LLP,** the company behind premium tequila labels Blanco Expression and Reposado Expression, is strengthening its foothold in Delhi while evaluating expansion opportunities in Karnataka and Dubai. **Asmita Mukherjee** writes…

Which markets and cities are driving your growth strategy over the next three to five years, and what factors influence your choice of locations for expansion?

Delhi remains our primary market, and that is a conscious strategic decision. Tequila is still an emerging category in India that requires consumer education before it can be effectively sold. Building awareness happens one bar and one bartender at a time, and we believe it is more important to establish a strong, defensible position in a single market than to spread ourselves too thin across multiple cities.

Delhi offers the ideal ecosystem for this approach, with its mature luxury hotel segment, highly competitive cocktail culture, and well-travelled consumers who already have an understanding of premium tequila and its quality benchmarks.

At the same time, we are actively evaluating expansion opportunities in Karnataka and Dubai. Bengaluru stands out for its highly skilled bartending community, which often influences trends across the broader hospitality and beverage industry. Dubai, meanwhile, represents a mature premium spirits market with an established tequila consumer base and a significant Indian diaspora that is likely to recognise and connect with the brand.

We are taking a measured approach to both markets, focusing on careful evaluation and long-term viability rather than making announcements before a clear market strategy is in place.

How is your product portfolio evolving to address changing consumer preferences, and are there any new categories or premium offerings you plan to introduce?

We launched with two expressions; Blanco and Reposado and we intend to stay there for now. Both are 100% agave, distilled and bottled at origin at La Cofradia in Tequila, Jalisco

The temptation in a young brand is to add SKUs to look bigger on the shelf. We think the opposite is true in premium spirits: two expressions that a bartender fully understands will outsell four that nobody can explain. Blanco carries our cocktail programme, Reposado is our sipping and gifting expression. Until both are properly established in the trade, adding a third is a distraction rather than a strategy.

How important are partnerships and collaborations to your growth roadmap, and what qualities do you look for when selecting strategic partners?

Partnerships are critical for a brand of our size because we cannot buy attention, we have to earn credibility.

Our foundation is our partnership with La Cofradia, a historic distillery in Tequila, Jalisco, where every bottle is produced, filled, and shipped to India. That relationship underpins the authenticity of our product. In India, we look for partners whose audiences genuinely consume premium spirits and who can showcase the product properly through trained staff, quality serves, and sustained menu presence. For us, meaningful engagement matters more than visibility. A bar takeover that educates bartenders delivers far greater long-term value than a large launch event that generates short-lived attention.

Which domestic and international markets do you see as the biggest growth opportunities for your brand, and how are you tailoring your strategy to succeed in those regions?

Delhi remains our focus market, while Karnataka is the next market under evaluation. Premium tequila consumption in India is concentrated in a few key cities, and our strategy is to build meaningful market share in select locations rather than maintain a limited presence across multiple markets.

Internationally, Dubai is our priority. The market already has a mature premium tequila consumer base, a simpler regulatory environment, and serves as a strong validation platform for the brand. Establishing credibility in Dubai also strengthens conversations with hotel and hospitality buyers in India.

Beyond these markets, we are taking a measured approach. Expanding into new markets is easy to announce, but successful execution and long-term servicing require careful planning. ■

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WelcomHeritage expands Rajasthan footprint with Jaipur Hotel

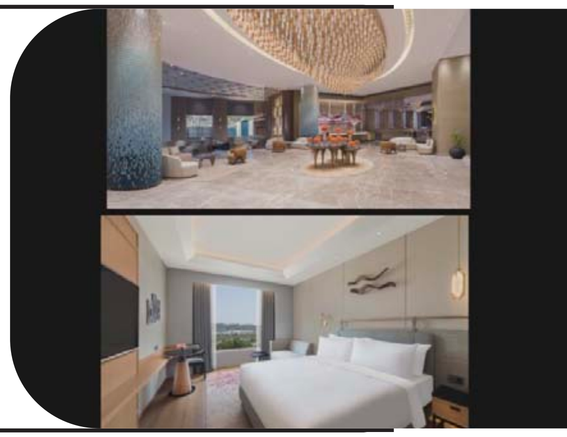
Located in Jaipur, the 34-key boutique heritage hotel is hosted by the descendants of the Ranbanka Rathore family of Kurki Fort, whose lineage traces back to the 23rd generation of saint-poet Mirabai. The property combines traditional Rajput architecture with contemporary hospitality offerings, targeting leisure travellers, destination weddings and the MICE segment.

Designed in the style of a traditional Rajasthani haveli, the hotel incorporates Marwari, Mughal and European architectural influences. The accommodation mix comprises one Maharaja Suite, four Maharani Suites, 18 Executive Mahal Rooms and 11 Rawla Deluxe Rooms.

