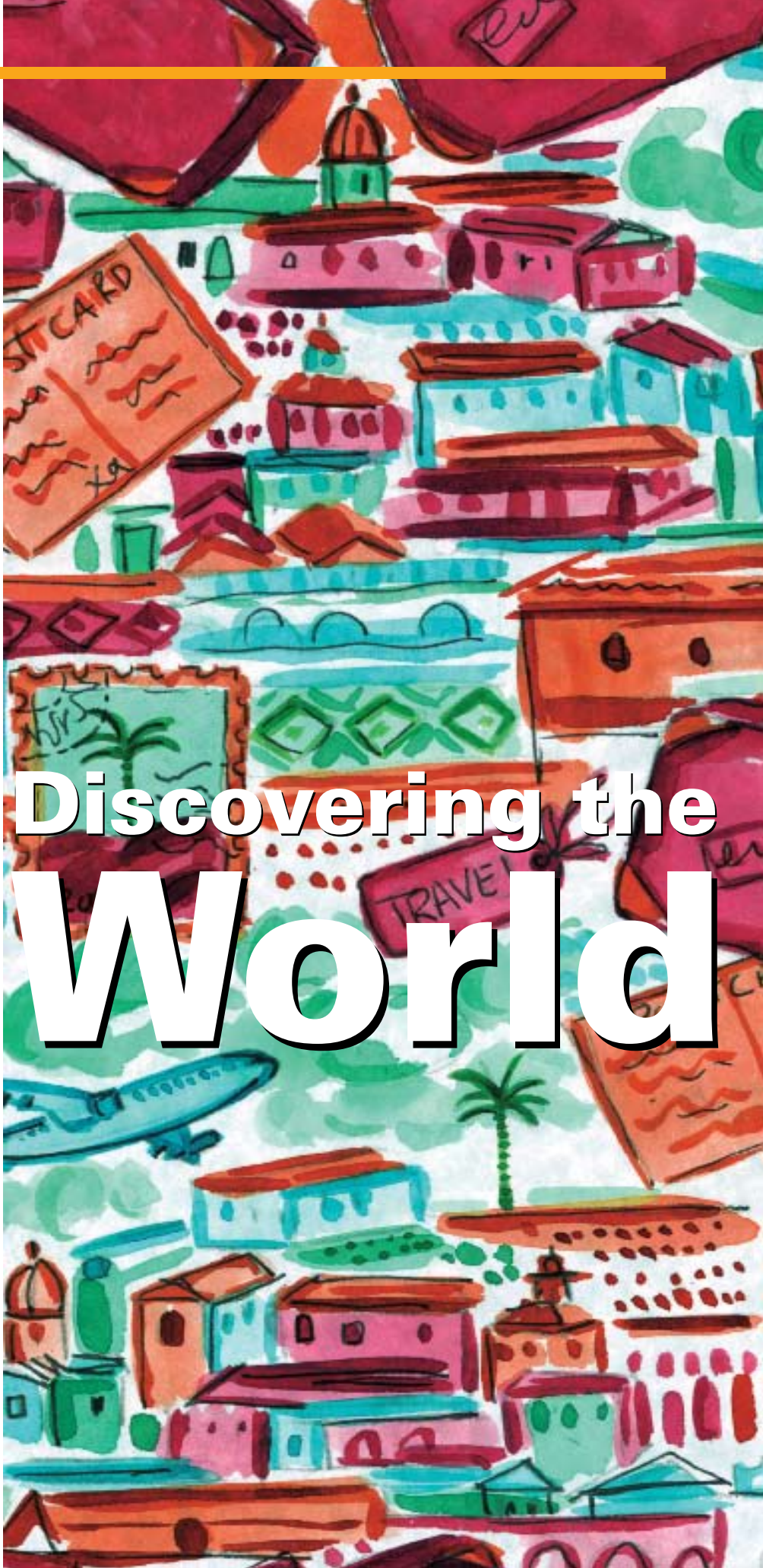


Five million Indians travelled abroad last year and the number is expected to triple by 2011, as a growing number of young, well-heeled professionals and techies venture out to discover the world, says **Rajiv Pai**.

THE red carpet is being rolled out across the world for the Indian business and leisure traveller. Seen as high-spending globetrotters, with increased disposable incomes and a growing penchant to explore newer destinations, nearly five million Indians travelled abroad last year. This tally is expected to almost triple by 2011, as a growing number of families and young professionals venture out to discover the world.

Last year, the average Indian tourist in Britain overtook his American counterpart spending \$1,582 in comparison with the latter's \$1,416. VisitBritain estimates the number of Indian visitors to have swelled 170 per cent between 1993 and 2007 and envisages them to be one of its biggest markets in a decade's time, if the growth rate sustains.

Indians have now emerged as among the highest spending on overseas sojourns, having spent more than \$6 billion while on foreign trips last year. In its study, 'Engaging the high-yield Indian outbound tourism market,' InterVistas Consulting Inc mentions, "Overseas travellers from India spend an estimated average of \$5,000 per person trip." It finds this unsurprising, as 1.6 million households in India have annual incomes exceeding \$100,000. While the moneyed Japanese and Arab travellers are known to spend lavishly on luxurious



Discovering the World



accommodation, Indians have established their credentials as compulsive shoppers, spending as much as a fifth of their travel budget on purchases.

Pradip Madhavji, former chairman, Thomas Cook (India) Ltd, who now chairs the SAARC Chamber Tourism Committee and the Indian Ocean Tourism Organisation, maintains that this trend too is changing. "The craze for shopping is subsiding as nearly everything is now available in India," he says. "Besides, preponderant group travel that characterised Indian tourists is increasingly yielding to foreign individual travellers (FITs), comprising couples or small families."

