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*Your Window To The Tech and Startup World*

## Global Destinations

*A Guide To The World of MICE and Tourism*

### Oman

- Crowne Plaza Muscat OCEC
- Novotel Muscat Airport Hotel
- InterContinental Muscat
- Arabica Orient Tours

- Ascott
- SAii Lagoon Maldives
- Radisson Blue Kharadi, Pune
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## Dear Friends

India and Oman are linked by geography, history and culture and enjoy warm and cordial relations – diplomatically, for tourism and aviation through Oman Air.

There's a lot to discover in Oman - a place of natural beauty, caves, waterfalls, desert, beaches, wildlife, dhow cruises and Omani hospitality. There are the stunning Hajar mountains providing the thrill of rock-climbing, abseiling at Jebel Shams, underground exploration at numerous caves, canyoning expeditions, the famous free abseil of more than 160 vertical metres. The many forts and castles including the Nizwa Fort, Al Mirani and Al Jilali, Jabrin Castle, Al Husn Fort and Taqah Castle in Salalah. Oman is also one of the few places in the world where frankincense trees are still grown and harvested for their prized sap.

It was a chance meeting at Frankfurt airport where we were at the baggage carousel waiting to reclaim our checked bags that I first met the trio Manuel Levonian, GM, Crowne Plaza Muscat OCEC (Oman Convention & Exhibition Centre), Deepak Mathew, Assistant Director of Sales, Crowne Plaza Muscat OCEC, Rejin Thomas, DoSM, InterContinental Muscat. In a few minutes all four of us jelled. Manuel invited me to visit Oman and cover his property as well as InterContinental Muscat, I humbly accepted. We have covered both the properties. While Crowne Plaza Muscat OCEC was built recently, the InterContinental Muscat was built in the 1970s and was the first international hotel to rise in Oman.

We have also done an interview with Sanjay Bhattacharya, Founder, Arabica Orient Tours (AOT). AOT has created a niche for itself as a leading and well respected DMC thanks to its focus on quality and Customer satisfaction. For the past 13 years AOT has been successful in garnering business from across Europe, East Europe, MENA market, United Kingdom, Indian sub-continent and South East Asia.

It was last October when I was at HICAP, Singapore that I caught up with my dear old friend Doris Goh, VP, Commercial, COMO Hotels and Resorts. She talked highly of her resorts in Maldives and Bhutan. So when I decided to make a trip to Maldives (this time with my family), I connected with her and she in turn introduced me to the two General Managers – Vincent Durier at COMO Cocoa Island and Sobah Mohamed at COMO Maalifushi. I decided to first make a trip to COMO Cocoa Island. And what a mesmerizing trip it was.

COMO Cocoa Island in Maldives offers an inconspicuous luxury especially for couples and honeymooners with a host of romantic experiences. Add to this an amazing beach, over water villas providing spectacular lagoon views and incredible diving and snorkelling sites in close vicinity.

SAii Lagoon Maldives, Curio Collection by Hilton is an excellent resort for families as it has plenty of activities for kids. Scuba Diving, Snorkelling, Dolphin Watching, Parasailing, Jet Skiing, Surfing, Sunset Cruise, Swimming or just chilling at the beach watching your kids, young adults involved in numerous activities.

It was when my dear old friend Pankaj Saxena, GM, Radisson Blu Hotel Pune Kharadi invited me with my family to attend the hotels Independence Day celebrations saying "This year we have collaborated with Harley Owners Group (HOG) for 'Ride for Nation City Parade' on our Independence Day." This got me interested and we arrived a couple of days before Independence Day to this wonderful property.

This iconic property has 141 rooms and suites. The hotel has 15,000 square feet of exquisite meeting space, making it possible to host an intimate rooftop party, an elegant wedding reception, or a plush soiree for up to 600 attendees. Not to be missed is a dinner at The Great Kabab Factory, which serves North Indian Frontier Cuisine.



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## Oman: Lots to discover

India and Oman are linked by geography, history and culture and enjoy warm and cordial relations – diplomatically, for tourism and aviation through Oman Air. While people-to-people contact between India and Oman can be traced back 5000 years, diplomatic relations were established in 1955.

The growth of tourists from India travelling to Sultanate of Oman is on the raise. In 2022 3,52,398 Indians visit Oman and by May 2023, 2,34,509 Indian visitors have already graced the nation - an astounding 114% growth, as compared to the same period last year.

There's a lot to discover in Oman - a place of natural beauty, caves, waterfalls, desert, beaches, wildlife, dhow cruises and Omani hospitality. There are the stunning Hajar mountains providing the thrill of rock-climbing, abseiling at Jebel Shams, underground exploration at numerous caves, canyoning expeditions, the famous



© Ministry of Heritage & Tourism Sultanate of Oman

free abseil of more than 160 vertical metres. The many forts and castles including the Nizwa Fort, Al Mirani and Al Jilali, Jabrin Castle, Al Husn Fort and Taqah Castle in Salalah. Oman is also one of the few places in the world where frankincense trees are still grown and harvested for their prized sap.

Snorkel, scuba dive with sharks, dolphins and turtles

But what would surprise many is that Oman also provides an opportunity to snorkel, scuba dive and kayak while feasting one's eyes on the natural coral reefs, turtles, dolphins and even whale sharks. It was a revelation to me that Oman is considered as one of the top ten dive spots in the world. The Al Munnassir, an 83m long wreck, rests in only 30m of water less than an hour by boat from Muscat Harbour.

In the Daymaniyat Islands nature reserve a throw away from the capital Muscat, visitors can watch whale sharks - enormous yet soft creatures and not dangerous at all while snorkelling, diving or swimming (my daughter recently experienced this in Maldives). Boat trips depart from Al Mouj Marin. They can also be observed near the Omani exclave Musandam.

With the arrival of eVisa, Indian nationals no longer get their visa on arrival in Oman. But Indian tourists can obtain a visa on arrival, provided that they have an entry visa to the USA, Canada, UK, Schengen countries or Japan and the best part is its gratis.



© Ministry of Heritage & Tourism Sultanate of Oman

At the southern tip of Oman in the Dhofar region around the town of Salalah one can watch dolphins. The tall cliffs surrounding many of the local beaches offer an excellent viewpoint for the black shadows beneath the waves. Visitors can take a boat tour with a local operator and many a times one can see half a dozen dolphins swimming alongside the motorboat. Best time is from November to March.

While Maldives has created a niche for itself in this segment, if promoted properly Oman can also raise to the occasion with excellent and fast connectivity, high end luxurious properties and specialised travel agents. It can be a great place for family holidays too.

*(With inputs from <https://www.itb.com/en/press/newsroom>)*



To go to Oman from India, Oman Air remains the best option. The airline was designated 'Best Airline Staff in the Middle East' at the Skytrax 2023 World Airline Awards. "Our excellent service makes a big difference. India is Oman Air's second largest market after Oman. And we are expanding. Soon we



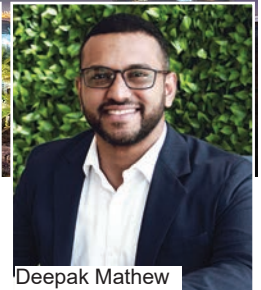
will be adding Trivandrum and Lucknow routes to our existing 8 destinations in India. Also our revamped Sindbad loyalty programme replacing the previous distance-based miles accrual system with spend-based accrual can be of great advantage to our frequent fliers. We have many partners with whom the earned miles or points can be redeemed," said Sunil V A, Regional VP, Indian Sub-Continent and Far East, Commercial, Oman Air. Distinguishing itself for its personalised service, authentic Omani hospitality, and meticulous attention to all elements of the guest journey, Oman Air continues to position itself among the world's major carriers.



## Crowne Plaza Muscat OCEC: An imposing business and leisure property



Manuel Levonian



Deepak Mathew

It was a chance meeting at Frankfurt airport where we were at the baggage carousel waiting to reclaim our checked bags that I first met the trio Manuel Levonian, GM, Crowne Plaza Muscat OCEC (Oman Convention & Exhibition Centre), Deepak Mathew, Assistant Director of Sales, Crowne Plaza Muscat OCEC, Rejin Thomas, DoSM, InterContinental Muscat. In a few minutes all four of us jelled. They were also going for IMEX and had a booth. We decided to catch up at the show.

Chatting with the dynamic and friendly Manuel at IMEX was a revelation. He instinctively appreciated my publication and my coverage of hotels across the globe (have been fortunate to visit 800+ hotels across 51 countries). His passion for his hotel impressed me and when he invited me to visit Oman and cover his property as well as InterContinental Muscat, I humbly accepted.



Flying Oman Air, the national airline of Oman, was the natural choice. Experiencing their business class certainly gives you the momentum. Immigration was quick and smooth (as I had a valid USA visa the Oman visa was provided gratis). The driver was there to pick me up and after a short 15 minute drive we reached this amazing property.

The façade is quite imposing and at check in they informed me my suite was already waiting for my presence. I was greeted by Sincy S Joseph, Marketing Executive, Crowne Plaza Muscat OCEC, who had just joined the hotel (two days before my arrival). The GM

and Deepak joined shortly in the lobby.

In spite of my International travel, conversing with the joyful Manuel lifted my spirits and we all sat conversing for over an hour in the lobby.

My suite was quite impressive but it's the welcome amenities that caught my attention. A large cake, a basket of fruits filled to the brim, and some traditional sweets.

This imposing property with 295 spacious and ergonomic rooms and suites is designed to have all five star facilities including a temperature-controlled swimming pool, a sauna, a fully equipped gym, a newly renovated spa and tennis and basketball courts etc.

