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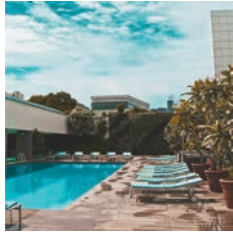
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Dear Friends

When the news that The Ascott Limited is acquiring Oakwood Worldwide, it came as a surprise to many in the travel fraternity. Thinking logically it was a solid financial decision as the acquisition increases Ascott's global presence to more than 150,000 units in about 900 properties across 200+ cities in 39 countries. Globally, The Ascott Limited operates through a wide range of brands, some of which are as follows –Somerset, Citadines, The Crest Collection, Lyf, Quest, Preference, Fox Hotels, Harris Hotels, Vertu Hotels, Yello. Six months down the acquisition to get an insight into the scenario we e-interacted with Vincent Miccolis, Managing Director of Middle East, Africa, Turkey & India (MEAT) and Hoshang Garivala, Country General Manager – India, The Ascott Limited

Led by the dynamic duo Ray Bloom, Chairman, IMEX Group and Carina Bauer, CEO, IMEX Group, IMEX has created a niche for itself in the world of MICE. IMEX provides an opportunity to event community to not only explore the latest event trends but also an exposure to expert education. This year again over 3,000 buyers will gather to meet a range of global suppliers spread across three days at IMEX Frankfurt.

HICC (Hyderabad International Convention Centre) will be exhibiting at IMEX Frankfurt. HICC stands out as one of India's most popular venues for hosting MICE events due to its world-class facilities, cutting-edge technology, and commitment to sustainability. Spanning over 15 acres of serene landscape, HICC offers a massive pillar-free hall measuring 6,480 square meters, capable of hosting a plenary with up to 5,000 delegates, which can also be divided into smaller halls as needed. With 32 breakout rooms, specialized meeting rooms, speaker preparatory rooms, boardrooms, and VIP lounges, all equipped with state-of-the-art AV and Wi-Fi, HICC provides an unmatched experience for event organizers and delegates alike.

Apart from Novotel and HICC Complex several other exhibitors will be there from India -Pullman New Delhi Aerocity, Mahatma Mandir Convention & Exhibition Centre and The Leela Gandhinagar, Hilton and Hilton Garden Inn Embassy Manyata Business Park, Marirott India, Palomino Hospitality Private Limited, MMACTIV , India Convention Promotion Bureau, Discover India Tours Pvt. Ltd., Alpcord Network Event & Conference Management Company, Clarks Exotica Convention Resort and Spa, A.T. Seasons & Vacations Travel Pvt. Ltd.), Elisyan India Private Limited, India Exposition Mart Ltd., Concept Conferences Pvt. Ltd, Hyderabad Convention Visitor Bureau, Travoinspire Global Pvt Ltd, IICC (India International Convention and Expo Centre), Abercrombie & Kent India, Distant frontiers etc.

One of India's finest exhibition grounds is HITEX - not only a premier MICE exhibition destination for international exhibitions and conferences but also a popular corporate events venue in India. As it celebrates two decades of success we did a focus on the venue.

Oman Air is also celebrating three decades of success and over the years has gone from strength to strength. The journey started in March 1993 with a single flight between the cities of Muscat and Salalah. The route, operated by Boeing 737-300, marked the launch of the airline's domestic network, which was followed shortly with its first international flight between Muscat and Dubai. Oman Air has been a force to reckon within Middle East and will be a global force once it's implemented into oneworld alliance. With a major presence in India and as India continues to be a big focus market, we thought it best to interview the dynamic and energetic Sunil V A, Regional Vice President ISC & FE.

Since 1966, ITB Berlin has been the World's Leading Travel Trade Show and truly remains the bench mark show for the travel and hospitality industry – a trendsetter in many ways, a venue to share and gain knowledge, an opportunity to network with colleagues, peers and bright youngsters and 2023 was no different with ITB Berlin concluding on a reasonably high note, as most of them returned with smiling faces.



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The Ascott Limited is a member of CapitaLand Investment. It is one of the leading international lodging owner-operators with properties across Asia Pacific, Central Asia, Europe, the Middle East, Africa and the USA. Its portfolio of serviced apartment coliving and hotel brands includes Ascott The Residence, The Crest Collection, Somerset, Quest, Citadines, Iyf, Preference, Vertu Harris, Citadines Connect, Fox, Yello, Fox Lite, and POP!.

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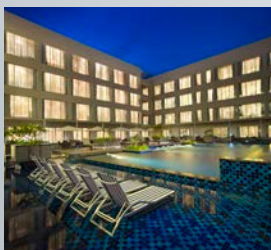
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Event Review

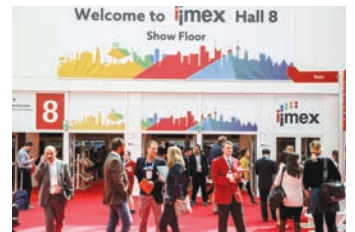
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World tourism unites @ ITB Berlin

ITB Berlin confirms the vital need to meet face-to-face



As the travel fraternity waited with bated breath the return of ITB – the bench mark show for the travel and hospitality industry, most of them returned with smiling faces as ITB Berlin concluded on a reasonably high note, feels **Chandragupta Amritkar**

Since 1966, ITB Berlin has been the World's Leading Travel Trade Show and truly remains the bench mark show for the travel and hospitality industry – a trendsetter in many ways, a venue to share and gain knowledge, an opportunity to network with colleagues, peers and bright youngsters and 2023 was no different with ITB Berlin concluding on a reasonably high note, as most of them returned with smiling faces.

I was again invited to cover ITB Berlin (13th year to visit). It was pure joy to be a part of the largest travel event after 3 years and catch up with old friends at a single venue. Met the ITB team - David Ruetz, Senior VP, Messe Berlin, Julia Sonnemann, PR Manager, ITB Berlin, Yasmine Abbou, PR Assistant, Messe Berlin.

The show attracted 5500 exhibitors from 169 countries. Certainly a little less than its former glory but it was expected as COVID had startled the world (lockdown, travel constraints) and after almost 3 years it was an excitement for the travel industry though still a few countries could not exhibit prominently (eg China opening up its borders late, Russia at war etc). But most exhibitors and visitors we spoke to were glad to be back in Berlin. Many top leaders, ministers, mayors graced the occasion.

Following the break due to the pandemic and taking as its slogan 'Open for Change', ITB was back for the first time as an exclusively B2B event. Instead of 5 days, ITB took place on only 3 days last week. The consumer participation on the 4th and 5th day of ITB was left out and cancelled. While a few were indifferent, some exhibitors, especially German felt those two days should be included.

Over the three business days a total of 90,127 attendees from more than 180 countries were in Berlin. For ITB Berlin, the ITB

Buyers' Circle with its 1,300 members was also an impressive success. ITB Berlin also attracted considerable media attention, with around 3,000 media members and 333 travel bloggers and high-profile international political figures at the event.

"Over the past few days the tourism industry has displayed incredible confidence despite the difficult overall situation and geopolitical crises", said Dirk Hoffmann, Managing Director of Messe Berlin.

Numerous networking formats including the ITB Speed Networking event, get-togethers and events on exhibitors' stands as well as evening events on the exhibition grounds and in Berlin's city centre were proof of the desire to meet in person.

The ITB Berlin Convention with high-profile figures attending offered wide-ranging orientation on specialist subjects. At 18 theme tracks, 400 internationally recognised top speakers took part in a total of 200 sessions and discussed highly pressing topics as well as current trends including digitalisation, Artificial intelligence and the skills shortage. Under the heading 'Mastering Transformation', experts presented ways to turn the pressing global challenges facing the industry into opportunities. A total of 24,000 attendees visited the lectures, panels and discussions at the leading international thinktank of the travel industry.

The Equality in Tourism Award, presented for the first time on International Women's Day at ITB Berlin 2023, aims to draw global attention to gender equality in tourism. Exhibitor numbers were especially high in the Travel Tech and Cruise segments at this year's show. The new multi-purpose hall hub27 also made a successful debut.

