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HVS Monday Musings: Rethinking Heritage Tourism in the Post-COVID India

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India is ranked 6th on the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites globally, with 38 World Heritage Sites, much ahead of global peers such as Australia, the UK, the US, and Japan. Heritage tourism in the country has been growing rapidly over the past few years as India blessed with centuries of intriguing history, numerous forts, palaces, and monuments attracted a growing number of domestic as well as international tourists. However, the COVID-19 pandemic put a halt to this growth story due to the temporary closure of heritage sites across the country. Even though most of these sites and monuments were reopened to public in September 2020, they have not yet seen much traction as tourists have been wary of crowded places and are visiting remote destinations instead.

Central and state governments are trying to revive heritage tourism

During the last year, the Ministry of Tourism has organized several webinars and other promotional activities under the 'Dekho Apna Desh' initiative to create awareness about India's rich heritage and culture. Various state governments have also announced plans to revive heritage tourism in their respective states. For instance, the Gujarat government introduced its first Heritage Tourism Policy 2020-25, under which financial assistance will be provided for converting heritage buildings built before 1950 into hotels, banquet halls and restaurants. Meanwhile, the Kerala government is beginning work on its four-phase INR 1 billion Travancore Heritage Tourism Project (THTP) to develop a heritage circuit in the state.

The way forward

Going forward, effective marketing campaigns communicating the COVID safety measures being implemented for different activities such as heritage/cultural walks, cycle tours, culinary events etc. at the various heritage destinations are of primary importance to rebuild tourist confidence and trust. Emphasis on conservation, preservation and restoration of the heritage sites should be increased. The government's 'Adopt a Heritage' scheme that promotes public-private partnership by encouraging companies and individuals to develop and maintain heritage sites in a sustainable manner as part of their CSR activity is a step in the right direction, but it needs to be promoted and executed aggressively.

Summary

India is known for its rich heritage and cultural diversity. Heritage tourism has the potential to lead the revival of travel & tourism sector in the country and collaborative efforts by the public and private sectors will be crucial going forward.

Comments

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Focused efforts are also needed to increase the number of UNESCO World Heritage Sites in the country. Only 42 additional sites have been nominated to be included in the World Heritage list while there are close to 3,700 centrally protected monuments/sites under the ASI in the country.

Though connectivity to heritage sites has improved in the last few years, lack of infrastructure and amenities is still a challenge which has negatively impacted tourist arrivals to these destinations. The massive investments for improving the road and rail network in the country announced in the recent Union Budget will further improve the last-mile connectivity to these places going forward. The improving connectivity will in turn encourage private investments especially in infrastructure development (including basic amenities like restrooms as well as peripheral infrastructure such as hotels and restaurants) at these sites.

Focus on digitization and sustainability has increased in the COVID era. As a result, investments on technology to ensure contact-less transactions, creating advanced reservation apps and setting up daily visitor limits etc. to proactively reduce overcrowding at the monuments and sites once people start traveling again will be crucial for the revival of this segment in the post-COVID world.

About Mandeep S Lamba

Mandeep S. Lamba, President – South Asia, oversees the HVS global hospitality practice for South Asia. He has spent over 30 years in the hospitality industry of which the last 19 have been in CEO positions. Having worked with leading International and domestic Hotel Companies such as IHG, Radisson & ITC Hotels, he also set up joint venture companies with Dawnay Day Group UK and Onyx Hospitality, Thailand to own and operate hotels in India giving him a broader exposure to the hospitality business.

An established industry leader, Mandeep has won several awards and recognitions in India and abroad for his accomplishments and contribution to the hospitality industry. He is a Certified Hospitality Administrator from the American Hotels Association (CHA), a member of the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors, UK (MRICS) and a member of the Tourism Council of CII (Northern India). His views are often solicited for television and print media as a spokesperson for the hospitality & tourism sector.

Prior to joining HVS in 2018, Mandeep was the Managing Director, Hotels & Hospitality Group for JLL.

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