"Due to its closeness to OCEC (it's conveniently located within walking distance of the OCEC), many feel that ours is a business hotel but we have all the facilities for a leisure traveller too. As we are surrounded by nature the peace that city hotel may not provide is a plus point. We are just 15 minutes distance to the city center so sightseeing is convenient. Add to this we have 5 dining venues giving our guests multiple options," said Manuel.

I had to agree – their F&B is one of their biggest plus points. "We have been fortunate to have some of the best chefs. Our Thai restaurant Charm Thai is so famous people from all parts of Muscat flock to taste some genuine Thai food," said Michael Fourie, Director F&B.





Another point that Manuel pointed out for leisure travellers was that Crowne Plaza Muscat OCEC is one of the best venues for ornithologists (bird watchers). “We have the famous Al Ansab Wetland which is clearly visible from quite a few of our rooms. So guests can do bird watching from your room window. There are a lot of bird-watching opportunities and our amazing Wadi is home to an array of natural birds. Understanding this as a plus point we will be soon installing a telescope in the lobby not only for bird enthusiasts but also for the amateur. I would like to welcome wildlife photographers from across the globe to this place,” said Manuel.

### Meetings and Events

The hotel is also a great option for MICE with meeting rooms, foyers, a functional ballroom, with a separate pre-function area that includes a spacious 3 section ballroom with a terrace, a boardroom, three smaller meeting rooms and a multi-level extensive parking space. The total area of meeting space is around 7000 sq ft with the largest room capacity being 425 guests.

“MICE is a very important segment for us. We have state-of-the-art conference facilities. Being close to OCEC is another advantage. While major trade shows conferences can happen there company groups can have their internal/ breakout events at our hotel. Its ideal even for wedding’s especially from India as we have some wonderful lawns,” said Deepak Mathew.



The hotel is a green-engaged hotel. They aim to reduce the carbon footprint by eliminating plastic straws and minimizing the use of plastic packaging of all kinds, among other initiatives.

Spread over 4 days I experienced that the hotel has some of the best staff – warm, attentive, friendly and certainly service oriented. “Every hotel has the same product. What differentiates are the employees, my colleagues who make sure we deliver memorable guest service with a personal touch and serving from our heart. We in turn look after their welfare, elect our monthly star, celebrate their birthdays, anniversaries, achievements including personal ones. If someone goes beyond the call of duty we publicise it through our social media. It feels so nice for all of us,” said Manuel.

## Culinary excellence: An experience that stands out

The hotels five dining venues include an all-day dining restaurant Mosaic serving international cuisine, Connexions a lobby lounge, Wadi Bar right by the pool, Le Petit Belge - with Belgian food and the award winning Charm Thai.

My culinary experience at all three restaurants was appetizing as well as delicious and the unique pleasure of spending time with the chefs of each restaurant.

Starting with lunch at Le petit Belge along with Chef Marc Woolf. Its a Belgian beer cafe offering a wide selection of Belgian beers and cuisine and certainly an incredible atmosphere. This was followed by dinner at the award-winning Charm Thai Lounge & Restaurant. Being vegetarian Chef Praiwan Sriplai had prepared some yummy vegetarian dishes. It truly offers a captivating culinary journey through the flavors of Thailand. “That’s what makes us unique. For our guests we provide authentic and comprehensive Thai experience with our Thai ingredients. Add to this exclusive Thai staff, and if you have noticed original Thai design is all over the restaurant,” said a Chef Praiwan, brimming with pride.



Chef Marc Woolf



Chef Praiwan Sriplai



Chef Issa Alamki



Mosaic, the all-day dining restaurant serves international, Middle Eastern dishes. They also have an Indian section which I am sure will please most Indian guests. “Its not just that if there are special requests for Indian dishes I and my team can cater to their select taste buds,” said Executive Chef Issa Alamki. Already an Omani celebrity chef, he had also served the rulers. He is so humble and down to earth. Hearing him articulate his story and experiences was such a pleasure while savouring his delectable creations.

Connexions, the lobby lounge café just in front of the lifts stands out. While having a pastry with Sincy, she said, “Its best place to sit and relax over a cup of coffee and watch nature or catch up with you friends and colleagues. You can invite a visiting business associate for a snack.”

Wadi Bar is the hotels pool bar and offers the perfect setting surrounded by natural green landscape with calming views of the Wadi. Guests can relish snacks and a variety of rejuvenating drinks. One can indulge in a puff of sheesha while savoring a glass of wine.

The ambiance at all dining venues is captivating.







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## “We pride in our ability to partner with our guests and offer experiences and solutions, rather than just selling rooms”

It was on my visit to Muscat that I met up with Sushanth Nambiar, GM, Novotel Muscat Airport hotel. In spite of the brief interaction I was pretty impressed by his thought process and in-depth understanding of the hospitality industry, having worked across seven countries. In an e-interview he focuses on what makes the hotel special, MICE potential and much more...

### With so many hotel options in Muscat how do you differentiate Novotel Muscat?

Novotel Muscat Airport is a perfect combination of business and leisure, and offers the best of both worlds. We are very close to the Airport, and yet a stone's throw away from down town. We have excellent F&B and recreational facilities as well as great MICE options to handle the needs of both domestic and International travelers. With all those great features, what really makes us stand out, is our super friendly team, and our philosophy of being “easy to do business with”. We pride in our ability to partner with our guests and offer experiences and solutions, rather than just selling rooms.



### How do you and your team cater to expectations of the new gen customers?

It is very exciting times for the industry, as there is a radical transformation happening, which is fuelled by the new gen travellers. The new gen is very focused on technology, customization and authenticity of the brand. Accor is constantly transforming and has always embraced change with open arms. On a daily basis, we strive to enhance experience by challenging the status quo and building a relationship with our guests by being our authentic selves.

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

Novotel Muscat offers 3 outlets namely, the Lobby Lounge, Ginger and Theatrum. Our Lobby Lounge offers a variety of brews and infusions along with small bites for our guests to have whilst they work, have meetings or just unwind. Ginger is our All Day Dining outlet which offers a large buffet consisting of cuisines from around the world and also provides an option of a la carte with a delectable selection. Theatrum is our upscale fine dining restaurant with a dedicated sushi bar and live kitchen which opens our guests to a world of fusion of five cuisines and unique experiences.

### What about your MICE and weddings business and the potential from India?

Novotel Muscat has well balance mix of leisure and business



Sushanth Nambiar

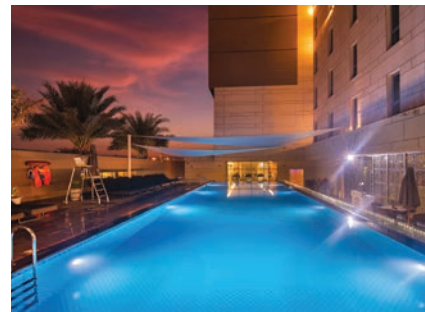
clients which keeps the hotel buzzing. MICE has been our key focus and we have seen great results in terms of business growth and converting new clients. With

extensive on premise MICE facilities and latest technology, we are a leading player for this very important business segment in Oman.

Oman's Ministry of Tourism has made impeccable efforts in promoting Oman and growing its tourist volumes. Oman has been growing in appeal to Indian travellers for business and leisure over the years. As business ties continue to strengthen between Oman and India, we are confident that we will be able to get more business share in terms of MICE and Weddings. With close proximity to the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre and airport, we are perfectly positioned for the MICE segment in Oman.

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

I joined the industry in 1999 and have been privileged to work in 7 countries and with some wonderful owners, business partners, mentors and talented people. The greatest gift has been the chance of travelling and exploring the world as a part of the job and being in the region has given the opportunity to work with colleagues and guests of various nationalities and ethnic background. Most part of my career has been spend in Middle East, and the region is considered as one of the best when it comes to hospitality innovation and talent pool, and it is wonderful to be a part of this hub.



My passion for good food and cooking is what attracted me to the industry and that still remains at the heart of whatever I do. I truly feel that today's guest are experience driven, and great food and beverage experiences remain a vital cog in delivering that experiences at the highest level.



## “India is a major focus for us”



Sanjay Bhattacharya

Based in Muscat Arabica Orient Tours (AOT) has created a niche for itself as a leading and well respected DMC thanks to its focus on quality and customer satisfaction. For the past 13 years AOT has been successful in garnering business from across Europe, East Europe, MENA market, United Kingdom, Indian sub-continent and South East Asia. In a tête-à-tête with Global Features, **Sanjay Bhattacharya, Founder, AOT** focuses on his plans for Indian market. Excerpts

### Being an entrepreneur with a keen business sense how do you feel the market has changed post COVID?

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted many industries, plans and changed priorities

and the global tourism industry was no exception. Post- COVID travel is more focused on luxury travel, personalised tours, adventure travel etc. Also travellers focus on sustainable travel has increased. While affordability will remain a factor I see many are looking to upgrade their comfort levels by spending a bit more.

Oman has been a very special destination that always attracted high level clientele so they are back to their travel and we expect that year 2024 will see us back to the pre- COVID times.

I believe the role of the travel agent will continue to be important in the luxury travel sector and I personally believe travel agents are the best way to get a personalized travel experience.

### What are your groups major activities and target markets?

We have an established client base across the globe. Most of our clientele are ones who want to discover the destination and not idle away on beaches or in hotel rooms. From our side we do our utmost to give our customers a good feel of the destination, suggesting a good mix of culture, history, a little bit of adventure, interacting with the local community and finally some nice relaxation by the beach. We are very strong in the European market which is primarily the source market for Oman. Our next focus is the emerging markets of which India is a major focus.