ITB Berlin 2024 is scheduled from 5 to 7 March (Tuesday to Thursday).

While at ITB our latest issue received positive response, for me and my magazine Global Features it was a wonderful 2022-23. Literally been on the move visiting **twelve countries since May 2022** - Dubai, UAE, Muscat/Salalah, Oman, Erfurt/Berlin/Munich, Germany, Slovakia, Hungary, Singapore, Thailand, Sweden, Norway (where I was the only Indian journalist invited to attend the prestigious Nobel Peace Prize Award Ceremony), USA, Maldives and Ethiopia. Truly overwhelmed by the love and appreciation showered by the industry.



“The Ascott Limited has set a target to sign 150 properties with over 30,000 units under its lyf coliving brand by 2030”



Hoshang Garivala

When the news that The Ascott Limited is acquiring Oakwood Worldwide, it came as a surprise to many in the travel fraternity. Thinking logically it was a solid financial decision as the acquisition increases Ascott’s global presence to more than 150,000 units in about 900 properties across 200+ cities in 39 countries. Six months down the acquisition to get an insight into the scenario we e-interacted with **Vincent Miccolis, Managing Director of Middle East, Africa, Turkey & India (MEAT) and Hoshang Garivala, Country General Manager– India, The Ascott Limited** on the MEAT and Indian market. Excerpts



Vincent Miccolis

What was the main aim of Ascott's acquisition of Oakwood?

The Ascott Limited, the wholly owned lodging business unit of CapitaLand Investment acquired Oakwood Worldwide (Oakwood), a global serviced apartment provider, from Mapletree Investments in 2022. The acquisition of Oakwood was intended to boost Ascott’s units under management and franchise contracts while accelerating the growth of Ascott’s asset-light business through Oakwood portfolio. The aim has been to build on the strong reputation and heritage of the Oakwood brand, especially in markets across South-east Asia, North Asia and North Africa. The acquisition of Oakwood has increased Ascott’s global portfolio by 81 properties and about 15,000 units.

Can you enlighten our readers on Ascott's portfolio and brands globally?

With a global presence extending across more than 30 countries in Asia Pacific, Central Asia, Europe, the Middle East, Africa



and the USA, The Ascott Ltd has been a successful leader in the serviced residence business. Ascott has strengthened its position as the world’s leading player and operator in hotel apartments, expanding the portfolio to over 1,60,000 units across 900 properties. In India, with the Oakwood acquisition, Ascott has now 6 properties in its current portfolio across the cities of Bangalore, Hyderabad, Pune and Chennai.

Globally, The Ascott Limited operates through a wide range of brands, some of which are as follows –Somerset, Citadines, The Crest Collection, Lyf, Quest, Preference, Fox Hotels, Harris Hotels, Vertu Hotels, Yello.

How do you view India as a market?

The Ascott Limited (Ascott), has achieved its target to secure 160,000 units by 2023, with the signing of over 4,000 units in 1Q this year.

Ascott has been growing organically well over the last ten years and with the acquisition of Oakwood, India operations had increased significantly. Ascott has restructured and strengthened the team in India and eyes expansion in the markets of Delhi and Goa in coming months. The company is looking forward to putting more effort to explain the concept of their business including the benefits provided to the property owners like lower development costs and better operating margins. Ascott has also signed a few properties in tier II and tier III cities in India considering a bigger share of travel with several industries and IT companies growing in these cities.

The Ascott Limited has opened 20 properties with more than



4,500 units in H1 2022 alone, a 56% YOY increase. In India, with the Oakwood acquisition, Ascott has added 4 properties to the current portfolio across Bangalore, Hyderabad and Pune. The company is also excited to launch four more properties, Ascott Ireo City & Citadines Paras Square in Gurugram, Citadines Arpora Nagoa & Citadines Calangute in Goa in addition, Oakwood will add 6 new properties across Bangalore, Hyderabad, and Vizag.

Co-living spaces concept is new to The Indian market. How do you plan to promote it?

The co-living market is taking off in the Asia-Pacific region, including India, as more people migrate to cities for jobs or education opportunities. This is creating new opportunities for real estate developers and investors around the region.

Witnessing the considerable peak in demand for co-living spaces within the urbanized, first-tier cities of the region and to cater to these travellers, Ascott came up with co-living brand 'Lyf' - offering a dynamic environment for guests to forge connections through a strong sense of community.

The Ascott Limited has set a target to sign 150 properties with over 30,000 units under its lyf coliving brand by 2030. Ascott currently has 17 lyf coliving properties with over 3,200 units in 14 cities and nine countries.

Many groups are focusing on ESG & sustainability. What's the scene at your end?

The Ascott Limited, in India has implemented the concept of sustainability and green living across its properties. Both the serviced residence properties of Ascott in India – Somerset Greenways Chennai and Citadines OMR Chennai actively



place sustainability at the forefront of their operation. In 2022, Somerset brand refresh was unveiled under 'Ascott CARES' - a sustainability framework aligned with the growth strategy on environmental, social and governance (ESG) considerations – to reinforce commitment in sustainable travel for multigenerational families, while also ensuring an inclusive, harmonious experience.

On the sustainability front, the properties offer a wide array of energy-efficient and eco-friendly services including using Bubble tops instead of water bottles to reduce single-use plastic, providing access to EV charging points for those who are using electric vehicles for sustainable mobility, using wind energy for electricity, application of LED in place of Light fixtures etc. Somerset and Citadines Chennai has also an active tie-up with BookWater – through this collaboration, after 30 times usage of a single water can, it is recycled to produce thread, leading to making clothes and bags as end-products.



Apart from these, Somerset Greenways Chennai also uses wooden key cards that are biodegradable, reusable, and reduce carbon footprint, while Citadines OMR Chennai has started using Air to Water dispensers as an eco-friendly alternative. During the festive season, Ascott also indulged in celebrating with a sustainable Christmas tree, enabling the reduction of 100 kg of carbon footprint emission. The Oakwood Residence Whitefield Bangalore has also been certified by Indian Green Building Council for its sustainable resourcefulness.

When do you expect corporate travel to bounce back especially with 'work from home' solution becoming popular?

The revival of corporate travel is picking up steam after two tough pandemic years. As many large companies are rolling out return-to-work programmes, an uptick in travel will likely to be generated through



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the shift to more office-based work. Business travel is yet to reach pre-pandemic levels, however, both aspects of corporate travel – external and internal travel would be impacted by how workplace flexibility will affect required journeys to office headquarters.

Post Covid how much emphasis is there on health and wellbeing?

Post Covid, the hospitality industry has witnessed a renewed interest on wellness tourism, as travellers are emphasizing on health and wellness retreats. There has been a considerable shift in people’s mindset to travel to places that offer health and wellness-enhancing opportunities and tourism shift from simple spa and leisure travel to health and wellness-focused travel.

The Ascott’s Covid-safe operating model actively sought to reduce its environmental impact and be a positive force in its territories around the world while growing as an established company, even during times of disruption. Our Ascott Cares commitment reassures guests we will deliver stringent hygiene and cleanliness and continue to provide safe homes for our guests and a safe working environment for our staff. To strengthen our commitment to cleanliness, Ascott has been awarded the SafeGuard Label from testing, inspection and certification body, Bureau Veritas, for our London-based Citadines properties and deluxe four-star Mayfair property, The Cavendish London. The certification confirms that the properties have the appropriate health, hygiene and safety procedures and processes in place which are in line with globally recognised best practices.

What are your expansion plans for Middle East, Africa, Turkey and India?

Middle East, Africa and Turkey remain a key focus for Ascott growth and expansion plan in view of the increasing demand



for extended stay offerings and internationally branded serviced apartments in the region. We are therefore committed to further growth, driven by our belief in the huge potential this region holds for quality hospitality supply in the extended-stay concept.

In the Middle East, we strive to deepen our presence in the first-tier cities of Riyadh and Jeddah while we are looking at opportunities to expand into second tier cities such as Tabuk, Taif and Yanbu.