He explains that in the past, Indian tourists sought security in group travel – "You enter a coach or board a cruise and everything gets taken care of" – but now they are getting even more adventurous.

Quoting an internal survey by his firm, Lalit Sheth, chairman and managing director, Raj Travel World, says, "Indian tourists are now becoming classier, expecting better quality of service and willing to pay a much higher price."

In fact, he sees them now much ahead of many international tourists as regards their travel spend. "More and more Indian tourists are now saying goodbye to shopping and are spending big bucks on prestigious hotels, fine dining and exclusive sightseeing," says Sheth.

The growth potential has prompted tourist regions of some countries to set up representative offices in India. For instance, travel destinations such as Switzerland's Jungfrau, Pilatus, Schilthorn, and Finland's Lapland and Australia's Gold Coast (in Queensland) have agents in India. At present, there are an estimated 30 foreign tourist boards operating in India and this number is growing.

Many among these travel destinations now have vegetarian restaurants – including Santa Claus's "official" base of Rovaniemi in Lapland – or even restaurants where 'maharajs' (Indian chefs) are flown in from India for the season to cater to the Indian palate. Signboards and menu cards with Hindi translation too are not uncommon, while shopkeepers are adept at calculating the exchange rate in rupees. At times, the increasingly attractive travel

SPORTS TOURISM

WITH about 25 million Indian-origin people – including Non Resident Indians and Persons of Indian Origin – living in over a hundred countries, it is not surprising that outbound tourism from India is on the rise.

Most NRIs have close ties with their relatives back home in India. Resident Indians are travelling these days to the US, Europe and Australia, meeting relatives and spending time with them.

Indian engineers, doctors and other professionals living in the US also invite their parents and other close relatives to visit them, resulting in a phenomenal increase in overseas trips from India.

According to the World Travel and Tourism Council, by 2020, about 25 million Indians will be travelling abroad every year. Business, leisure and social travellers would dominate the outbound tourism segment.

Similarly, thousands of Indian students will be headed for foreign shores to take up under-graduate and post-graduate courses in some of the best universities.

With growing affluence in India, tour operators are also conducting packages for special groups. Thousands of cricket-crazy Indians are already travelling to World Cup events in different parts of the world.

With more such tournaments being organised – including world cup versions of the 20:20 series, and Indian Premier League – the number of Indian fans touring with their favourite players will continue to grow.

Motor sports is another segment that is attracting Indian travellers. SOTC, a leading outbound tour operator, has just launched the first Formula One sports holiday package from India, together with the Singapore Tourism Board.

SOTC Sport Abroad will coincide with the Singapore Grand Prix being held in September and October.



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FASCINATING MONUMENTS: Indian tourists are curious to discover other cultures around the world

packages offered by Singapore, Malaysia, Mauritius and Dubai render travelling there cheaper as compared to tourist destinations within India.

Thanks to the Internet, Indians travelling abroad can now plan their entire stay and tour overseas through the world wide web.

Madhavji mentions that more Indian visitors abroad are opting for renting out cars and embarking on self-driven tours.

According to him, countries like New Zealand – of which he is the honorary consul in Mumbai – accept Indian driving licences and have right-hand drive traffic like in India.

Siew-Kheng Kang, the Mumbai-based regional director for South Asia, Middle East and Africa for the Singapore Tourism Board (STB), says the island-state is focussing on India as a strategic source for tourism.

Indian tourists accounted for 103,000 of the record 828,000 visitor arrivals registered in May. This surge in overall visitor numbers propelled Indians to the second spot on the list of arrivals in Singapore.

Last year, nearly 750,000 Indian tourists

More and more Indians are spending big bucks on prestigious hotels, fine dining and exclusive sightseeing.

visited Singapore, which is targeting an overall 10.8 million visitors this year.

Ronny Mehta of Mumbai's Travel Heights, a travel and tour agency, says South East Asia will always remain a favourite destination for Indian tourists due to its close proximity.

Sheth of Raj Travel World, adds that

the United States has also sprung up in a magical way, recording close to 400 per cent growth in tourist arrivals from India.

“Traditionally, summer holidays were the peak season for tourism, followed by Diwali and Christmas vacations,” he notes. “But now there is only the high and low season, with absolutely no off-season.”

Cheaper airfares for international destinations is another factor that is triggering off the rush of Indians travelling abroad. Off-season packages are even more competitive, luring thousands of middle-class Indians to destinations in Europe and South-East Asia.

Sheth, however, observes that first-time overseas travellers from India, who make up a fair proportion of the outbound traffic, could be discouraged by the sudden increase in airfares and the strengthening of the Euro and the US dollar.

According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), hospitality is the world’s largest industry in terms of its contribution to global GDP and employment. It forecasts the employment potential of this sector to mount from 238 million to 296 million over the next decade.

Tourism accounts for 6.1 per cent of India’s GDP and provides direct and indirect employment to 52 million people. Inbound tourism is growing at over 12 per cent per annum, and is expected to continue expanding at a fast pace.

Besides, the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) calculates international tourist arrivals to have grown by 6.6 per cent last year, to 903 million, up by almost 100 million in two years. It adds that international tourism receipts grew to \$856 billion last year, a 5.6 per cent increase over 2006.

Apart from the increasing prosperity of Indians, Bangkok-based Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA) notes that some enabling features too have spurred outbound travel.

In its report, ‘Total tourism: India’, PATA cites these as, “An expansion of the open-skies policy, especially with Asian carriers, the privatisation of key airports such as Delhi and Mumbai, and as many as 15 airports now servicing overseas destinations.”

It concludes, “Whichever way we look at these changes, we can only see opportunity.”



OPEN SKIES Cheaper airfares are encouraging Indians to travel to distant parts of the world