### What makes your agency stand out among other agencies in Oman?

Firstly I and my team are passionate and knowledgeable about what we do. We have a client-centric process and are one of the few DMCs whom clients can trust to deliver the promises made. For us creativity is the key. We ensure that the agent/customers are buying the right product and our team educates them accordingly.

Our team is experienced in the destination and are approachable 24\*7, 365 days. We always value add and surprise our customers with many small moments that bring a big smile on their face. We not only offer competitive prices but thanks to our relationships and special contacts we are able to get our clients VIP access. Being a customer focused agency, we understand what it takes to give the guest the best holiday.

### What makes Oman such an attractive destination?

Oman is steeped in tradition and history with several attractions-pristine landscapes, nature experiences, seas, desert, forts,

mysterious caves, marvellous wadis, towering peaks that makes it so special. For tourists there are several places to experience – Muscat, Salalah, Nizwa, Wadi Darbat, Sohar, Musandam, Sur, Wadi Shab, Masirah Island, Al Hoota Caves, just to name a few. Oman still remains one of the best kept secrets around the globe thus not overcrowded and certainly worth a visit.

### What potential do you see from India?

Oman has great potential to attract Indian visitors to visit, travel as well as relax. India remains an excellent market for Oman mainly for two good reasons – It is very well connected to all major cities in India with direct flights mainly thanks to Oman Air and the second point is both countries share thousands of years of partnership by diversified trade relations.

Considering the proximity, the price structure, availability of rooms it's a safe haven for Indian tourists. It is ideal for MICE – Oman Convention & Exhibition Centre that can host world-class events and several hotels with excellent banqueting facilities. Quite a few hotels are ideal for Indian weddings. Film shooting is another segment that has huge potential. While a lot is happening in these three segments, we just need to make them stronger. We have decided to focus on attracting Indian travellers not just for leisure but also MICE and film shootings. I believe we have the contacts and resources.

### On a personal front - What inspired you to become a travel agent?

I think it was by chance and fate that I came into this industry. Way back in 1990 my old friend Murlu who was working for Cox and Kings offered me the job in this industry. After my training was over I was assigned an account which provided me the opportunity to meet people from different walks of life and there was so much to learn from them all. I fell in love with this industry and it's been 33 years and the passion never dies down.







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# InterContinental Muscat: Grande Dame of Muscat



While I was staying at Crowne Plaza Muscat OCEC (Oman Convention & Exhibition Centre) my dear friend Rejin Thomas, DoSM, InterContinental Muscat came to meet me. Though post my stay at Crowne Plaza Muscat OCEC I was scheduled to experience InterContinental Muscat, he felt it a good idea to take me on a hotel tour before my planned visit (as he was going on a business trip during my visit days). And it was a good decision as not only we spent quality time but also an interesting conversation during the tour of the hotel.



Chandragupta

Rejin Thomas

Arriving into the property Rejin pointed out the sea – so close to the resort. I was pretty impressed by the greenery and acres of palm-filled gardens. As we entered the property, he showed me a framed photo. “This photo was taken in the late 70s when there was nothing around it except beach and sand. It was one of the first hotels in Oman. Over the years our hotel has become part of the capital’s social and cultural life,” said Rejin.

But from inside it did not look so old and is quite modern. One can but not fall in love with the lobby that exudes a sense of grandeur with a soaring, seven level open atrium with glass elevators in the lobby taking guests to the guest room floors. It does make quite an impression on guests when they arrive at the hotel. The lobby is certainly a place where you can relax and unwind. After a tour of the hotel Rejin and I sat in the lobby café to enjoy coffee and juice.

He showed me around the rooms which were aesthetically done providing a testament to luxury and elegance. “Despite the lockdown we continued to renovate the rooms and Club Lounge with latest technologies and today you can see the refurbished product. Infact over the years we have won several awards. In 2021 we won the “The Best Luxury Hotel in Oman” acknowledging our top position in the luxury market for Oman,” said Rejin. I loved the new suites and he smilingly mentioned but naturally you will be staying in one with access to our Club Lounge.

When I arrived a couple of days later the check in was smooth and I was allotted a nice suite facing the sea. The hotel with 270 rooms including the Club Suites sits on a prime beachside location between the Hajar Mountains and the green-blue waters of the

Indian Ocean. My suite was quite spacious, clean and comfortable. All rooms come with a balcony and French windows. From my balcony I could see the sea as well as a



lagoon-style pool, quite popular with families. Its eye catching with a colourful kids play area with bridges and fountains. The hotel is prominently located in the city’s residential, government and diplomatic quarter. The Royal Opera House is just around the corner, and the hotel is only 15 minutes from the airport.

There are several shops and bars on the ground floor, including an Irish pub and a bakery, which offers fabulous pastries. The hotel has seven dining venues including Al Ghazal Pub, Musandam, Tomato, Trader Vic’s, Tr.Eat Cafe, Mynah’s Edge & Takara. The breakfast was scrumptious with some Indian delicacies.

For VIP guests and elite members of InterContinental’s loyalty program there is the 5th floor Club lounge – Club InterContinental. They were kind enough to give me a suite on the 5th floor and I used the lounge quite often to relax and read some books (they have a small library in the lounge).

The hotel is big on amenities. It offers two floodlit tennis courts, a 25-metre (82 ft) Olympic size pool, a lagoon-shaped pool, a fully equipped gym, sauna, and a Jacuzzi plus a spa.

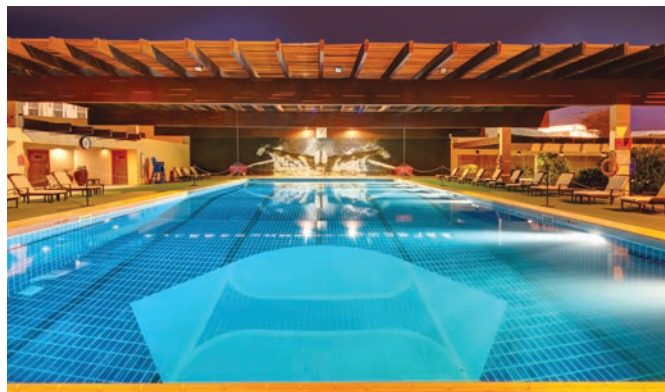
The hotel, popularly known as the ‘Grande Dame of Muscat,’ is an ideal place to stay either for business or leisure. Even to host meetings, conventions, company get togethers, gala dinners or weddings.

## MICE

The hotel provides premiere setting for meetings and conferences. There are five meeting rooms can be configured into theatre-style, banquet, and reception venues. The Jabrin Ballroom is the largest meeting room with 645 sq. m and can cater to 400 guests. Then there is Almajlis with Omani style decoration and can cater to 50 guests and the rest three are Sohar, Ocean View, Nizwa. They have huge outdoor are too that can cater to over 1500 guests. “Its quite suitable for large weddings especially Indian weddings. Indian corporate can also use a mix of our meeting rooms for their product launches, team-building activities or to just celebrate company milestones along with clients, employees or both,” said Rejin.



## “We have become associated as a beach hotel and a true urban retreat”



With over 25 year's experience with IHG **Daniel Arbenz, AGM, IHG Oman OMRAN Hotels & InterContinental Muscat** (when I met him he was GM, InterContinental Muscat) is considered as a stalwart in the hospitality industry. A Swiss national, graduated from Swiss Hotel Management School Luzern SHL he has worked in hotels across Switzerland, Southeast Asia, Australia, and Greater China, Hongkong & Macau. Starting his career when he was just 18 years old he moved up the ladder very fast and in 5 years he was already a GM at Holiday Inn Semarang in Indonesia – the youngest IHG GM in Asia Pacific. From 2017 to 2021, he severed as director of operations for South China, Hong Kong and Macau, as well as GM of InterContinental Shenzhen, overseeing 22 hotels in total. Had the pleasure of interviewing this dynamic personality during my stay. **Excerpts**



Daniel Arbenz

### What makes InterContinental Muscat unique?

We have a legacy of almost 45 years. Being the first International hotel we have a lot of embassies and ministerial offices close by. This has been a major advantage as we get a lot official guests and for most government meetings and events ours is the preferred hotel.

While keeping the impressive structure as it is we have done renovation of our rooms in 2022. So it has that rustic look but with all the modern facilities too.

### Your location is amazing.

True we have a spectacular location right on the public beachfront, with acres of greenery. One can also relish the distant view of the majestic Hajar Mountains. Our proximity to the Royal Opera House, the Souk and Muscat's City Centre is an additional advantage.



Almost all of our rooms have 100% sea views or Opera views. Over the years we have become associated as a beach hotel and a true urban retreat.

### Sustainability is the buzz word.

True and globally InterContinental Hotel Group is leading the fight on Sustainability. We are making large investments and

efforts towards becoming more sustainable and environment friendly. We are also on a mission to eliminate plastics in our hotel and soon be plastic free. We plan to own water bottling factory. Also trying to source as much as possible from local suppliers. Solar panels on the roof, 100 per cent LED lighting, Water filtration plants, environment friendly bathroom accessories etc are already in process.

### IHG group has a great presence in Oman.

Yes. We have seven properties across three brands in Oman including our hotel InterContinental, Muscat, Crowne Plaza, Oman Convention and Exhibition Center, Crowne Plaza, Muscat, Crowne Plaza, Sohar, Crowne Plaza Duqm, Crowne Plaza, Salalah and Holiday Inn, Seeb. Two more are in the pipeline. Among the major hotel groups globally, I think we have the maximum number of hotels in Oman.



