

Spiritual tourism picks up as restrictions end

Firms expect Apr-Jul to be good for business as places of worship open up

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Places of worship are opening up across the country for long-postponed pilgrimages, raising hopes among hotels and travel agencies for the return of business from spiritual tourism. Pilgrims are locking dates for religious sites, spurring demand for travel to destinations like Shirdi, Vrindavan, Ajmer and Bodh Gaya.

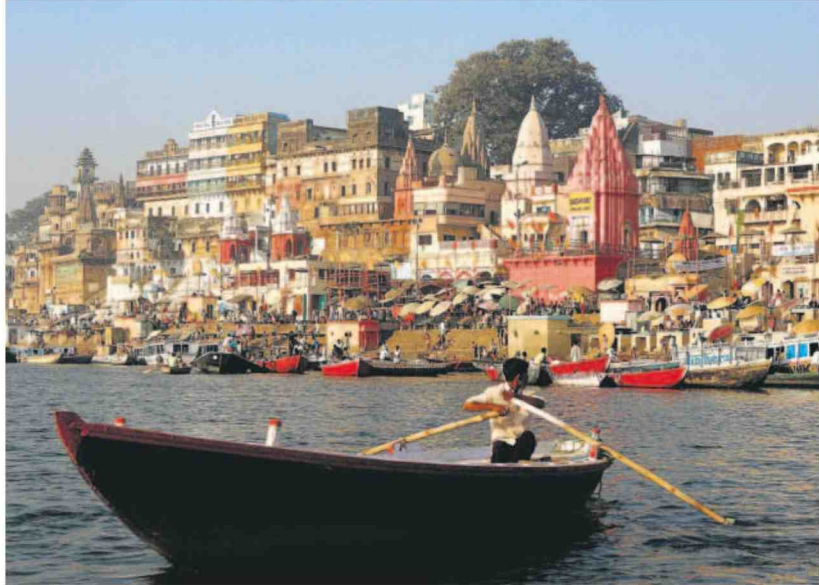
Firms like MakeMyTrip Ltd, Sarovar Hotels, Indian Hotels Co. Ltd (IHCL), Thomas Cook (India)Ltd, and Lemon Tree Hotels Ltd are expecting April-July to be good for business due to religious tourism across the country. Some companies are seeing upwards of 80% occupancy in their hotels across locations.

Online travel agency MakeMyTrip said religious cities Mathura, Haridwar, Puri, Varanasi and Pushkar are seeing a steady increase in tourists.

Puneet Chhatwal, managing director (MD) and chief executive officer (CEO) of the IHCL said spiritual tourism is resilient, unless governments shut down these places like they did during peak pandemic. "It (religious tourism) is a massive business. We are going to launch a Vivanta hotel in Katra soon. We already have a Ginger Hotel there. We have a Ginger in Dwarka (Gujarat) and have opened a Taj in Tirupati as well and all of these have opened during the pandemic," he said.

Ajay Bakaya, MD of Sarovar Hotels & Resorts said he anticipates a surge in religious travellers to their hotels even across the hotter months of April-July. The company has hotels in Bodh Gaya, Badrinath, Haridwar, Somnath, Junagarh, Mathura, Vrindavan and Tirupati. It intends to open three more hotels by the end of this year in Amritsar, Dwarka and Katra on the back of growing demand.

"From our point of view, once the worst



Pilgrims are locking dates for religious sites, spurring demand for travel to destinations like Shirdi, Varanasi, Vrindavan, Ajmer, and Bodh Gaya, among others.

of the covid was over, while there was a limitation in numbers in places like Tirupati, without exception we have seen close to or over 80% occupancy at all of these locations. Which is great for places like Bodh Gaya particularly since that would rely on international tourists," said Bakaya. Pre-covid, he said, the occupancy generally

sure travel, said a desire to leave behind the upheavals of the past two years of the pandemic is driving demand for religious tourism with an uptick of over 70% versus 2019.

Individual hotels are benefiting too. Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine in Katra, J&K, saw the number of pilgrims plunge from 8 million in 2019 to 1.7 million in 2020 before climbing back again to 5.5 million in 2021. Skyview by Empyrean Patnitop, located just 90 minutes from the shrine, expects this year's numbers to be in sync with pre-covid times, said Syed Junaid Altaf, MD, Empyrean Skyview Projects.

Lemon Tree Hotels has been seeing high demand for its hotels located within or close to pilgrim destinations, including Amritsar, Jammu, Katra, Rishikesh, Neelkanth, Dehradun, and Dwarka. "For us, Rishikesh is leading the trend with high occupancies at strong rates," said Vikramjit Singh, the company's president.

PENT-UP DEMAND

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hovered around the 70% mark in most of these cities.

Indians are leveraging weekends/extended weekends for spiritual travel—Thomas Cook India, for instance, witnessed a significant three-fold increase for the Holi long weekend starting 18 March. Rajeev Kale, its president, who also looks after lei-