

Shailesh Menon & Lijee Philip

After nearly 18 months, the Archaeological Survey of India reopened the Taj Mahal for night viewing in the third week of August. Interminable rains and cloud cover played spoiler for the first set of visitors who had come to see the marble marvel under a moonlit sky. But as the final batch walked in, late into the night, the skies cleared and the white monument shimmered under a full moon. The Taj, the byword for tourism in India, has been attracting thousands of visitors since mid-June when it reopened for day visits. It is not just the 17th century monument that is seeing footholds. Indians are again thronging population destinations, even pilgrimage centres. It seems the cloud of despair that hung over the tourism sector during the two raging waves of the Covid-19 pandemic is blown away.

Says Rajkumar Patel, superintending archaeologist at ASI's Agra circle: "Tourists have started visiting the Taj Mahal again. We get over 20,000 visitors every weekend and about 20,000 on weekdays. Even our night-viewing sessions get fully booked these days."

Globally, travel and tourism has been one of the biggest casualties of the pandemic. Prior to Covid-19, the sector accounted for nearly 10% of global GDP and employed over 300 million people, as per IMF scrolls. India, too, relies heavily on tourism which accounts for nearly 7% of the GDP and generates over 40 million jobs. When Covid struck the country in early 2020 and travel restrictions were imposed, the share of tourism sector to GDP fell to 4.7%, according to a recent report by S&P Research, and hundreds of thousands of people lost their jobs. While the sector showed signs of improvement in the third quarter of last fiscal, the Covid second wave put paid to them. Several months later, thanks to falling cases and a widening vaccination coverage, the travel and tourism sector is again looking up. Lead indicators of the sector — train and flight bookings, hotel occupancy ratios and footfalls — point to a recovery.

Union Minister for Tourism, G. Kishan Reddy says, "Domestic travel has resumed and tourist destinations are receiving a large number of visitors. There is a pent-up demand that will surface — and can be tapped."

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G. Kishan Reddy, Union Minister for Tourism

"Near-term leisure travel bookings during festivals have seen a jump over the past few weeks," says Vipul Prakash, CEO, MakeMyTrip. "People have started searching and booking tickets 30 days ahead of the date of travel. There is a consistent month-on-month increase in forward bookings within the flights and hotel segment," he adds.

Economists at Quantis Research scanned Google Trends dataset to gauge the current consumption pattern in the country. Searches for holiday packages and tickets have grown across online platforms such as MakeMyTrip and Oyo Rooms over the past three weeks. "There's some pent-up demand that is aiding the tourism sector recovery. People who have been vaccinated are open to non-essential travel," says Yuvika Singhal, economist at Quantis Eco.

For large travel agencies like Thomas Cook India, domestic tourism business has registered a double-digit growth over the past few months. The agency is seeing significant growth in the number of people wanting to travel within the country and stay in well-managed properties for a long period. "This could be because many people are not travelling overseas these days," says Abraham Alapat, president & country head — marketing, Thomas Cook India. "Also, not a lot of discounts are there — airfares are high in some sectors and hotels are charging pre-Covid rates. Now there is demand for travel, but supply is limited."

SHARE OF TOP 10 STATES IN DOMESTIC TOURIST VISITS, 2020

| STATE | % SHARE |
|----------------|---------|
| Tamil Nadu | 23.0 |
| Uttar Pradesh | 14.1 |
| Karnataka | 12.7 |
| Andhra Pradesh | 11.6 |
| Telangana | 6.6 |
| Maharashtra | 6.4 |
| West Bengal | 4.7 |
| Madhya Pradesh | 3.9 |
| Gujarat | 3.2 |
| Punjab | 2.7 |
| Others | 11.0 |

WE ARE OPEN

Domestic tourism is reviving as visitors again throng popular destinations, even pilgrimage centres

HOTEL BOOKINGS UP

With consumers regaining the confidence to travel, hotel occupancy ratios have gone up considerably over the past few months. According to leading hotel chain executives, Jaipur, Udaipur, Goa, Kodagu, Darjeeling, Corbett, Rishlesh and Shimla are drawing a large number of visitors. "Domestic tourism is really booming. All the 160+ tourist destinations notified by the Union government are seeing more than 80% occupancy since August this year. This trend is likely to continue," says GKV Rao, director-general of tourism, Ministry of Tourism. He is hopeful of a "bright 2022" for both inbound and outbound tourism.

But hotel industry bigwigs are mindful of the pandemic. "If there is no third wave, we do expect the last two quarters of this fiscal to see a better rebound," says Farheen Chander, SVP (sales & marketing), IHCL, which owns the Taj Hotels brand. According to Chander, the resurgence of travel after the second Covid wave has been quicker and has helped the revival of the sector. "The industry is seeing month-on-month growth, with recoveries touching 70-80% of pre-pandemic levels," he adds.

Fauz Kossawi, CMD of Lemon Tree Hotels, says pent-up demand is leading to "a lot of revenge travel" among Indians. "The January-March 2022 quarter will be very good for the hotel industry," he says.

But not many large hotel chains make a lot of money by catering only to domestic travellers. Chains like The Taj and Marriott command a large wallet share of foreign tourists visiting India. "If Covid restrictions are eased and commercial flight operations resume, we can anticipate some inbound travellers from Europe in Q1 of 2022. But a 50% recovery to 2019 levels may start only from Q4 of next year," says Monisha Dewan, senior area director (sales), Marriott International.