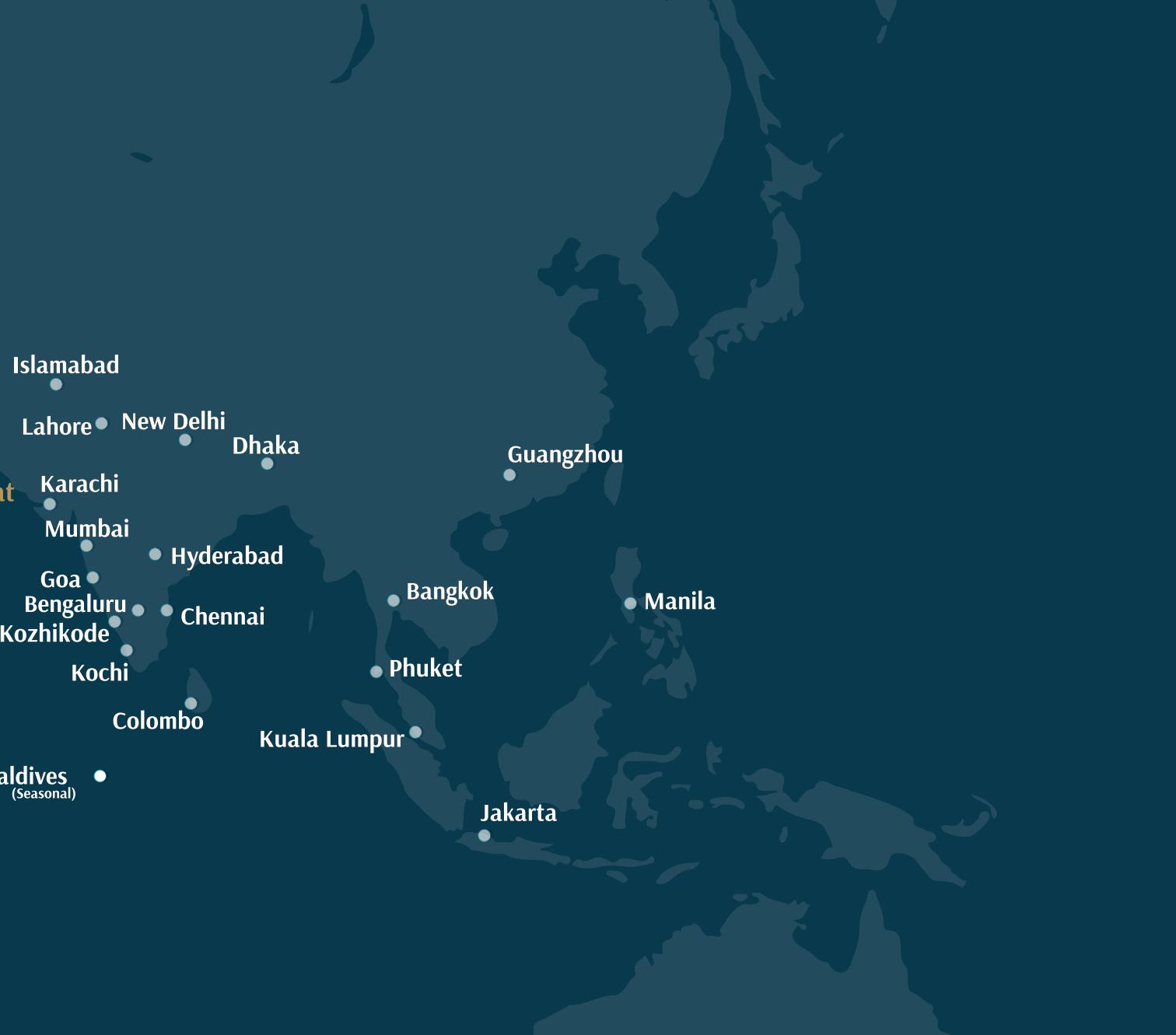


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## COMO Cocoa Island: An unobtrusive luxury



Though it was my sixth visit to Maldives, the inconspicuous COMO Cocoa Island is ideal for honeymooners, couples and those who seek their own space and peaceful relaxation. It was a different experience feels **Chandragupta Amritkar**

It was last October when I was at HICAP, Singapore that I caught up with my dear old friend Doris Goh, VP, Commercial, COMO Hotels and Resorts. She talked highly of her resorts in Maldives and Bhutan. So when I decided to make a trip to Maldives (this time with my family), I connected with her and she in turn introduced me to the two General Managers – Vincent Durier at COMO Cocoa Island and Sobah Mohamed at COMO Maalifushi. I decided to first make a trip to COMO Cocoa Island. And what a mesmerizing trip it was.

COMO Cocoa Island in Maldives offers an inconspicuous luxury especially for couples and honeymooners with a host of romantic experiences. Add to this an amazing beach, over water villas providing spectacular lagoon views and incredible diving and snorkelling sites in close vicinity.

Arriving at the Malé International Airport (MLE) immigration was quick. Don't forget to complete immigration through IMUGA - the online platform, which is used for immigration services. All travellers are required to submit the Traveller Declaration within 96 hours to the flight time, during arrival and departure.

On arrival we were greeted by COMO representative who led us to our speedboat. A 40-minute speedboat transfer (no need of a seaplane) from airport brought us to COMO Cocoa Island located among South Malé's coral atolls.



### The Water Villas

Stepping on the island the first thing we noticed is the amazing sand that is white and extremely fine and the eye-pleasing natural beauty. We were led to our Loft Water Villa with an expansive lower level living area and a master bedroom on the mezzanine (most ideal for families). It also has a secluded outdoor rain shower, private overwater terrace with loungers and dining table. My daughter loved the loungers and private access to the sea right from the villa.

Had the pleasure of catching up with old friend Nuaas Mohamed, Cluster Director of Sales & Marketing, COMO Maalifushi and COMO Cocoa Island over lunch. He was kind enough to come to the island just to catch up with me and left after lunch. He is very keen on tapping the Indian market. "India is a huge market for almost all resorts in Maldives and remains a top tourism source market of Maldives. India is not only close but



has a lot of people who love and appreciate luxury including film stars. Our plus point is we have well-trained chefs and butlers to cater to Indians," said Nuaas. About the villa which was provided to us he said "Your two-level Loft suite with an outdoor shower is one of my favourite as they have the best direct access to snorkelling." When queried on the other COMO resort, "Each island has a different energy. COMO Cocoa is probably one of the few resorts in Maldives that has all over water villas and no beach villa. The resort is so closely knitted that one can walk from one end of the island to the other end comfortably. Also while we have families I would recommend families stay at our family-friendly sister property COMO Maalifushi. Ideally one can combine COMO Cocoa Island with a stay at its sister property COMO Maalifushi," said a smiling Nuaas.



COMO Cocoa has 33 overwater suites and villas docked at a wooden boardwalk reaching out over the lagoon. The largest is the three-bedroom COMO Sunset Villa that features two standalone villas connected by a wooden walkway and is named for its spectacular sunset views.

The resort is instantly recognisable by overwater villas shaped like the gently curving wooden forms of the local 'dhoni', a traditional Maldivian fishing boat. Each bungalow sits above the lagoon, connected by planked walkways.

### Wellness

The COMO Shambhala spa is one of the pillars of the resort and can be considered as a deeply restorative destination offering Asian-based therapies, a hydrotherapy pool and free yoga. The treatment rooms (with four massage pavilions) overlook the lagoon and lush foliage. It is the embodiment of the resort's philosophy



for healthy living with emphasis on a holistic approach and Ayurvedic therapy. Each package combines a number of additional procedures that allow you to achieve real results, from

relaxation to recovery and rejuvenation.

They also have probably the only hydrotherapy pool in the Maldives, where high-pressure jets massage the body — a safe and powerful therapy. Here guests can relax in the heated water, with purpose-built high pressure jets to target different areas of the body. There is a two-storey centre with a yoga pavilion on the top floor providing 360-degree lagoon views, and a fully equipped gym on the lower floor. There is also a Pilates studio featuring a Cadillac-Reformer machine.

### Cuisine

Next to the swimming pool there is an inside-outside, pool- and beach-side restaurant (the only restaurant on the island) Ufaa that serves an excellent cuisine of fresh produce. The food is excellent containing the nuances of South Indian cuisine with light curries, seafood and salads. Every morning we had dosas and the bakery was yummy and soft. Ufaa offers a daily-changing menu of fresh-from-the-sea, plucked-from-the-branch goodness, Malabar Coast and Thai-style dishes



To complement the wellness experience, COMO Shambhala Cuisine is available on all menus, allowing guests to pursue vegan, vegetarian, gluten-free, nutritionally-rich and additive-free wellness diets during their stay.

A classic pool bar with direct beach access, Faru, offers fruit cocktails, drinks and wine. There are also vitamin-packed juices and fragrant tea infusions.

### Activities

There are lots of activities at the resort — some free, others chargeable. Every day in the yoga pavilion of Como Shambhala there are free yoga classes — Ashtanga, Mat Pilates, Vinyasa, Surya Namaskar etc. Then there is Snorkelling, Scuba Diving, Shark Adventure, Whaleshark Expedition, Reef Explorer, Turtle Snorkelling, Cooking Class, Reformer Pilates, Sunset Cruise, Tented Candlelit Dinner on the Beach and many more....