As for Africa, our focus is to grow our existing portfolio in the identified countries including Kenya, Ethiopia and Tanzania in East Africa; Nigeria, Senegal, Cameroon, Ivory Coast and Morocco in West and North Africa

Ascott is also set to expand its presence in Turkey and Kazakhstan beyond Istanbul and Atyrau to better service the diverse clients base in key cities where business travel is growing, such as Izmir in Turkey and Almaty in Kazakhstan.

What is the future for the serviced apartment sector, especially any new innovations?

Serviced apartments are gaining popularity as people are being exposed to the many benefits of choosing this category over other alternative accommodation solutions. Serviced apartments now offer services well comparable to what a star-rated property offers



- space and size of apartments, flexibility in food and beverage offerings, fully equipped kitchen, heightened privacy and security services are some of the benefits that score over hotels.

The trend is also picking up amongst non-travelers and people looking for short-term stay. After enduring the pandemic challenges for almost two years, an increasing demand is witnessed for extended trips balancing business and leisure pursuits – which needed the travellers to maintain their personal lifestyle and comforts in a homely environment instead of a typical hotel guestroom. Also, following the trend of Indians usually traveling together with groups of friends or family, the size of the apartments along with a kitchen and other amenities that distinguish them from hotel rooms become quite beneficial as it allows everyone to meet individual lifestyle preferences without compromising on hospitality excellence.

These factors have raised consumer awareness of staying in a serviced apartment and facilitated the growth of this segment. This concept was already popular in cities like Mumbai, Bangalore etc. and it is now slowly making an entry to smaller cities of India as well.

A Delight - Cloud 9 and Skylight In-Terminal Hotel

When I was invited to Germany, I thought it would be great to again experience Ethiopian Airlines. When I mentioned this, the energetic and lively Bilen Arefaine, Regional Director of the Indian Sub-Continent said it would be great as you can also visit our new Skylight In-Terminal Hotel as well as the renovated business class lounge. She was right and it was truly an amazing experience.

Cloud 9 - Ethiopian Business Class

Ethiopian Airlines remains the largest and fastest growing Airline in Africa and having experienced it several times I have to admire the hospitality that the airline provides apart from the inflight comfort. This time was no exception.



Ethiopian Business Class - Cloud 9 makes you feel special. Travelling on Cloud 9 has multiple advantages - an additional baggage allowance, an exclusive C9 lounge access and priority boarding. Most of the airline's long-haul Boeing and Airbus aircrafts feature fully flat Business Class seats in a 2-2-2 layout. The Boeing 787-9 aircraft has a more striking 1-2-1 layout, while new A350 aircraft features a staggered 1-2-1 layout.

While I flew 4 sectors - Mumbai -Addis -Frankfurt - Addis - Frankfurt, my experience on A350 was the best. The cabin and seat on the airlines new A350s are quite comfortable and can give a run to other global airlines. As with most Ethiopian airlines the business class seats were a combination of bright red and green, Ethiopian's signature colours. They reclined to a lie-flat position but the footwell on these seats can be narrow and constraining when reclined in the fully-flat position. Another interesting addition to the product that I noticed is they have a large storage cupboard with a mirror and additional handset behind the headrest. Very useful to keep your spectacles and phone in a safe place while sleeping (frequent travellers will recall their specs and mobiles falling off/under the seat). Amenity kits in Cloud 9 come in three distinct colours taken from the Ethiopian national flag - green, yellow and red.

I found the Ethiopian Airlines flight crew to be very kind and professional. As always their traditional Ethiopian attire impressed me. The crew came round with a pre-departure drink, either champagne or orange juice. On the food side there is plenty of choice and you won't be going hungry.

Skylight In-Terminal Hotel

Ethiopian Airlines has launched an in-terminal hotel (transiting guests never need to leave airside), the Skylight In-Terminal Hotel at Addis Ababa Bole Airport. The new main terminal building (Terminal 2) is very easy to navigate with most departure gates in a straight line.

On arrival the signage is easy to follow and through a set of escalators you enter the hotel.

Surprisingly one has to walk half way down through a corridor of rooms to reach the hotel reception. Adjacent to the reception is the dining area - quite spacious and an excellent spread of delicacies.



I had the pleasure of meeting the hotel manager Kirubel Henok who took me around the hotel. The hotel has 97 rooms and for an in terminal hotel surprisingly has 5 categories of rooms the Standard King/Twin to Executive Suites. There are also rooms that meet accessibility requirements. "Our rooms are quite comfortable with a starting size of 24 sqm to 71sqm. Each room has an armchair, a marble coffee table, a working table, two USB-A ports. This is very convenient for business travelers including corporate people who instead of spending time in the lounge can do their work, have a quick meeting, a video conference with all privacy. Diplomats transiting also prefer our hotel," said Kirubel Henok. I had to agree as it was much bigger and better than most in-terminal hotels.



Kirubel Henok

The hotel is available for stays from four hours up to 24 hours.

Cloud 9 lounge

The new Cloud 9 lounge at Addis Ababa with 5,000 sq. mt (an upgrade that was long overdue) is quite large - the lounge has a series of rooms which stretch all the way to the other side of the terminal with large skylights and sculptural light fittings. With a capacity for 600 passengers, showers, a wide selection of F&B including the famous Ethiopian coffee ceremony it's worth a visit. In addition to the large seating areas, the lounge has a nap area, prayer rooms. Surprisingly the buffet (a variety of refreshments, cold and hot snacks) is at the rear of the lounge and is the most crowded area. The best part is (over many global lounges) is one need not worry when to board their flights as a staff will personally come to announce the departure time for each flight. There are separate lounges for Star Alliance Gold and Silver passengers.



IMEX to provide exciting networking and learning opportunities

IMEX, considered by many as the heartbeat of the MICE and corporate industry, gets the global business events community in a single venue for three exciting days every year. This year is no different feels **Chandragupta Amritkar** as he previews the event



Led by the dynamic duo Ray Bloom, Chairman, IMEX Group and Carina Bauer, CEO, IMEX Group, IMEX has created a niche for itself in the world of MICE. IMEX provides an opportunity to event community to not only explore the latest event trends but also an exposure to expert education.

Despite bumpy economic headwinds, demand for in-person events is strong and many parts of the global market have responded with investment in refurbishments, new properties, product innovations, new technologies and enhanced attendee experiences. This year again over 3,000 buyers will gather to meet a range of global suppliers spread across three days at IMEX Frankfurt.



Ray Bloom

Carina Bauer

A wide variety of suppliers have lined up to exhibit spanning the globe: Europe – Germany, France, Spain and Croatia; North & South America – Peru along with Boston and Georgia (both of which are increasing their presence); Asia – India, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Thailand and Malaysia.

Sarawak, the largest of Malaysia's 13 states, will have its own stand for the first time and will also be joined by the region's Tourism Minister. Hotel groups Accor, IHG Hotels & Resorts, NH Hotels and Radisson are among the exhibitors expanding their presence along with destinations - Boston, Georgia, Los Cabos and Morocco. The Asia Convention Alliance will hold their inaugural event during IMEX, while Cvent are among several suppliers presenting new research.

Over 25 Indian exhibitors will have their presence. Some of them include – Novotel and HICC Complex, Pullman New Delhi Aerocity, Mahatma Mandir Convention & Exhibition Centre and The Leela Gandhinagar, Hilton and Hilton Garden Inn Embassy Manyata Business Park, Marirott India, Palomino Hospitality Private Limited, MMACTIV, India Convention Promotion



Bureau, Discover India Tours Pvt. Ltd., Alpcord Network Event & Conference Management Company, Clarks Exotica Convention Resort and Spa, A.T. Seasons & Vacations Travel Pvt. Ltd.), Elisyan India Private Limited, India Exposition Mart Ltd., Concept Conferences Pvt. Ltd, Hyderabad Convention Visitor Bureau, Travoinspire Global Pvt Ltd, IICC (India International Convention and Expo Centre), Abercrombie & Kent India, Distant frontiers etc.