IHG Debuts Vignette Collection in India with Panchkula Hotel

IHG Hotels & Resorts has launched its luxury collection brand, Vignette Collection, in India and South West Asia with the opening of The Aarlis Hotel Panchkula, a 145-room property located in Haryana's Chandigarh Tricity region.

The Aarlis Hotel Panchkula features multiple dining venues, a spa, fitness centre, swimming pool and nearly 30,000 sq. ft. of meetings and events space, including the Aura Grand Ballroom. The property is targeting both business and leisure travellers, leveraging its proximity to Chandigarh's commercial districts and attractions such as Morni Hills, Sukhna Lake and the Capitol Complex.



IHCL signs Ginger Hotel in Sindhudurg

Indian Hotels Company Limited (IHCL) has announced the signing of a Ginger hotel in Sindhudurg, Maharashtra, further strengthening its footprint in emerging leisure destinations. The project, a conversion of a standalone hotel, will be expanded to a 50-key property under the Ginger brand.

The signing aligns with IHCL's strategy of growing its presence in high-potential tourism markets and expanding the reach of its lean luxe Ginger portfolio across the country.

IHCL Signs Heritage Conversion Hotel in Chettinad

Indian Hotels Company Limited (IHCL) has expanded its heritage hospitality portfolio with the signing of Tree of Life Kanadukathan in Chettinad, Tamil Nadu. The project involves the adaptive reuse of an existing heritage-style Chettiar mansion, reinforcing the company's focus on restoring culturally significant properties for hospitality use.

The 20-key brownfield development will be located in Kanadukathan, a town renowned for its distinctive Chettinad architecture and historic mansions. The project will retain the property's regional architectural character while introducing hospitality infrastructure, including an all-day dining restaurant, lounge, swimming pool, spa and fitness centre.

Lee Kum Kee expands India foodservice Portfolio

Lee Kum Kee Sauce has expanded its India foodservice portfolio with the launch of Japanese Style Soy Sauce, strengthening its presence in the country's rapidly growing Asian cuisine segment.

The product has been introduced in partnership with Earthling Consumer Products Pvt. Ltd., the company's authorised and exclusive import and distribution partner for North India, and will be available to restaurants, hotels, cafés, cloud kitchens and other foodservice operators.

Naturally brewed using first-draw extraction, the soy sauce is designed to deliver balanced umami and consistency across commercial kitchens. It is suitable for a range of applications, including sushi, donburi, stir-fries, marinades, grilled meats, seafood and contemporary Asian dishes. The product contains no added MSG, is Halal-certified and is suitable for vegetarians.

Monika Alcobev partners with Angostura to expand premium Caribbean Spirits portfolio in India

Monika Alcobev Ltd., a leading importer and distributor of premium alcoholic beverages, has entered into a strategic partnership with Angostura, the Trinidad and Tobago-based producer of globally recognised bitters and premium Caribbean rums, to officially introduce and expand the brand's presence in India. Under the agreement, Monika Alcobev will manage the import, distribution and marketing of Angostura's portfolio, which includes Angostura 5-Year-Old Rum, Angostura Aromatic Bitters and Angostura Orange Bitters. The products will initially be launched in Delhi and Maharashtra, with phased expansion planned across other key markets.

Dasara Gin enters India

Premium craft spirit brand Dasara Gin has entered the Indian market with the launch of Dasara Ginand Dasara Savari Gin, blending Indian heritage with American craft distilling. The brand, founded by Mysuru-born entrepreneur Varchasvi Shankar, will initially be available in Karnataka and Goa before expanding into other markets.

Distilled at Shankar Distillers in Troy, Michigan, the launch marks a homecoming of sorts for Shankar, who left Mysuru more than three decades ago and went on to establish one of the first American craft distilleries to export bourbon to India.

The flagship Dasara Gin is crafted using more than 11 botanicals, including Indian ingredients such as turmeric, cardamom and orange zest, creating a profile characterised by citrus freshness, floral notes and warm spice. Dasara Savari Gin, a more complex expression, incorporates 12 botanicals including Darjeeling black tea, offering added depth and complexity.

Kikkoman revamps dark soy sauce

Kikkoman has relaunched its Dark Soy Sauce exclusively for the Indian foodservice market, introducing an upgraded formulation developed in collaboration with chefs across the country to better cater to the evolving needs of professional kitchens. The revamped product features enhanced colour, deeper umami flavour and improved consistency, aimed at elevating Indo-Chinese and Pan-Asian cuisine while maintaining Kikkoman's traditional honjozo natural brewing process. Manufactured in India using Kikkoman Naturally Brewed Soy Sauce from Japan as the primary ingredient, the product also aligns with the company's 'Make in India' strategy. The relaunched Kikkoman Dark Soy Sauce is being rolled out across India through foodservice distributors and wholesale channels. It is available in 446g, 913g and 11.2kg packs, targeting restaurants, hotels and institutional kitchens.