## Exhilarating and Captivating adventure with sharks

COMO Cocoa Island gave us a chance to have an exhilarating and captivating adventure with sharks. I was super excited but also a little nervous since this was my first time snorkelling. We arrived at the marine centre, where they gave us snorkel gears, life jackets and a brief summary about what to expect inside the open ocean water. There we met Eddy and Ali, our diving instructors.

After the quick briefing, we headed towards the speedboat and off we went into the vast beautiful ocean, speeding towards the reefs which sharks are known to inhabit. The main goal was to spot blacktip and whitetip reef sharks. These sharks can be easily identified by the prominent black tips or white tips on their fins.

Once Eddy, our instructor, was into the waters, we jumped in too. Soon, I was surrounded by a school of fish and I couldn't help but gawk at the aquatic wonders below me. Each coral seemed to be hosting its own exclusive ecosystem as fishes sped in and out. The beauty was simply magical. We glided further and further into the waters, looking for sharks, and as if on cue, the stars of the show arrived. The shark made a grand entrance in slow motion. With every sway of his tail, he commanded attention. I watched him glide by and then he met his friends, now there were 4 sharks in front of me and my phone shook as I tried to take a video, a memory that I will frequently share and revisit. We even spotted a sea turtle as it made its way towards the top of the waters to take a breath and then effortlessly swam back into the depths.

After an adventurous hour, we reluctantly stepped out of the water and I knew that I had just made a core memory. An experience that I will cherish for a lifetime. We're so often caught up in the mundane work and inland life, that we forget to explore the extraordinary magical life beneath the surface. This was my first snorkelling experience but I assure you, it will not be my last!



Pooja Amritkar @womanonrampage

## “We aim to provide memorable and transformative experiences”

While we did miss meeting **Vincent Durier, General Manager, COMO Cocoa Island**, we had an e-interaction with him where he delighted us by his and COMO Hotels and Resorts focus on Sustainability. **Excerpts**

**With so many hotel options in Maldives what makes COMO Cocoa Island unique?**

COMO Cocoa Island is an intimate island just 40-minutes away by speedboat from Male. With only 33 overwater villas in our inventory, it allows us to cater to our guests individually and personalise their experiences during their stay. We also have sandbank that stretches more than one-kilometre at low tide from the Eastern tip of our island with sandy shores and baby black tip reef sharks swimming in the lagoon.

We are also home to an award-winning COMO Shambhala Retreat where our wellness offerings encompass treatments, experiences, products, and activities, curated to nurture well-being. Here, we have four massage pavilions with outdoor shower, a hydrotherapy pool, a Pilates studio featuring a Cadillac-Reformer machine, a fully equipped fitness centre and an open-air yoga pavilion with a view of the ocean. By seamlessly integrating Asian-based therapies, nutrition, exercise, and yoga, COMO Shambhala offers a holistic approach driven by results. At our resort, one can also find our signature COMO Shambhala Cuisine, a collection of healthful, nutrition-optimized dishes crafted from pure ingredients in nourishing combinations in addition to the blend of Indian and Mediterranean culinary offerings at our main restaurant, Ufaa.

While being easily assessable from Male, we are also surrounded by some of the top diving sites and makes for some of the best underwater experiences for guests who are avid snorkelers and divers. The three house reefs around our island have resident turtles, black-tip sharks and beautiful, colourful coral teeming with marine life.



**How do you look at the Indian subcontinent?**

To attract tourists, we emphasize the beauty of our destination, tailor experiences to align with cultural preferences, and showcase our resort's amenities as a perfect complement to their journey.

**Sustainability is the buzz word. Your views and how are you implementing it in COMO?**

At COMO Hotels and Resorts, we act as custodians, rather than managers, of each destination. We recognise the privileges and responsibilities of being part of the community and are committed

to celebrating local culture, supporting the domestic economy, and minimising our impact on the environment. Operating sustainably inspires and drives us to better serve our guests, develop our teams and plan for the future.



Vincent Durier

At COMO Cocoa Island, we have implemented the following initiatives: -

- **Marine Conservation and Education:** We provide guests with insights into marine life before excursions and hold weekly sustainability talks to raise awareness.
- **Coral Propagation:** Our coral propagation efforts restore the island's reef. The coral frame structures support marine life, contributing to ecosystem vitality.
- **Reef and Island Clean-ups:** Regular clean-ups ensure the pristine condition of our environment, demonstrating our commitment to maintaining a healthy ecosystem.
- **Species Identification and Data Collection:** We collect data on dolphins, turtles, manta rays, and whale sharks, contributing to endangered species conservation by assessing their status and trends.
- **Citizen Science Initiatives:** We educate local schools about marine life, conservation, and waste, promoting sustainable practices within the community. This year we have also partnered with MantaTrust for the Ocean Women initiative an endeavour committed to training Maldivian women as adept swimming and snorkelling instructors. These empowered women, in turn, would offer routine aquatic classes, nurturing confidence and prowess among more fellow women of the sea.
- **Energy Efficiency:** We're adopting energy-efficient technologies and exploring solar panels to reduce our carbon footprint.
- **Water Conservation:** Rainwater harvesting, water cycling, reduced consumption, and staff awareness campaigns help preserve this precious resource.
- **Local Sourcing:** A significant portion of our restaurant's ingredients are sourced locally, supporting the community and reducing our carbon footprint.
- **Sustainable Fishing:** We prioritize local, responsible fishing methods like hand line and pole and line techniques for sourcing fish.

**Any specific plans for the property in the next couple of years?**

We are focused on enhancing COMO Cocoa Island's offerings in alignment with our mission of enriching lives. We plan to curate immersive experiences like COMO Journeys and COMO Conversations, featuring experts for residency programs to elevate guest stays. By integrating these initiatives, we aim to provide memorable and transformative experiences that resonate with our guests' aspirations and passions.





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## “With plenty of blue waters, green growth and azure skies one can bask in nature”

While I was in Hyderabad to cover Oakwood hotel, thought it a good idea to use this opportunity to visit my old friend Veer Vijay Singh, MD and CEO at Trance Hotels & Resorts upcoming property at Vikarabad. “The property is amazing, though a few final touches remain, I am sure you will fall in love with the resort,” said Veer Vijay Singh.

So co-ordinating with **Ismail Desai, GM, Trance Veechika Resort, Vikarabad**, I proceeded to Vikarabad. A pleasant two hour drive brought us to the property. It’s really a lovely property, though a few cottages are yet to be made. To get an insight we spoke with Ismail Desai. **Excerpts**



Ismail Desai

### Can you in brief describe your property?

Located near Ananthagiri Hills, where nature envelopes the resort, one can easily get locked amidst the hillock. The resort, spread over 22 acres of lush greenery, will have 22 Cottages in its first phase with a restaurant overlooking the swimming pool.

We have four different styles of rooms and cottages and each of them have its own charm - few of the cottages have a patio, some have barbeque area and some are being rebuilt using shipping containers. Plans are afoot to add glamping tents around an in-house pond, have tree houses and family villas. We will be also adding a fitness centre, a high end rejuvenating spa, laundry, and kids play area.

### What is so unique about the resort's location?

Quite a few. Some of the highlights of Vikarabad are Ananthagiri hills, Anantha Padmanabha Swamy Temple, Ananthagiri Forest, Kotepally reservoir, Ananthagiri view point etc.

With plenty of blue waters, green growth and azure skies one can bask in nature. If you are in Hyderabad, then Trance Veechika Resort is a two-hour drive and once you are nearing the resort



you can also have stopovers at small streams and waterfalls especially during the monsoons. With abundant nature it will attract birdwatchers and ornithologists from across the country.

### What kind of activities can guests look forward to?

We plan to keep a vivid option for our guests to explore with adventure sports activities like Zip line, ATV track, rope course, archery, net cricket, kayaking, cycling, camping, jungle trekking, star gazing, bon fire, barbeque night.

## Trance hotels: Focussing on wellness retreats

Trance hotels, a hotel management company and hospitality consultancy has currently four hotels in operation - Trance Greenfields Resort & Convention Centre, Moinabad, Hyderabad Argo by Trance, Goa Anahata Retreat, Goa and Trance Babylon Executive Stays, Hyderabad. “By March 2024 we will have 8 operating hotels. We are concentrating on quality and not quantity with a major focus on good resorts which will have par excellence wellness facilities,” said Veer Vijay Singh.



The group already has the renowned Trance Greenfields Resort & Convention Centre, a 13 acres property in Hyderabad – just 30 minutes from Financial District & 35 minutes from airport.

The resort with 42 luxury rooms has some of the largest rooms in Hyderabad with 404 Sqft and suites at 808 Sqft. The resort has excellent banqueting facilities. “We have a world class convention center that can if required be split into 5 halls catering to small meetings and large conferences. Combining our indoor and outdoor venues we can hold an event/wedding for upto 5000 guests. For residential conferences we also have team building activities, training space and break away rooms,” said Veer Vijay Singh.



Veer Vijay Singh

The group plans to focus on high end wellness centers across the country. “At Trance Veechika Resort we plan to have at least 20 treatment rooms providing numerous therapies. We will look at having rejuvenating programs for guests ranging from 7-15 days. This wellness concept will later be implemented at most of our resorts,” said Veer Vijay Singh.

# Independence Day@ Radisson Blu Hotel Pune Kharadi



Pankaj Saxena

It was when my dear old friend Pankaj Saxena, GM, Radisson Blu Hotel Pune Kharadi invited me with my family to attend the hotels Independence Day celebrations saying “This year we have collaborated with Harley Owners Group (HOG) for ‘Ride for Nation City Parade’ on our Independence Day.”