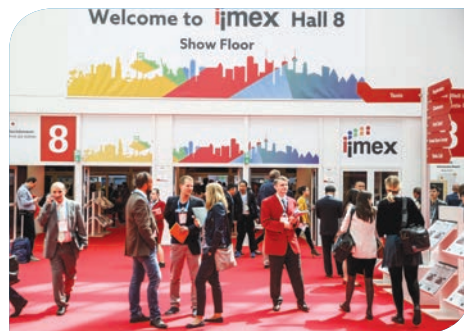
The show has been designed to deliver a broad experience, however, one which unites business needs with purposeful and exciting learning opportunities. The IMEX Group has partnered with a cutting-edge roster of organisations to showcase a range of innovative – and often surprising – learning experiences. The emphasis is on breaking away from the norm and doing things differently.

Some of the experiential activity taking place across the show floor this May include - Google Experience Institute (Xi) CoLabs; Encore Ideation Station; DRPG & Maritz – More than

Experience Theatre etc. All these sessions form part of the extensive, free programme of 150 educational and networking events at IMEX Frankfurt.

Carina Bauer says “While doing business and catching up with contacts are absolutely fundamental, today's attendees increasingly expect to be able to navigate the entire show experience in a personal way, one that enables them to explore at their own pace and according to their own preferences. Our range of experiential learning opportunities allows attendees to enjoy an individualised, micro experience at a macro event.”

IMEX Frankfurt takes place 23 – 25 May 2023



Gastronomy at its best

On return from a short stint at Mercure Maldives my dear friend Soumitra Pahari came back as General Manager Grand Mercure Gandhinagar Gift City, he invited me to visit and experience this iconic property. And what a trip it was including a gastronomical journey.

Arriving at Ahmedabad's airport in the evening the duty manager, Somnath Dey, from Grand Mercure was there to receive me. A comfortable 30 minute drive brought me to Grand Mercure. The traditional welcome left me impressed and I got a chance to meet Vijit Sarna, FoM and TN Gosh, F&B Manager again. I was also introduced to the hotels Executive Chef, Mrinmoy Chakraborty (over the next few days I understood his passion for cuisine and a true culinary artist) and Rajan Chaturvedi, Director of sales.

Check in was smooth and an elegant suite was provided - a separate living and bedroom space with a small kitchen zone. The hotel has 151 rooms including 19 suites. The hotel has two restaurants - Sangam an all-day dining multi-cuisine restaurant features global and local delicacies and Samaroh a specialty poolside restaurant providing vegetarian cuisine in particular Gujarati food. It also has an infinity swimming pool, a well-equipped fitness centre along with a yoga pavilion and a spa. There are several meeting and banqueting spaces as well.

But it was the chef's delicacies that was the icing. Starting with hors d'oeuvre, the chef over four days treated me to some

of the tastiest and unique dishes including the finest local fare. Starting off with the Bengali cuisine, Executive Chef, Mrinmoy made me relish Gujarati, South Indian, Western, Asian, Indian cuisine's ending the journey with a traditional Gujarati thali.



Mrinmoy Chakraborty

Some of the delicacies included Gulab Jamun Thadka, Beetroot Galouti, Nylon Khaman, Podi Idly, Gujarati Kadi, Semiya Payasam, Rasmalai etc.

I also had a brief tour to the 15th-century stepwell with intricate carvings on the pillars representing the Indo-Islamic fusion architecture that percolated through the many stepwells of the period. The walls are covered in ornamental carvings with mythological and village scenes.



"I can consider our hotel as one of the most sustainable hotels"



Soumitra Pahari

What is your hotels USP?

Our biggest advantage is we are located in the heart of GIFT (Gujarat International Finance Tec) City – Gandhinagar. It's one of its kind smart city in India and India's first globally benchmarked International finance service centre (IFSC) - a global financial and IT services hub with multi services Special Economic Zone (SEZ). There are also several residential complexes and social amenities like schools, petrol pumps, hospitals, business clubs within GIFT.

How important are corporate?

Very important. We have well-equipped banquets and meeting rooms - designed to suit all types of business meetings, conferences, and social gatherings. The Pillar-less Ballroom is appreciated by many event organisers. Our F&B is another plus point for

To get insights into the hotels distinctiveness we spoke to **Soumitra Pahari, GM, Grand Mercure Gandhinagar Gift City. Excerpts**

banquets. Travelling time from airport is just 25-30 minutes thus avoiding city traffic. We are conveniently located near all the key companies within GIFT, IT SEZ, government offices, and educational institutes making it convenient to hold events.

What about tourists?

Lots to see. We are close to India's first UNESCO World Heritage City Ahmedabad. One can visit the stunning Adalaj step well. Visit Gandhi Ashram, Sabarmati Riverfront, Calico Museum of Textiles, Akshardham, Swaminarayan Temple, Gujarat Science City etc. Lots of shopping to be done including traditional dresses.

What about sustainability?

I can consider our hotel as one of the most sustainable hotels in the country. We have no cooling towers. Thanks to District Cooling System (DCS) that provides the cooling system we saved on not just capital cost of implementing coolers but DCS also ensures lowering down the power demand and energy efficient system operation for air conditioning, reducing CO2 emissions. Apart from this water, electricity and gas are provided through an underground utility tunnel. They have also installed an automated waste collection and segregation plant apart from facility to reuse wastewater.

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Srikanth TG

“We have successfully hosted over 1500 national and international events and expositions”

One of India's finest exhibition grounds is HITEX - not only a premier MICE exhibition destination for international exhibitions and conferences but also a popular corporate events venue in India. To get insights into the success of the venue and its future plans we interviewed **Srikanth TG, Business Head, HITEX Exhibition Center**. Excerpts

Firstly, congrats on completing two decades. How has the journey been?

Thank you for your kind words. The journey of HITEX over the past

two decades has been truly remarkable. Since its establishment in 2003, HITEX has evolved into a leading destination for events, exhibitions, conferences, live shows, and trade fairs in India. Our vision was to provide a world-class facility that caters to the diverse needs of businesses and industries, and I'm proud to say that we have achieved that and more.

Throughout these years, HITEX has played a significant role in promoting trade and commerce in the region. We have successfully hosted over 1500 national and international events and expositions, making us a preferred choice for event organizers and exhibitors. The support and patronage we have received from our clients, partners, and stakeholders have been instrumental in our success.



Our journey has been marked by continuous improvement and a commitment to excellence. We have invested in state-of-the-art facilities, advanced infrastructure, and cutting-edge technology to ensure that we provide a world-class experience to our clients and visitors. Our team of highly skilled professionals, many of whom are CEM certified, are dedicated to delivering exceptional service and creating memorable events.

Post COVID, how has HITEX adapted to the new normal?

The COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented challenges to the events industry, but HITEX has demonstrated resilience and adaptability in the face of adversity. We quickly recognized the need to adapt to the new normal and prioritize the safety and well-being of our clients, staff, and visitors.

We have implemented comprehensive health and safety protocols in line with government guidelines and international standards. These measures include temperature checks, sanitization stations, social distancing guidelines, and mandatory

mask-wearing. Our team is trained to ensure strict adherence to these protocols throughout the venue.

Additionally, we have embraced virtual and hybrid event solutions to cater to the changing needs of our clients. By leveraging technology, we have successfully hosted hybrid conferences allowing stakeholders to connect and showcase their offerings to a global audience. These digital platforms have provided an alternative avenue for engagement and networking, ensuring that the industry can continue to thrive despite the challenges.

Can you give our readers your perspective on the exhibition sector both within India and in the global market?

The exhibition sector in India has experienced remarkable growth and transformation, reflecting the country's dynamic business environment and expanding economy. With an increasing emphasis on trade and commerce, exhibitions have emerged as essential platforms for Indian businesses to showcase their products, foster collaborations, and explore new markets. According to industry reports, the exhibition industry in India is projected to grow at a CAGR of 12% between 2021 and 2026, indicating a thriving market with immense potential (source: Research and Markets).