Smaller boutique properties are also witnessing a rush of tourists since August this year. Several travellers, bearing crowds in large hotels, are choosing small properties. "Tree of Life Resorts, a boutique hotel chain with 150 keys across 13 locations, is logging occupancy ratios of about 70%. "We have been very busy since August," says Akhil Anand, director, Tree of Life Resorts. "Demand for small, away-from-the-city properties has been going up since 2015. Covid has accelerated the trend. Highest demand has resulted in our rates going up by nearly 25%," he adds.

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NUMBER OF DOMESTIC TOURISTS IN STATES & UTS

| Year | No. of Domestic Tourists (mn) | Change Over Previous Year (%) |
|------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 2015 | 1,432 | 11.6 |
| 2016 | 1,615 | 13.0 |
| 2017 | 1,657.5 | 2.6 |
| 2018 | 1,854 | 12.0 |
| 2019 | 2,322 | 25.3 |
| 2020 | 610 | -74 |

HIGH TICKET SALES

Domestic airlines are all operating at 70-75% passenger load factor (metric for utilisation of seats). Several sectors are fully booked. Presently, footfalls at major Indian airports are in the range of 5-6 lakh passengers a day vis-à-vis an average of 7.6 lakh passengers in pre-Covid months.

Train ticket bookings have also gone up significantly. IRCTC, the ticketing and tourism platform under the Ministry of Railways, gets nearly 14 lakh ticket bookings a day as against 1 lakh in the pre-pandemic phase. Anand Kumar Jha, IRCTC spokesperson, says travellers have shifted to online booking from purchasing at ticket counters. "Sale of general/unreserved class tickets has been fewer than in pre-Covid times. Tickets to pilgrim spots are also selling fast. There are takers even for trips like the Shri Ramayana Yatra. It was sold out in four days, now four more trains are added to this service," he says.

Pilgrimage sites across the country are seeing an increase in the turnout of devotees. People have started participating in Dham yatras while popular religious places such as the Ajmer Dargah and Velankanni Church in Tamil Nadu are seeing 6,000-10,000 visitors per day. Business travel has also gone up over the past two months. Goa has already played host to a few corporate off-site meetings and conferences. A few national-level exhibitions are also scheduled to be held early next year, which may result in more people travelling for work.

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Down south, the houseboats sailing the backwaters of Kerala are not so fortunate. They have yet to get many tourists. This, according to boatowners, is due to the high number of Covid-19 cases in the state. "In normal times, we would get 15-20 trips a month, now we get about 8-10 trips," says V Vinod, president, All Kerala Houseboat Owners' Association. "We need more activity. This will come only when the overall tourism activity picks up," he adds.

In the East, hill stations like Darjeeling are seeing a decent turnout of visitors. The Victoria Memorial Museum in Kolkata has been logging over 13,000 visitors a day as against 20,000 visitors in pre-Covid months. National parks and tiger reserves are also seeing an influx of visitors. "We may end this year with 2.2 lakh to 2.5 lakh visitors as against our pre-Covid annual average of 3 lakh visitors," says Rahul, director, Corbett Tiger Reserve. People are flocking to the Andamans as well. "We are getting around 500 tourists every day. If Covid cases stay within a manageable limit, we may see more tourists in December and early next year," says Nikhil Kaia, proprietor of Blue Corals Dive, Havelock. Goa is seeing a rush of visitors on long weekends and festival holidays. "The beaches are packed on weekends," says Jude Lobo, owner of Souza Lobo, a restaurant on Calangute Beach. "The business is improving steadily. It will reach pre-Covid levels when charter flights and foreign tourists start coming to Goa," he adds. Happy holidays are almost here.

shailesh.menon@timesgroup.com

LEAD INDICATORS

AVIATION SECTOR

Average footfall in domestic airports is 5 lakh now. Flight services are about 2,500. Passenger load is 70-75%.

HOTELS

Hotels in tourist centres in metros are getting fully booked on long weekends and festival holidays

TOURIST DESTINATIONS

Jammu & Kashmir, Ladakh & the Andamans get high footfalls

PILGRIMAGE TOURS

Most religious places are seeing 75-80% of pre-Covid footfalls. Dham yatras, visits to dargahs and churches on steady recovery path.

TRAIN TICKET SALES

IRCTC sells an average of 14 lakh tickets per day vis-à-vis 9 lakh in pre-Covid months

TAJ MAHAL

Gets nearly 32,000 visitors on weekends now. Night-viewing slot, which opens 4-5 days a month, is fully booked

HOUSEBOATS OF KASHMIR

Were almost fully booked during Dussehra holidays

CORBETT TIGER RESERVE

Gets nearly 3 lakh visitors every year; could close this year with nearly 2.5 lakh visitors

ANDAMANS

Receives over 500 visitors from mainland every day, as against 2,000 pre-Covid. The 25-off schools during Dussehra take nearly 275 tourists on dives every day now

VICTORIA MEMORIAL MUSEUM, KOLKATA

Gets 13,000-14,000 visitors a day; pre-Covid months, it was over 20,000

GOOGLE SEARCHES

Holiday searches on Google steadily rising every month

MICE TRAVEL

Business meetings, conferences, exhibitions, corporate offsites are gaining traction



NO. OF GOVT-APPROVED HOTELS & HOTEL ROOMS IN INDIA

| CATEGORY | HOTELS | ROOMS |
|------------------|--------------|-----------------|
| One-Star | 10 | 346 |
| Two-Star | 27 | 914 |
| Three-Star | 533 | 18,193 |
| Four-Star | 419 | 21,351 |
| Five-Star | 226 | 28,833 |
| Five-Star Deluxe | 149 | 33,877 |
| Heritage Hotels | 59 | 1,778 |
| TOTAL | 1,423 | 1,05,292 |

Source: Tourism Ministry, industry sources