This got me interested and we arrived a couple of days before Independence Day to this wonderful

property. Located just 3.5 hours from Mumbai airport, 20 minutes from Pune International Airport and just ten minutes from EON IT Park and World Trade Center Pune this iconic property has 141 rooms and suites. On entering the huge lobby catches one’s eyes. Check in was smooth and we were led to our suite.

Arriving on a Sunday, the charming and delightful Tanuja Sawant, Assistant Manager- Marketing Communication insisted we have the hotels famed brunch which is generally accompanied by live music and engaging activities. “This week during the brunch we have a flea market and I am sure you wife and daughter will love it,” said Tanuja. And how right she was as my daughter picked up some beautiful hand painted glass lamps as well as finger rings. There was also a hand painting artist and my wife got a nice peacock figure painted on her arm. Two employees - one got Tom and the other Jerry painted and when placed side by side it exactly matched on their arms. It was truly a great Sunday.

Culinary experiences are a delight and we caught up with Chef Sanjiv Kumar, Executive Chef and Chef Zameer Ahmed, Indian Master Chef. The hotel offers three dining options: Carmine, the all-day dining restaurant that serves global cuisine (where we also had our brunch); The



Bridge, which serve connecting cuisines (Indian, Italian, & Mexican), along with SKYE, which offers a diverse range of alcoholic beverages; and The Great Kabab Factory, which serves

North Indian Frontier Cuisine. One should not miss the exquisite Indian flavors of kabab at this restaurant that’s open only for dinner. Then there is also Citrine - The Cake & Bake Shop which truly provides yummy pastries. The variety of desserts on the buffet is amazing and eye catchy.

The hotel is also a popular MICE venue for corporate events, conferences, and social gatherings. “We offer flexible and well-equipped meeting spaces, including banquet halls with partitions. The hotel has 15,000 square feet of exquisite meeting space, making it possible to host an intimate rooftop party, an elegant wedding reception, or a plush soiree for up to 600 attendees,” said Pankaj.

The hotel offers extensive recreational amenities, including an art-of-fitness studio, meditation room, a rejuvenating spa, salon and an open-to-the-sky swimming pool with spacious alfresco deck.

Speaking on future plans Pankaj said, “We are all set to unveil a captivating rooftop lounge where the sky becomes its canvas and is complemented by an infinity pool that merges with the limitless horizon.”

But the highlight of the visit was the HOG community coming on 15th of August. HOG stands as a globally acclaimed association that unites Harley-Davidson motorcycle aficionados hailing from diverse nations and regions. Within this vibrant HOG community in India, their focus lies in advancing the Harley-Davidson brand and cultivating a strong camaraderie among passionate motorbike enthusiasts.

On the 15th of August, an exhilarating ride commenced at 7:00 am from Amanora, featuring an impressive gathering of 76 bikers. This enthusiastic group reached at the hotel at 7:30 am, where an invigorating series of captures amid the rumbling engines and roar of bikes created an electrifying atmosphere. At 8:00 am, the bikers seamlessly joined our event, adding to the grandeur of the Flag hoisting ceremony, which was followed by a delightful “tiranga” breakfast.

## Sustainable initiatives

The hotel has implemented several sustainable initiatives to contribute to environmental preservation. It has adopted energy-efficient practices, such as using LED lighting, wind power purchases, which help reduce carbon footprint, EV charging points, a biogas plant, a garden hub (farm to table), rainwater harvesting, a sewage treatment plant, E-waste and waste oil control, water aerators, and implementing smart controls for energy conservation. Waste management strategies are employed, including recycling programs and reducing single-use plastics. Water-saving measures are in place, such as low-flow fixtures and monitoring systems. The hotel also promotes responsible sourcing by partnering with local suppliers and emphasizing locally-grown produce. “We are delighted to be associated with the ‘Soap for Hope’ program with Diversey. The program creates shared value between our business and the communities in which we operate. Providing local access to better hygiene aligns closely with the brand’s Blu Planet program to encourage water mindfulness,” said Pankaj.

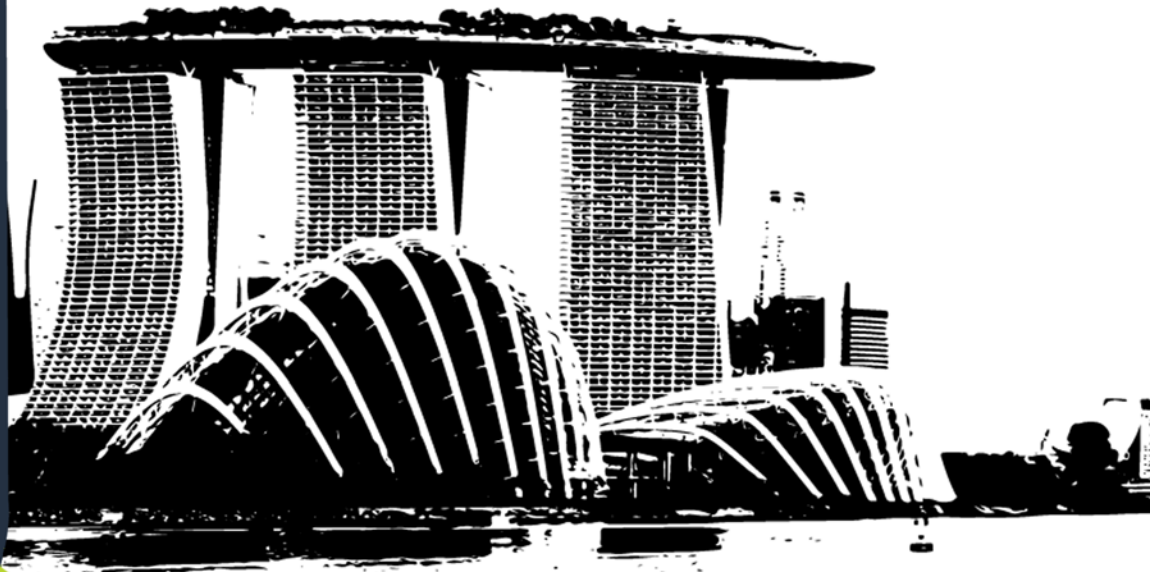


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## SAii Lagoon: A family friendly destination



Scuba Diving, Snorkelling, Dolphin Watching, Parasailing, Jet Skiing, Surfing, Sunset Cruise, Swimming or just chilling at the beach watching your kids, young adults involved in numerous activities. Welcome to SAii Lagoon Maldives, Curio Collection by Hilton an excellent resort for families as it has plenty of activities for kids.

Arriving from COMO Cocoa Island, who were kind enough to drop us directly at the jetty of The Marina@CROSSROADS. We were driven in a buggy to our rooms. Both resorts (SAii and Hard Rock) connect directly to The Marina@CROSSROADS which is an attraction in itself. While crossing one can see plenty of restaurants, cafes, bars, boutique and souvenir shops and even a MICE venue - one of the largest rentable spaces in the Maldives. The Event Hall is a multi-purpose venue with high ceilings and 3 function rooms ideal for meetings or workshops, dinners or celebrations

SAii Lagoon offers 198 spacious guestrooms with numerous room categories - Overwater Villa, 2-Bedroom Overwater Villa with Pool, Beach Villa with Pool, 2-Bedroom Family Beach Villa with Pool, Beach Villa, Beach Room with Pool, Beach Room and Sky Room. With connecting Family Beach Rooms SAii provides the perfect accommodation if you are travelling with kids and also seeking privacy.

While booking apart from the type of room guests can opt for half board with breakfast and dinner, full board with the addition of lunch while all-inclusive includes also selected beverages.

On arrival do load the app as you can access the schedule and book in advance activities that you'd like to participate. Also the app helps you get the buggies to your room or your location on the lagoon for pick and drop. There are plenty of bikes too (on hire) to explore the island

M.I.Y or Mix It Yourself is a wonderful idea. Provided for all guests Aroma Lab allows guests to create their very own scent to apply during the trip and take away. It can be a mixture of cedar wood, lavender, orange, pine, rosemary, peppermint, geranium, and eucalyptus.

One of the major advantages that SAii has over most resorts is that guests have 14 dining options to choose from located in SAii, Hard Rock, and The Marina. Miss Olive Oyl is their all-day dining restaurant that provides fresh seafood and grilled dishes and tropical cocktails. For breakfast they even have idlis and if ordered in advance parathas can also be served. The other options include a Maldivian, an Indian, a Chinese, Thai



restaurants, a steak restaurant and the hard rock cafe. Indian cuisine and vegetarian options are available at Kebab & Kurry restaurant. We relished our lunch and dinner at this venue.

SAii Beach Club provides the ultimate leisure experience with an infinity pool and direct access to the beach with the ocean to dip just a few feet away. For ice cream lovers there is a gelato corner as well as restaurants and bars

The most popular activity in the Maldives is to discover the underwater world and SAii is no different providing guests the opportunity to snorkel around the beautiful reefs and lagoon, dolphins discovery, sunset parasailing, catamaran sailing, sunset cruise, discover scuba, diving banana ride, jet ski, pedal boat, kayak, semi submarine, movie night, explore the private islands, sandbanks etc. Apart from this SAii offers its guests quite a few complimentary activities like yoga, zumba classes, beach volleyball, interactive cooking etc.

Lèn Be Well presents guests to be pampered while rejuvenating their senses. The spa is an innovative wellness concept that embraces extraordinary new levels of relaxation, spa treatments, holistic activities, and culinary delights.

On return the speed boat took just 15 minutes to the Malé international airport.