On a global scale, exhibitions play a pivotal role in facilitating international trade and driving economic growth. They provide a unique opportunity for businesses to connect with industry professionals, share knowledge, and establish valuable partnerships. The global exhibition market is estimated to reach a value of \$49.8 billion by 2027, driven by increasing globalization and the need for cross-border collaborations (source: Grand View Research).

In conclusion, a key driver of the exhibition sector's growth is the increasing focus on sectors such as healthcare, manufacturing, technology, and agriculture.

Is it possible to use the exhibition spaces for other purposes when there are no trade shows or events?

Yes, our exhibition spaces at HITEX are designed to be versatile and flexible, allowing for various uses beyond trade shows and events. When there are no scheduled exhibitions, these spaces can be utilized for a range of purposes, including corporate meetings, conferences; product launches, promotional activities, brand activations, product displays, networking sessions, seminars, training sessions, and cultural events.

The column-free halls provide ample space and can be easily adapted to accommodate different setups. The advanced infrastructure, including sound systems, lighting facilities, and multimedia equipment, allows for seamless transitions between different event types. Our dedicated event management team

collaborates closely with clients to ensure that every detail is taken care of, from logistics to on-site management.

The open layout and high ceilings provide a visually appealing backdrop that can be customized to reflect the brand identity and message of the event. This versatility allows us to cater to a wide range of industries and event concepts. In addition, HITEX's sprawling 53-acre campus offers outdoor spaces that can be utilized for various purposes. These areas can be transformed into vibrant marketplaces, food festivals, concerts, or outdoor exhibitions. We have hosted carnivals, sidewalk events, and other outdoor activities that attract both businesses and the general public.



How do you compete with your competitors within India?

Competition is a healthy driving force in any industry, and the exhibition sector is no exception. At HITEX, we believe in setting ourselves apart by focusing on several key areas that differentiate us from our competitors.

First and foremost, our commitment to excellence and customer satisfaction sets us apart. We prioritize understanding our clients' needs and delivering tailored solutions that meet their specific requirements. Our team of experienced professionals is dedicated to providing top-notch service and ensuring that every event at HITEX is a success.

Secondly, our world-class infrastructure and state-of-the-art facilities give us a competitive edge. HITEX boasts modern exhibition halls, spacious conference rooms, advanced audio-visual equipment, and seamless connectivity. We continuously invest in upgrading our facilities to stay ahead of the curve and provide our clients with the latest technological advancements.

Our commitment to sustainability and corporate social responsibility is a key differentiator. We actively promote eco-friendly practices within our operations. Our focus on ESG (Environmental, Social, and Corporate Governance) principles resonates with businesses and organizations that prioritize sustainability in their events.

Overall, our competitive edge lies in our relentless pursuit of excellence, innovative approach, world-class infrastructure, strategic location, strong network, and commitment to sustainability. These factors combined make HITEX the preferred choice for exhibitions and events in India.

You have been having your own events. Which are these?

HITEX takes pride in organizing its own initiatives and events to promote trade, commerce, and industry. These events serve as platforms for businesses to showcase their offerings, network with

industry professionals, and stay updated with the latest trends and developments.

How tech savvy is HITEX?

In terms of HITEX's tech-savviness, we understand the importance of staying at the forefront of technological advancements in the events industry. Our venue is equipped with state-of-the-art audio-visual systems, high-speed internet connectivity, and advanced multimedia capabilities. We constantly invest in upgrading our infrastructure to support the latest event technologies, such as virtual reality, augmented reality, and live streaming. This enables us to offer immersive and engaging experiences for both in-person and virtual attendees.

To further enhance our technological offerings, we are exploring the integration of smart event management solutions. This includes features like digital event registration and ticketing, mobile event apps for seamless communication and engagement, and data analytics tools for event organizers to gain valuable insights into attendee behavior and preferences. By embracing technology, we aim to provide a seamless and interactive event experience for all participants.

Where do you see HITEX growth coming from in the next 3 years?

As we look to the future, we envision HITEX's growth coming from a combination of factors. Firstly, the increasing demand for events, exhibitions, and conferences in India and globally presents significant opportunities for us. We will continue to attract renowned national and international trade fairs, conferences, and exhibitions to our venue.

Secondly, our own events have played a crucial role in showcasing our capabilities and attracting a diverse range of participants. We will continue to curate and host our own events, focusing on areas such as industry-specific conferences, technology showcases, and cultural festivals. These events not only contribute to our revenue but also position HITEX as a thought leader and trendsetter in the events industry.

Furthermore, we will place emphasis on strategic partnerships and collaborations to expand our reach and attract a wider audience. By working closely with industry associations, government bodies, and corporate partners, we aim to create synergies and tap into new markets and sectors.

In the next three years, our major focus sectors will include technology, healthcare, sustainability, trade, and arts and culture, as previously mentioned. These sectors align with market trends and present immense growth potential. By understanding the evolving needs of these sectors and providing tailored solutions, we aim to attract a diverse range of events and reinforce HITEX's position as a leading MICE destination.

In conclusion, HITEX's journey over the past two decades has been marked by remarkable achievements and continuous growth. We are committed to upholding our standards of excellence, embracing innovation, and providing world-class event experiences. With a strategic focus on key sectors, a commitment to international standards, and a forward-thinking approach, we are confident in our ability to drive HITEX's growth and contribute to the success of the events industry.



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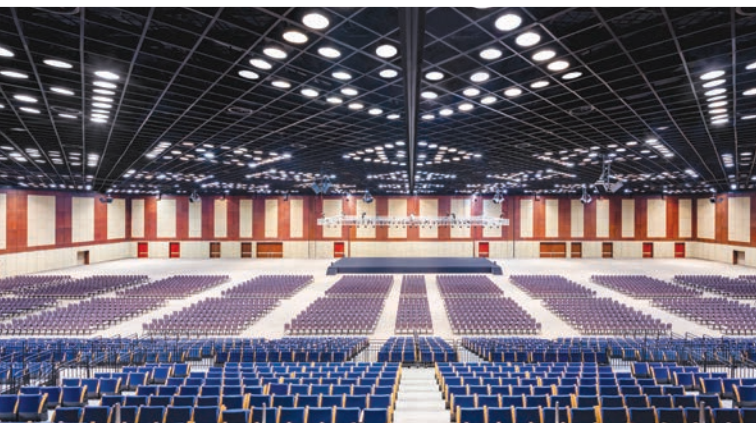

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“HICC offers a massive pillar-free hall measuring 6,480 square meters, capable of hosting a plenary with up to 5,000 delegates”

Whenever I visit HICC – the sheer size of the venue attached to a hotel impresses me. It was no different this time and a leisurely lunch in a relaxed atmosphere conversing with the talented **Rubin Cherian, GM, Novotel Hyderabad Convention Centre & Hyderabad International Convention Centre** made it more invigorating. Excerpts



Rubin Cherian



What is your main aim in participating at IMEX, Frankfurt?

Our main aim in participating at IMEX Frankfurt is to showcase HICC (Hyderabad International Convention Centre) as a global venue for hosting MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions) events. We believe that IMEX Frankfurt provides a unique opportunity to meet with global leaders in the business events and incentive travel industries, exchange ideas, and stay updated on the latest industry developments. By participating in IMEX Frankfurt, we aim to position HICC at the centre of the global business events community and highlight Hyderabad as a preferred destination for MICE events.

HICC is one of the most popular venues in India. What sets it apart from other venues?

HICC stands out as one of India's most popular venues for hosting MICE events due to its world-class facilities, cutting-edge technology, and commitment to sustainability. Spanning over 15 acres of serene landscape, HICC offers a massive pillar-free hall measuring 6,480 square meters, capable of hosting a plenary with up to 5,000 delegates, which can also be divided into smaller halls as needed. With 32 breakout rooms, specialized meeting rooms, speaker preparatory rooms, boardrooms, and VIP lounges, all equipped with state-of-the-art AV and Wi-Fi, HICC provides an unmatched experience for event organizers and delegates alike.