HYATT HOTELS

Sujeet Chaturvedi, Director of Sales, Hyatt Place Jaipur Malviya Nagar

Sujeet will lead the hotel's sales strategy, revenue generation, business development, and market positioning initiatives.

Sujeet brings more than 13 years of experience in the hospitality industry and has worked with leading brands including The Park Hotels, Hilton Hotels, Accor Hotels, Marriott Hotels, and Radisson Hotel Group. Most recently, he served as Director of Sales at Radisson Hotels, where he was responsible for driving revenue growth, strengthening client relationships, and expanding market share. Throughout his career, he has demonstrated a strong ability to build strategic partnerships and deliver business results across diverse hospitality markets.

ESPIRE HOSPITALITY

Burkhard Wolter, General Manager, Six Senses Fort Barwara

With over three decades of experience in international luxury hospitality across Europe, Asia, the Middle East, Africa and the Caribbean, Burkhard brings extensive operational expertise and a strong passion for people, culture and guest experiences. Throughout his career, Burkhard has held leadership roles across some of the world's most renowned luxury hospitality brands including Shangri-La, Four Seasons, Rosewood, Raffles, Kempinski, Oberoi Hotels & Resorts and Orient Express. His professional journey has spanned luxury resorts, heritage hotels, city properties, cruise ships and boutique hospitality ventures, giving him a well-rounded understanding of the industry.

ibis HOTELS

Rajesh Dudi, Director of Sales, ibis Hyderabad HITEC City

With more than two decades of experience in the hospitality industry, Rajesh brings extensive expertise in sales leadership, business development, and commercial strategy. Over the course of his career, he has worked with Accor and several leading hospitality brands, building a strong track record of driving business growth across diverse markets.

In his new role, Rajesh will oversee the hotel's overall sales and commercial strategy, with a focus on expanding corporate and travel trade partnerships, identifying new business opportunities, and strengthening the hotel's presence across key market segments. He will also work closely with the team to drive revenue growth while supporting ibis Hyderabad's long-term business objectives in an increasingly competitive market.

MAYFAIR HOTELS & RESORTS

Saugat Nandy, Assistant Vice President – Sales, MAYFAIR Hotels & Resorts

Bringing more than 29 years of experience across leading luxury hospitality brands, Saugat joins MAYFAIR to support the brand's continued focus on strategic growth, market expansion, and revenue excellence across its portfolio of 19 resorts in 8 states. Having built an accomplished career with renowned hospitality brands including Starwood Hotels & Resorts, ITC Hotels Ltd., Blackrock Hotels & Resorts, and The Wanderers, Saugat has consistently led high-performing commercial teams, driven multi-property sales strategies, strengthened customer relationships, and delivered sustainable business growth across diverse markets. His extensive understanding of the luxury hospitality landscape will further strengthen MAYFAIR's commercial capabilities as the brand continues to expand its footprint.

In his role, Saugat will work closely with the leadership team to further enhance MAYFAIR's sales strategy, strengthen relationships across key business segments, identify new growth opportunities, and reinforce the brand's position across the corporate, MICE, leisure, and wedding segments. His leadership and strategic expertise will play a key role in accelerating the brand's commercial growth and expanding its presence across key domestic and international markets.

HILTON WORLDWIDE

Karan Singhal, Marketing & Communications Manager, DoubleTree Suites by Hilton Bengaluru ORR

In his new role, Singhal will lead the property's marketing and communications strategy, driving experience-centric campaigns, enhancing brand positioning and developing guest engagement initiatives across accommodation, dining and lifestyle experiences. He will also focus on strengthening the hotel's digital footprint, media outreach and strategic partnerships while creating integrated marketing programmes to reinforce its presence in Bengaluru's competitive hospitality market.

With over six years of experience in hospitality marketing and communications, Singhal brings expertise in brand communications, digital marketing, public relations, social media and integrated campaign management.

R.N.I.No.MAHENG/2007/22934,
Licence to post without pre-payment WPP LICENSE NO. MR / TECH / WPP-29/SOUTH / 2019-21, Regn. No: MCS/181/2019-21, Published on 1st of every month, Posted at Mumbai Patrika Channel Sorting Office, Mumbai 400 001 on 3rd & 4th every month

Printed and Published by Sheldon Eric Santwan On Behalf Of Saffron Synergies Pvt. Ltd, Printed At Indigo Press (India) Private Limited, 1c/716, 21 Bharat Crown Compound, A.G. Pawar Marg, Dadoji Konddeo X Road, Ghodapdev, Byculla (East), Mumbai 400 027 And Published From Saffron Synergies Pvt. Ltd. 902, Cozy Apartments Chs Ltd. Yari Road, Versova, Andheri (West), Mumbai 400 061. **Editor : Sheldon Eric Santwan**