### Juniors enjoy the most

SAii is perfect for families with children. The Koimala & Maalimi's Junior Beach Club and Camp that provides an exciting, energetic hub of activity for all family members. An imaginative centre designed to be an innovative edutainment concept that encourages children aged 4-15 to embrace their spirit of creativity in an engaging and dynamic environment. Kids below 13 years old also enjoy free meal from the kids menu and a 50% discount on a regular menu. The facility is spread over three outdoor and three indoor areas, including a family room where adults and guardians are welcome to join the fun. An activity room and a playroom are kids-only zones, fostering a sense of children having their own space to create and grow. Outside, a beautiful, private beach provides a wonderful location for a variety of games and activities. An on-site education centre engages children in topics surrounding sustainability and conservational awareness.





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## “Ascott is on a growth plan in India”

With over 30 years of experience in the hospitality industry, **Hoshang Garivala, Country General Manager – India, The Ascott Limited** who started his career with Oberoi Hotels & Resorts has over the years been involved in overseeing multi-unit Operations, Asset Management, Sales and Marketing, Food and Beverage, Human Resources etc. Now it's been a year since The Ascott Limited has acquired Oakwood Worldwide increasing Ascott's global presence to more than 150,000 units in about 900 properties across 200+ cities in 40 countries. We thought it the right time to have a tête-à-tête with this dynamic and forward thinking Hoshang Garivala. **Excerpts**

**What was the major benefit to Oakwood from the acquisition?**

A lot of benefits. Ascott's has a substantial reach globally. It spans across the globe with presence in Asia Pacific, Central Asia, Europe, the Middle East, Africa and the USA. Also Ascott's portfolio of serviced apartment, coliving and hotel brands, apart from Oakwood include Ascott, Citadines, lyf, Quest, Somerset, The Crest Collection, The Unlimited Collection, Préférence, Fox, Harris, POP!, Vertu and Yello. Add to this Ascott's loyalty programme, Ascott Star Rewards that offers exclusive benefits to its members. Overall, I think the acquisition has given us a better footprint.

**How do you view India as a market?**

In India, with the Oakwood acquisition, Ascott has now 6 properties in its current portfolio across the cities of Bangalore, Hyderabad, Pune and Chennai. And with more in the pipeline, Ascott is on a growth plan in India.

Over the last decade Ascott has been growing organically and with the acquisition of Oakwood, India operations has 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 put in efforts to explain the concept of their business including the benefits provided to the property owners like 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.

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 Go.



In addition, Oakwood will add 6 new properties across Bangalore, Hyderabad, and Vizag.



**Coming to Hyderabad specifically, how is the scene at your hotel Oakwood Residence Kapil Hyderabad?**

On an average we have been managing 85% to 87% Oakwood Residence Kapil Hyderabad. This is mainly thanks to our long staying guests. We have great connects with relocation agents. Also we are flexible with our rates depending on the stay period and corporate contracts that we have. Our long staying guests were our saviors during COVID period as unlike most hotels we remained profitable. We are also in the process of upgrading our F&B and banqueting sections.

Hyderabad is all set to be home to one of India's biggest World Trade Centre and Oakwood will be part of this infrastructure. Being close to the airport WTC Shamshad will have a sprawling campus and this will certainly benefit us.

Close to our existing property in Hyderabad we are also planning a multi-purpose complex with co-living and apartments as focus. It will be a huge tech savvy property with 1000+ rooms with several F&B outlets, huge lobby, relaxing zones etc.

**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 India in a big way, 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 travelers, Ascott came up with co-living brand 'Lyf'

- offering a dynamic environment for guests to forge connections through a strong sense of community.

### Many groups are focusing on ESG & sustainability. What's the scene in India?

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.

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

After leaving college, joining the hospitality industry was just a job. Upon seeing how dynamic it is, with every situation having a different solution, it did not remain just a job for me. The high performance and challenging nature of the industry is what has kept me motivated and going.

### How do you manage your personal life with many obligations at your job? How do you cope with stress?

Time quality management is very important to lead a healthy life. I make sure to spend quality time with my family. I do not compromise on a yearly 20 day vacation where I like to “Switch Off” and relax. It is very crucial that it isn’t just me but every member of my team maintains a healthy work life balance every day.

## lyf coliving brand from The Ascott Limited



The Ascott Ltd has been a successful leader in the serviced residence business. While they have several brands it's the lyf brand that has been attracting a lot of attention.

Managed by millennials for millennials and millennial-minded, lyf (pronounced "life") is a hospitality concept that provides co-living spaces for digital nomads, technopreneurs, creatives and self-starters to “live your freedom” in a dynamic environment. The apartments, social spaces, and experiential programmes at lyf properties are designed for guests to forge connections and to nurture a strong sense of community.

Whether in the form of private nooks or social spaces, lyf provides creative spaces and flexible arrangements for residents to live, work and play wherever they may be.

lyf community helps guests stay connected online and offline with other next-generation travelers. lyf keeps the community engaged through #virtuallylyf, social media and various engagement activities across all properties.

lyf crew reinvented hospitality roles so the entire stay will be enlivened by the most dynamic individuals. From our multi-tasking lyf Guards to the effervescent Ambassadors of Buzz, the lyf crew is always ready to provide advice, recommendations and even just to hang out!

Staying at lyf properties brings out authentic stay experiences to the next level by incorporating culture, design, attractions and partnerships from the local neighborhood right into lyf.

Ascott currently has 17 lyf coliving properties with over 3,200 units in 14 cities and nine countries. lyf Funan Singapore is the largest coliving property in Southeast Asia. Spanning about 121,000 sq ft, the nine-storey lyf Funan Singapore houses 412 rooms across 279 apartments. The Ascott Limited has set a target to sign 150 properties with over 30,000 units under its lyf coliving brand by 2030.







## “We have a strong vision to shift our operations towards sustainability”

Sayaji Hotels is on an expansion path across India. Currently the group has 3 hotel brands – Sayaji, Effotel by Sayaji and Enrise by Sayaji under its umbrella. But its Flagship hotel is Sayaji Hotel, Pune, a nine storied hotel that has created a reputation of outstanding service accompanied by delicious food. The excellent ambience and spacious rooms with warm hospitality make it a desirable property for both leisure and MICE. Taking it a notch up is **Ajay Kanojia, the vibrant GM at Sayaji Hotel, Pune**, especially with plans to open few more hotels in and around Pune. Excerpts

### Firstly congrats on the groups expansion in your region. How beneficial would this be to the group and your guests?

We have noticed tremendous growth potential in tier two cities. There is plenty of untapped business opportunities and requirements of hospitality services in these regions. Pune region is no exception. Our aim is to get a foothold in the region.

Since our Pune property is already well known for its par excellence hospitality and magnificent fine-dining experiences I think we are on the right track.

As hotel markets are witnessing traction in Tier – 2, we are also in an expansion spree. We are in the process of coming up with all our three brands (Sayaji, Effotel by Sayaji and Enrise by Sayaji) in different cities in Maharashtra.

### What are the USP of the new property?

One of the major USP is that most of our forthcoming properties have presence in leisure destinations. We are known for our banquets and food, so guests have better options on such locations for comfortable stay. We are also setting our sub brands at industrial hubs and corporate belts where corporates are on the lookout for comfortable accommodation services away from city. We will be having MICE facilities too so corporate can have their meetings and events in our premises.

### Being the GM of Sayajis flagship property in Pune, how is the property doing?

We are doing extremely well. On the F&B side we have a fabulous and a huge spread in our buffet – and one of the few hotels to have a lunch buffet too. Our prices are also very competitive. As our team serves live snacks on the table it has been much appreciated by guests and corporate who come for lunch.

We have also improved our room service controls, so none of our orders are missed or delayed (I experienced this service for not just room service but also housekeeping). We have also renovated

all the rooms and the next step is our restaurants.

At the moment we are all geared up for upcoming season and focusing on social gatherings, banquets along with the MICE.

### That’s great. So MICE and wedding will be a major focus?

True. With such a huge inventory we are the best option in PCMC area. But we have become selective so we don’t have to compromise on our ADR as well as on maintaining our superior services and F&B. We have also add a new hall Pearl while Ruby can cater to 1000+ people and is quite popular for evening events. Parking is not an issue as we have 50,000 sq.ft. area including valet parking.

On weddings - Subh Vivah by Sayaji is a one-stop solution for dream destination weddings. Our wedding venues include beautifully decorated Outdoor and Indoor wedding halls, signature Food and memorable services.

### How do you compare yourself with competition in your segment in PCMC area?

Most of our hotels are located in the best area giving us a competitive edge. Having a strong presence from 15 years in market our patrons prefer us. If we talk about PCMC (Pimpri-Chinchwad Municipal Corporation) area the average inventory of branded hotels is 150 while we have the highest inventory 240 rooms among our competitors.

### Sustainability is the buzz word. Your views?

I have always believed that sustainable practices make hospitality organizations stand out. The goal of sustainability is to minimize your hotel's impact on the region by reducing their environmental impact through green best-practices. Post COVID many travellers dont mind spending more to support an eco-friendly hotel, as long as the hotel also delivers a top-notch guest experience.

We have a strong vision to shift our operations towards sustainability. Many things we have scaled up our operations with decomposition methods of wastage, bottle crushers installed for recycling the plastic waste, and saving on electricity. The EV charging stations for guests has become quite popular.



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## **COMO Cocoa Island: Your Tranquil Oasis**

Nestled in the South Malé Atoll, COMO Cocoa Island is a hidden gem known for its serene atmosphere and unique overwater villas. Arrive in style with a 40-minute speedboat transfer from the Malé international airport.