In addition, HICC's commitment to sustainability and environmental protection sets it apart from other venues. As a part of Accor's Planet 21 program, HICC operates at the highest environmental standards and is associated with professional convention associations such as ICCA (The International Congress & Convention Association). The venue's focus on sustainability, along with its exceptional facilities and services, makes it a unique destination for hosting MICE events.

What are the major national and international conventions, meetings, and trade shows hosted by HICC?

HICC has been privileged to host some of the most prestigious national and international conventions, meetings, and trade shows, making it a key player in developing the "Brand Hyderabad." Some of the notable events organized at HICC include the Metropolis World Congress, World Congress on Biotechnology, International Conference on Hotel & Business Management, International Conference on Agricultural & Horticultural Sciences, World Congress on Analytical & Bioanalytical Techniques, World Congress on Pharmaceutical Regulatory Affairs, International Conference And Exhibition On Cosmetology And Cosmetics, Pravasi Bharati Divas, Asian Development Bank Meeting, World Newspaper Congress, International Astronautical Congress, World Telecommunication Development Conference, Info Services Congress on Biotechnology. Other major events hosted by HICC include The Global Entrepreneurship Summit, Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Summit, International Seed Testing Association Conference, Commonwealth Law Conference, Bio Asia, and NASSCOM Indian Leadership Forum.

HICC's track record of successfully hosting such high-profile events has firmly positioned Hyderabad as a preferred destination for national and international conventions, meetings, and trade shows.

What are the challenges in conducting large events?

Conducting large events presents unique challenges that require staying updated with the rapidly evolving social and political climate, embracing new trends and technologies, and developing the necessary skills to stay ahead of the curve. At HICC, we recognize the importance of continuous training and development for our associates to handle these challenges effectively. We strive



to equip our staff with the latest technology and business skills to support our business partners and ensure guest happiness and satisfaction.

What is your diversified F&B product offering at HICC for global events?

At HICC, we take pride in our diversified F&B product offerings for global events. We understand that F&B has become a deciding factor, and we work towards providing our guests with a unique culinary experience that caters to both global and Indian cuisines. Our chefs are trained to offer a variety of options, including vegetarian, vegan, flexitarian, and plant-based food options, to cater to different dietary preferences. In addition to our innovative menu options, HICC is also known for our popular F&B outlets such as Le' Café, The Food Exchange, and we have now also created couple of pop-up restaurants to cater to a varied segment of our clientele, which adds to the overall hospitality experience at our venue.

How environmentally friendly is the venue?

Sustainability and environmental protection are important values at Accor, and HICC is committed to being an environmentally friendly venue. As a part of Accor's comprehensive sustainable development initiative, HICC operates at the highest environmental standards. We are also proud members of ICCA (The International Congress & Convention Association), which sets industry standards. Our partnership with Aria Lifewater, world's first packaged atmospheric mineral water which is also considered the most sustainable water, further underscores our commitment to being an environmentally friendly venue. HICC is a perfect venue for conferences that adhere to international quality standards and prioritize sustainability.

What tech trends do you see in the convention space?

The convention space is constantly evolving, with technology playing a pivotal role in shaping the industry. Streamlined and automated processes are becoming the norm, reducing production time and increasing efficiency. Cyber security is also a top priority, with advancements in technology aimed at preventing cyberattacks during events.

One of the most exciting tech trends on the horizon is Virtual Reality (VR). Imagine being able to transport attendees to the heart of an event, allowing them to experience it first-hand. VR has the potential to revolutionize the way conventions are held, creating immersive and unforgettable experiences for participants.

Another intriguing trend is the use of holograms. These cutting-edge tools can recreate any shape using light, making it possible

to have holographic hosts that captivate and engage attendees like never before. This technology has the potential to be the next big thing in convention hosting, providing a unique and exclusive user experience that sets events apart.

In addition to VR and holograms, there is a growing focus on the customization and transformation of event spaces. This includes controlling the venue's architecture, lighting, and design to create a truly immersive and tailored experience for attendees. The goal is to merge technology seamlessly with the event, creating a meeting point of innovation and creativity.

You have a hotel - Novotel Hyderabad attached to HICC. How beneficial is it and are any WOW factors that you would like to highlight?

Novotel Hyderabad Convention Centre, our 5-star 287-room hotel attached to HICC, offers numerous benefits to our guests. With world-class restaurants, business centres, a spa, a gym, and other amenities, Novotel Hyderabad Convention Centre enhances the overall stay experience for business travellers. The WOW factor that sets us apart is our lush green outdoor landscaped garden with an equally beautiful swimming pool with a waterfall adding to the scenic tranquil beauty coupled with unmatched service that add to our guest satisfaction and has earned us multiple awards and recognition. Together, Novotel and HICC form a strong foundation for Brand Hyderabad, putting it on the international map and driving the growth of the hospitality sector in the region.

What are your plans for both Novotel and HICC in the next couple of years?

In the next few years, our focus at Novotel and HICC is to further elevate our offerings and establish ourselves as one of the best MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions) destinations in the world. We are committed to bringing in the latest technology, enhancing the F&B experience and at the same time give a resort like ambience while providing exceptional service to our guests.

Our goal is to secure a significant market share and continue to contribute to the growth of Hyderabad as a preferred destination for MICE events.



On a personal front why have you chosen to pursue a career in the hotel industry?

I chose to pursue a career in the hotel industry because it offers the perfect blend of business management and customer service. I find immense satisfaction in constantly learning about different cultures, businesses, and global trends while providing exceptional experiences to our guests. The hotel industry is one of the fastest growing and most dynamic fields, offering exciting opportunities for learning and growth. I am passionate about creating a safe, fun-loving, and positive environment for our guests and contributing to the success of the hospitality industry.

“We employ expert planners to work closely with guests to design impressive, immersive experiences”

One of the iconic hotels in Mumbai is Sofitel Mumbai BKC, a perfect blend of the French lifestyle and Indian hospitality is strategically located in the central business district of the city. The hotel looks magnificent – the façade is impressive and the lobby remarkably striking with lush greenery adding to the grandeur. Recently the dynamic Manish Daya took over as GM of the hotel. With over 10+ years in Accor group he is an icon, well known as a great motivator and an astute professional. In an e-interview **Manish Daya, GM, Sofitel** highlights on the uniqueness of India's only Sofitel. Excerpts

How do you view Sofitel as a brand globally and in India?

Globally, the Sofitel Hotels & Resorts brand continues to stand for five-star luxury with a distinctive French flair. This is most definitely a defining characteristic for the brand, and I am pleased with how the same sense of joie de vivre has translated seamlessly via the Mumbai property – the first Sofitel hotel in the country, now completing 11 Magnifique years of Excellence. Through Sofitel Mumbai BKC, we have been able to bring the best of French culture and sensibilities blending with the finest elements of India (design, food, hospitality) into the guest experience, something which my team and I are committed to continuing as we introduce more people to the magnifique elegance of Sofitel.

What do you feel is the most distinctive or unique feature of Sofitel?

The unique way in which Sofitel blends the best of French culture and elegance with local culture and gastronomy, in every city where it is present, is to be the most distinctive feature of the brand. As soon as guests enter the lobby of a Sofitel, they'll feel a comforting, yet other-worldly vibe of being exactly where they are-but with a little French flair. Once they settle in and make themselves at home, the brand invites them to explore their restaurants and bars where passionate chefs and mixologists will delight guests with lively culinary experiences, whether they're cooking local cuisines or French specialties. What's more, Sofitel's sumptuous wellness sanctuaries and sophisticated modern design reveal a unique and chic atmosphere proving that la vie is, indeed, belle.

What is the profile of your guest and which are your key feed markets?

While our guests are primarily business travelers who are trendy and tech-savvy, both domestic and international but these modern luxury voyagers are unapologetic hedonists looking for sophisticated and personalized experiences that Sofitel Mumbai BKC has to offer. We also welcome a lot more than before leisure travelers who are looking out for new ways to celebrate and indulge in life's pleasures.