Indulge in the allure of 33 overwater villas, including the iconic Dhoni Villas, reminiscent of traditional Maldivian fishing boats. With their high ceilings, airy interiors, and expansive windows, these villas provide a seamless connection to the surrounding turquoise lagoon.

The COMO Shambhala Retreat, spanning a third of the island, is a holistic haven offering yoga, Pilates, meditation, and spa treatments to rejuvenate your body and soul.

From diving and snorkelling to sunset and night fishing, adventure awaits at COMO Cocoa Island. With more than 20 dive sites within a short boat ride, explore the mesmerizing marine life in crystal-clear waters.

## **COMO Maalifushi: Tropical Elegance**

Embrace the unspoiled beauty of Thaa Atoll at COMO Maalifushi, a luxury escape accessible by a scenic 60-minute seaplane journey from Malé.

Be captivated by the allure of 33 overwater and 32 beach accommodations, providing unrivaled views of the Indian Ocean. Relish culinary delights at Tai, the Japanese seafood restaurant, or savour tropical flavours at Madi, where Maldivian, Mediterranean, Indonesian, and Thai influences converge. Unearth adventure with diving, swimming alongside gentle whale sharks, or riding the waves at renowned surf breaks. For an intimate escape, venture to the private island of Lavadhoo for a romantic picnic under the stars.

Rediscover serenity at COMO Shambhala, where signature treatments and open-air yoga pavilions await. Families are welcomed with the Play by COMO Space, offering purposeful activities for children aged four to 12. retreats promise an unforgettable escape.

Embrace paradise today. Experience the unmatched allure of COMO Cocoa Island and COMO Maalifushi in the Maldives.

*Among the Maldivian island resorts, COMO Maalifushi (above) and COMO Cocoa Island stand apart with their understated style, captivating the spirit of the Indian Ocean and barefoot chic ambiance.*





## The question isn't if AI will take over our jobs – it's when

Artificial Intelligence – these two words have taken over every existing field. Business, healthcare, finance, retail, education, entertainment, environmental conversation – you name it, AI has in some way affected it. And in many cases, transformed jobs to the point where a human touch is no longer needed. But what does this mean for the people who wake up, work hard and aim for success in their chosen field and career? People who are putting immense effort into their professions because they need to – because that's how they will survive feels **Pooja Amritkar**

Recently came across a post on social media about a girl who lost her copywriting job because OpenAI's ChatGPT is capable of performing the same activity at a faster and superior pace. Her task no longer needs to be executed and managed by a human because a sophisticated application has become her formidable foe.

This isn't the first story of its kind and it most certainly won't be the last.

ChatGPT has managed to raise accolades as well as conspiracies since its launch on November 30, 2022. Many have condemned this impregnable rise in technology but many have chosen to accept it and incorporated it in their jobs and daily lives.

One of the notably impacted fields has been that of customer service. AI has started to dominate call centres all around the globe with the idea of improving efficiency and handling routine queries. Where once a human answered every inquiry and concern during customer support, we now face a chatbot that tries to gauge the severity of our situation and then decides if it's worth human intervention.

Some of the other influenced areas are advertising, journalism, education teachers and roles that entail creativity. AI is much faster and more competent at analyzing and interpreting data than any human and this puts it in the front seat to victory. People are already starting to experiment with new AI tools, media companies are using ChatGPT to their advantage and creating dozens of articles, exploring new creative ideas and evaluating different forms of themes. But that human touch – that human emotion – will still be missing.

Not everything can be automated – yet. The fiery streak of human judgement and passion makes a lot of difference.

Sam Altman, the CEO of OpenAI and founder of ChatGPT, said in an interview with Economic Times, 'Some jobs are going to go away. But there will be new, better jobs that are difficult to imagine.' And this should give people hope but as the population increases so rapidly, shouldn't the increase of job opportunities be proportionally accelerating?

Another distinguishable area where AI has made its mark is in automating mundane, routine and repetitive tasks to perform them more efficiently and consistently than humans. Given that, AI is excellent at evaluating data and predicting outcomes, market research analysts - professionals who gather, analyze, and interpret data about a specific market and provide insights to guide

businesses - may also be susceptible to AI's growth.



People are already starting to experiment with new AI tools, media companies are using ChatGPT to their advantage and creating dozens of articles, exploring new creative ideas and evaluating different forms of themes. But that human touch – that human emotion – will still be missing.



Pooja Amritkar

Finance jobs also have a high chance of getting afflicted by AI, as well as assistants who are responsible for overseeing and operating large amounts of information.

But AI's effects aren't just limited to jobs, this upsurge comes with substantial dangers and repercussions.

Geoffrey Hinton, famously known as the godfather of artificial intelligence, quit his job at Google and has been vocal regarding his fear of AI technology getting out


of hand. He passionately warns us about the dangers that come alongside collaborating with AI – one of his major concerns is that AI might become more intelligent than us and thus, much more destructive. AI's use in the field of surveillance, data collection and analysis has raised concerns about privacy rights and security.

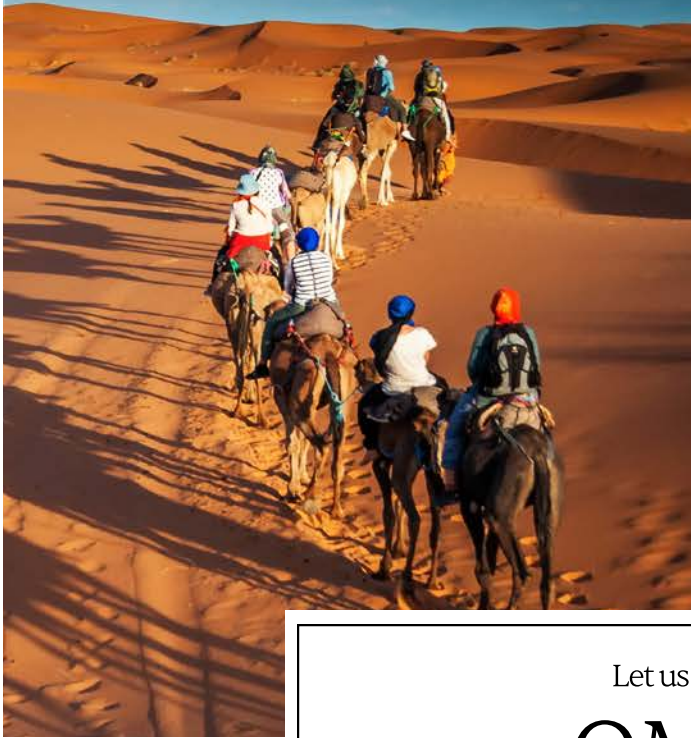
But regardless of what people believe, AI is here to thrive and prevail. While many employees face growing anxiety and apprehension, the best way to overcome this dilemma is to adapt and evolve with new technologies and upskill learning.

AI has started to reshape the job market, and we need to work in conjunction with new technologies and excel in an environment that we can no longer control. We need to accept this change and brace ourselves, developing our abilities to be in sync with the change.

But there are some things that AI cannot do like a human – AI doesn't have our fiery passion, acute emotional intelligence, wild imagination, the ability to empathize, deep moral reasoning or that intuitive gut feeling. And that's where we win.

The author is an MTech from BITS, Pilani with work experience at Wipro. She is now a well-known tech and travel writer as well as an Instagram travel influencer.

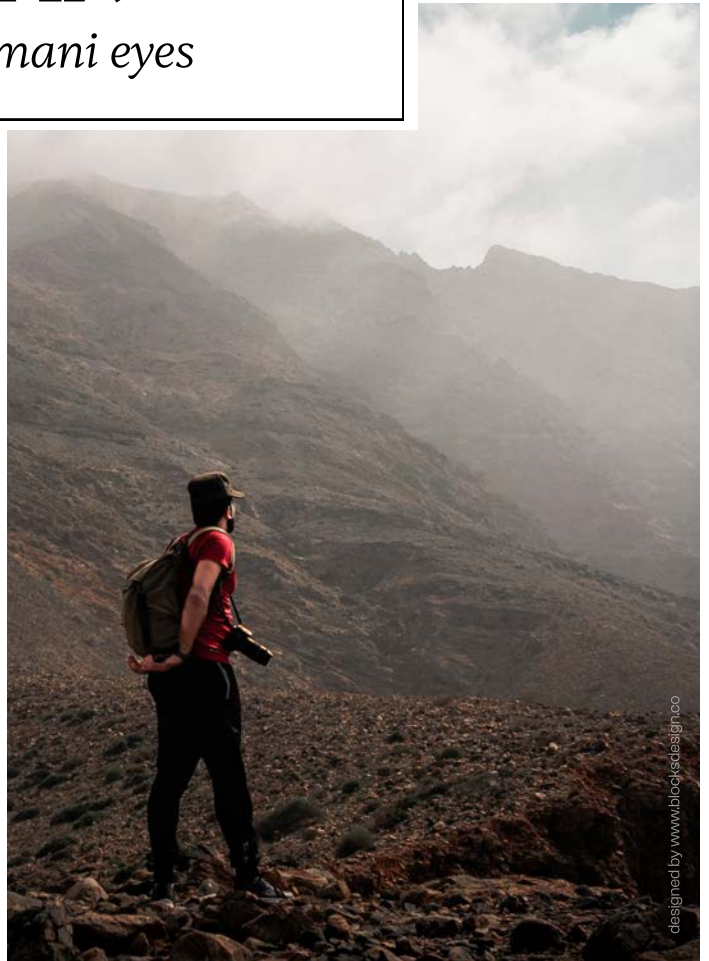
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