How does your team create memorable experiences for the guests?

Personalization is key, when considering the guest experience. My team and I go that extra mile to ensure that we are intimately aware of guest names and profiles, as well as their preferences. Sofitel Heartists and Ambassadors around the world are passionate about heartfelt hospitality, delivering genuine care and thoughtfully personalized service right from the heart. Our service culture - Cousu Main translates as “tailor-made” but it also means so much more than that. We all go the extra mile and way beyond when it comes to making our guests feel, not just at home, but special. We genuinely care about the happiness of our guests and naturally use our service savoir-faire to anticipate guests needs even before being asked and to passionately delight with details.

Additionally, via Sofitel's exclusive Club Millésime, we are able to offer our guests a privileged journey into Sofitel's modern French art de Vivre, which scales the heights of quality and



Manish Daya



exclusivity with impeccable service and outstanding amenities and experiences that are perfect for those accustomed to life's finer things and can expect ultimate luxury and exclusivity. Privileges include a seamless private check-in, dedicated personalized service, chic and intimate settings, delicious gourmet breakfast, sweet afternoon-tea treats, and a cheerful evening of wines and delights.



F&B is vital. What type of restaurants do you have?

Sofitel Mumbai BKC lays special emphasis on the gastronomical offerings at the hotel – since good food and beverage is such a large part of both French and Indian cultures. From the all-day dining Pondichery Café to more specialized offerings like the award-winning Tusker's Vegetarian Dining & Bar, Jyran – Tandoor Dining & Lounge, the French-style Artisan Bistro and the newly-opened Artisan Patisserie, ideal for a cup of coffee and a pastry, the hotel has a variety of offerings that will suit every palate. Additionally, oenophiles will enjoy Le Bar's majestic, floor-to-ceiling Wine Tower which accommodates over 800 bottles of wine with more than 120 varied varietals, and the Vinothèque – the Wine Library at Artisan, which stocks a magnificent compilation of over 300 bottles with more than 80 international and local labels. Gin lovers will enjoy the Gin Bar by Jyran – the first and only five-star gin bar in the city, featuring an innovative menu of exquisite gin cocktails and much-loved classics.

Enlighten us about your meetings and weddings business and the progress in these sectors.

Be it a party or a business meeting, hosting can be stressful. With our Magnifique/Inspired Meetings and Events offering, we promise to elevate the experience - be it personal or professional - to a whole new realm. At Sofitel Mumbai BKC, we employ expert planners to work closely with guests to design impressive, immersive experiences. In Sofitel Mumbai, the dedicated 2nd floor of meeting spaces offers nine meeting rooms, a full-service Business Centre and Loft Kitchen, innovative cocktails and themed breaks around interactive live counters.

We are also just in the process of launching Hriday Marquee, an exquisite new, pillarless venue that spans 8000 square feet and will be ideal for seamless banqueting, weddings, corporate events and product launches. We are confident that this new space for the season, along with the flawless hospitality that Sofitel already provides, will help us secure even more banqueting, corporate and weddings business, through this year and onwards.

Many groups are focusing on ESG. What's the scene at your end?

Sustainability – which used to be a trending buzz word once upon a time is now almost a pre-requisite expected by both brands and guests. At Sofitel Mumbai BKC, it is no different. We are eliminating all single-use plastic from our premises and have achieved a considerable success on this front. All our actions are aligned towards this goal including In-room and bathroom amenities, glass bottles in Rooms and Food & Beverage Outlets including Banquets. Banned completely on usage of plastic straws, stirrers, all packing and takeaway's. We also have a fleet of EV cars for guest usage with charging stations available at the hotels parking facility. Ensured endangered fish are not part of our menus and offerings, and serve cage-free eggs. All these initiatives are amongst the few of many such initiatives in place to speak off under the sustainable initiative for Accor and Sofitel Mumbai BKC is platinum certified.

How can our government help with aiding hospitality/tourism recovery?

In 2022, the Indian tourism sector generated 31,000,000 jobs which is near 7% of the total employment in India. The hospitality sector can – and is – playing an important role in the growth and development of the Indian economy. I appreciate the consistent efforts of the central and state governments in helping the tourism sector recover from the Covid-19 pandemic via the allocation of significant monies towards the development of tourism circuits; introducing SAATHI (System for Assessment, Awareness and Training for Hospitality Industry); the sanctioning of 76 projects under the Swadesh Darshan Scheme for development of tourism infrastructure in the country; and the Government scheme wherein 5 lakh tourists will get free visas, in order to ease travel for international tourists, to name just a few. These, and so many more government initiatives are greatly aiding the hospitality and tourism sector in India, and is helping make India a global tourism hub.



As you look to 2025 what are the key priorities that you are focused on for the brand?

The hospitality industry in India is challenging, given the number of local and global players in the country. I see this as an exciting challenging, one which my team and I are not daunted by. This makes us further committed to constantly elevating the Sofitel experience for our guests and making our mark as a premium bleisure hotel in Mumbai. We are also looking forward to the expansion of the Sofitel brand in India, in the coming years.

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Hall Size	-	3500 sqm (each hall)

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Delightful experience at ibis

Post Covid had the opportunity to again interact with the lively and vibrant Anant Leekha, Cluster General Manager, ibis Mumbai Vikhroli, ibis Navi Mumbai and ibis Thane who is now the CGM for the 3 hotels. He was kind enough to invite my family to experience his hotels in Vikhroli and Thane.



Visiting ibis Mumbai Vikhroli and ibis Thane (the 22nd ibis hotel in India) hotels gave an insight to me on how the new ibis hotels will look. Both hotels are designed by my dear friend Isabelle Miaja (we had the pleasure of featuring her in one of our earlier issues), a Singapore based international design and architecture firm that was also involved in designing of Sofitel, Mumbai. The ibis team lead by the dynamic JB Singh, President & CEO, InterGlobe Hotels is all set to make the new ibis lovable for families as well as corporate with a focus on meeting rooms too.

Arriving at ibis Vikhroli I felt the trolley concept superb. At security they have trollies for you to take your baggage to your room. As one enters the hotel the extensive lobbies stretching into a restaurant as well as a working zone catches ones attention. Check in was smooth at both hotels and the new-age rooms though ibis standard size (around 170-180 sqft) now feature a couch/day bed that can be used as a third bed or a relaxing zone – making it a great option for families. Both hotels have trendy interiors related to the local areas - every room had a theme related to Mumbai. Keeping in tune with the latest technology, another feature that youngsters/ millennial will love is that televisions have access to OTT content though one needs to log in with one's password. They have also created a smart pod bathroom with eco-friendly bathroom amenities.

With the new ibis having a key focus on music the hotel lobby has musical instruments that one can play and relax. The lobby



also doubles up as a workspace or to meet your guests and a nice cozy bar.

One of the major add ons that I appreciated was the over 2000 sq.ft fully equipped smart meeting or conference rooms offering audio visual facilities, high speed WIFI and complimentary parking. Private venue, co-working and board room options also available. Add to this is a well-equipped gym.

The F&B is another plus point. Both hotels have ibis signature multi-cuisine restaurant 'Spice It', offering India's longest-



running breakfast, from 4 am until noon. The 24-hour restaurant with an interactive live kitchen at its centre serves Continental, Chinese and Indian cuisines along with authentic regional dishes. Recently the Spice It team have created an all-new menu which will be available at all ibis hotels in India.



ibis now provides a quintessential literary retreat

To promote reading ibis group have taken the lead in introducing in-hotel libraries that let guests enjoy a selection of some of the well-known authors and best reads (I was amazed by the collection as all in our family are avid readers). Not just for bibliophiles, the libraries are a quest to bring back the younger generation to read. With an impressive collection and relaxing surroundings ibis hotel libraries are certainly a book lover's dream. These are located next to the lobby /restaurant making the access easy.



“ibis hotel brand is young, fun, vibrant and open to all”

In an exclusive interview **Anant Leekha, Cluster General Manager, ibis Mumbai Vikhroli, ibis Navi Mumbai and ibis Thane** talks about the new ibis facilities and sustainability. Excerpts

ibis as a brand is growing fast. What is the vitality of your brand?

We are adapting to the market & tech trends fast - with revamping our spaces to be as per the latest requirement and adapting to practices basis the preference of India as a market- in all aspects: our services, food menu, offers, etc. We are working on understanding the needs of our guests using the latest tech and continuously working so we can exceed their expectations. We stand out because of the way we are positioned- ibis hotel brand is young, fun, vibrant and open to all. We have also adopted the latest of trend of promoting “homegrown” by promoting local artists by displaying artworks of upcoming local artists, globally we promote a lot of upcoming music bands through our existing IP- ibis Music and we do the same on a small scale in India and all our hotels have an ibis Music corner for our guests also to jam and have an immersive experience.

As a cluster manager for three hotels what is unique of the properties?

As a brand the locations of our hotels are one of the biggest USPs amongst others. In addition to the location, our hotels have a lot to offer in terms of the a super comfortable stay powered by the SweetBeds, delectable food at spice it- something to suit everyone’s palate, ibis music corners and gaming spaces for the guests to have a great time, our restaurant and Alfresco areas are perfect for small social gatherings, for more serious corporate setting- we have i-meets (meeting rooms and banquet spaces and we always have exciting F&B offers running basis the seasonality.

Being a voracious reader of books, I was very happy to see a library stacked with some of the best novel. How did the idea germinate?

All the new ibis properties have libraries in the public spaces. The idea was suggested by the CEO of our owning entity InterGlobe Hotels – JB Singh. All the books that you see in the libraries are personally curated by him for our guests to enjoy while they spend time at ibis.

How sustainable are your properties?

ibis has always worked towards sustainability and we continue our efforts in this space with practices like- Reducing the single use plastics to minimal- from our toiletries to stationery, everything is made of recyclable materials; We have done away with use of plastic bottles in all our hotels and have set up mineral water bottling plants and use glass bottles in all of our hotels; Some of our hotels have charging stations for electric vehicles- ibis Mumbai Vikhroli being the one in Mumbai; Usage of Solar Energy for day to day operations and lighting of periphery; Consume local and seasonal products.

Gastronomy is important for the growth of any hotel. Your comments.

Food is one of our passion points as a brand and we have been working constantly to serve the best in class to our guests- Spice it Restaurant and bar are open spaces accessible from the lobbies of all our hotels. We recently launched a new Food and bar menu with items from all across the globe. The new menu has something to suit everyone’s taste buds.

Great to see ibis finally having large meeting spaces. How important is MICE for your properties in future?

ibis has been a hotel catering to business people. We have had meeting and banquet spaces at most of our properties but now we have taken that a notch ahead with upgrading all the tech that one can need for hosting meetings. We have banquets at all 3 properties with double height ceiling and a good pre-function area which are not only good for meetings but also apt for conferences, social gatherings, functions, hosting parties, etc.

Tell us a little about your experience in the hospitality sector – what drove you to pursue a career in hospitality?

I have been working in the industry for over 18 years and have recently completed 15 years with Accor across its various brands and locations. I decided to pursue a career in hospitality at a very young age as the grandeur of the hotel lobbies, the food served and the sophistication of people working at hotels that I visited as a kid really inspired me. It all seemed like a well-organized grand scheme, which I really wanted to be a part of.

As you look to 2025 what are the key priorities that you are focused on for the brand in Mumbai?

Our key focus areas would be driving more footfalls to our restaurant-Spice it, drive more business through MICE and to increase our market share to become the leaders in the segment by driving higher ADR levels.



Anant Leekha



“India will continue to be a big focus market”

Three decades of success - Oman Air has gone from strength to strength. The journey started in March 1993 with a single flight between the cities of Muscat and Salalah. The route, operated by Boeing 737-300, marked the launch of the airline's domestic network, which was followed shortly with its first international flight between Muscat and Dubai. Oman Air has been a force to reckon within Middle East and will be a global force once it's implemented into oneworld alliance. With a major presence in India, we thought it best to interview the dynamic and energetic **Sunil V A, Regional Vice President ISC & FE**. Excerpts



Sunil V A

Congrats on your airlines 30th anniversary.

Thanks. Its also thirty years of our presence in India. While our first international flight was between Muscat and Dubai, in November 1993 we had our second international flight to Trivandrum. Since then there has been no looking back. We now have a strong international presence and fly to nearly 45 destinations from Europe to Far East. We now operate a fleet of modern, fuel-efficient aircrafts and our on-time arrivals make it one of the best performing airlines globally. We also have a state-of-the-art Flight Training Centre



What about Indian market?

India contributes a major share of the overall network traffic for Oman Air. India will continue to be a big focus market and thanks to a strong recovery in international travel we hope to restore our 2019 frequencies to India. We have been steadily increasing our frequency of operations with growing demand.

We will soon be flying to 10 cities - Bengaluru, Chennai, Delhi, Goa, Hyderabad, Kochi, Kozhikode, Mumbai, Lucknow and Thiruvananthapuram. We have announced the launch of five-weekly flights between Muscat and Thiruvananthapuram in August this year. This is in addition to twelve-weekly flights from Muscat to Lucknow to be launched in the same month. Double-daily flights are being operated to these six destinations Kochi, Kozhikode, Chennai, Hyderabad and Mumbai. Mumbai will only see wide-body operations, with a mix of Airbus A330s and Boeing B787 Dreamliners.

What about other International markets?

We have extensive connectivity to major airports across the Middle East and making us a good option to travel to Middle East. From India we offer convenient connections to European points such as Istanbul, London, Paris, Frankfurt, Munich, Milan and Zurich. Through our partners such as Qatar Airways and American Airlines we extend the connectivity to over 15 destinations across US and Canada.

Most airlines play a vital role towards boosting tourism in the country.

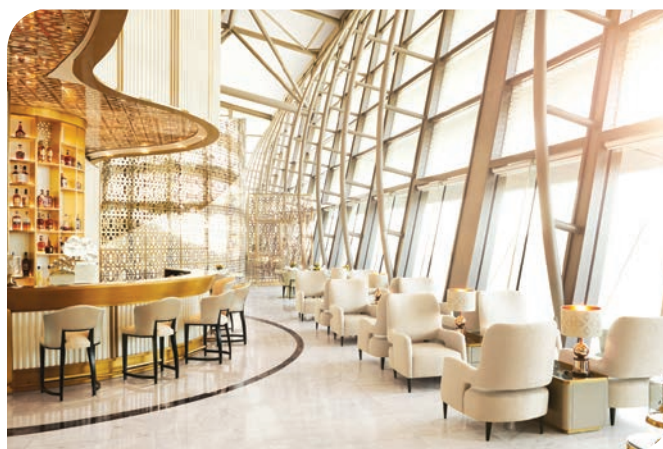
True and Oman Air is no exception as the airline constantly strives towards boosting tourism in Oman. Over the years we have played an active role in shaping the future of tourism in Oman through our holiday arm - Oman Air Holidays. They offer a wide variety of attractive and affordable holiday and hotel packages at special rates. Oman offers some of the most breath-taking natural escape and the landscape has a lot to offer for nature lovers and curious travellers. Its an opportunity for tourists to also experience true Omani hospitality.

What about MICE?

It's becoming an important aspect of our business. We have organised several corporate events, incentive tours and destination weddings. Lots of hotels in Muscat and Salalah have huge banqueting facilities. This has made it very convenient.

Your business class is much appreciated.

True. Our innovative layout is comparable to many First Class cabins in the sky. Our long haul flights feature the same Business Class seats - the APEX Suite (a denser 2-2-2 cabin configuration but cleverly designed by staggering the seats along the sides of the cabin and providing a passageway from the window seats thus all seats have direct aisle access). With a pitch of 80 inches and a bed length of 76 inches the seat turns into a fully lie-flat bed. Each seat has a 17-inch personal monitor and two USB ports. Guests also enjoy a set of unisex Amouage kits (the Omani luxury fragrance brand).





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