

Resilient MICE market in post-pandemic era

The hospitality industry is on the recovery path after witnessing two years of sluggish demand driven by pandemic restraints. The recovery is at 70-80 per cent of pre-pandemic times brought about by leisure travel and MICE events. Safety, security and hygiene are the three mantras ruling the post-pandemic world and hospitality groups are leaving no stone unturned to cater to the demands of MICE travellers. TTJ interacts with some of the properties in the Eastern region of India to get the ground reality of the MICE movement.

Swaati Chaudhury

With global travel coming back and repositioning the Indian tourism industry, the MICE sector is on the ascending path. If one takes a peek at some of the major hospitality groups in the Eastern region of India, one can come up with a concrete idea about the current status of MICE and the kind of expectations the properties have from the MICE realm.

According to **Kumar Shobhan, General Manager, Hyatt Regency Kolkata**, "There has been a rise in MICE enquiries along with leisure travel over the past few months,



▲ Kumar Shobhan

particularly from banking, finance and pharmaceutical sectors. With the easing of COVID restrictions, the corporate world is gearing up to host conventions and MICE business is picking up pace. We have made an effort to organise a Sales Mission Meet with teams from a host of Hyatt properties across the country to focus on team building, strategic planning, meeting and fostering with our existing customers after a period of two years. Pharmaceuticals, insurance, automobile, banking and finance, sports and entertainment form the strong points of our MICE business. Currently, we are

concentrating on the domestic MICE market and hope to target the global MICE world in the year-end. The MICE business will definitely take a leap and the demand will surge ahead by the end of the current year and next year."

The hotel is poised to handle large MICE groups for hosting conclaves with standard operating procedures keeping with sanitisation protocols and contactless experience including mobile keys, masking up, regular sanitisation and temperature check for both hotel staff and guests at the entrance and practising other hygiene norms. Shobhan informed, "Our major aim is to provide a safe environment for event planners and make health and safety measures our topmost priority. With the relaxation of pandemic restrictions, the confidence of travellers is gaining ground and the corporate world is ready to take its plunge into MICE travel. There is a positive and high demand for domestic retreats and global travel is yet to pick up like pre-COVID times. All we need is the right kind of marketing and promotion to lure MICE opportunities and utilise the upward growth trend."

Take the case of Siliguri-based Mayfair Tea Resort which is incidentally the premier, luxury and one-of-a-kind tea resort in the country. The property is a half-an-hour drive from Bagdogra airport and is well-equipped



▲ Prasant Das

with multiple banquet venues, breakout rooms and the main ballroom that has a theatre-style seating capacity of 1,000 guests. **Prasant Das, General Manager, Mayfair Tea Resort**, said, "Our resort is one of the biggest five-star, deluxe properties in the North-eastern region and has a plethora of facilities for MICE travellers like high-speed internet, seamless power supply, outdoor and indoor venues, fascinating points for meditation and taking a break. We have MICE experts to evaluate the needs of MICE travellers and organise any kind of audio-visual requirements, including 3D screens. We provide utmost significance to safety and our safety staff hosts orientation sessions once MICE kicks off. Our resort has appointed a spiritual and yoga guru to make MICE programmes more interesting. There is a recreation team to take up team-building exercise."

Recently, there has not been any significant demand in MICE enquiries at the resort. Das further said, "We are stressing on both domestic and global MICE business, although MICE is not as robust as it was in pre-pandemic times. We are adhering to COVID protocols and keeping with government guidelines for organising events. All our MICE venues and items are sanitised and we make use of thermal sensors for detecting guests down with high temperatures. Our staff members are double-dosed and are armed with food handler certificates. Most of our staff members have bagged WHO's online certificate to host large conventions. Our hospitality group has formulated a checklist to follow for MICE events. In the upcoming period, Destination MICE will gain ground and the corporate sector will allocate separate budgets. India will emerge as a preferred MICE destination for multi-national groups."

Located in close proximity to Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose International Airport is Holiday Inn Kolkata Airport which boasts of a strategic location and infrastructure and this constitutes one of its high points in the MICE business. **Bhawna Verma, General Manager, Holiday Inn Kolkata Airport** said, "Our property is the right choice for customers in the context of logistics. Our hospitality set-up is well-connected with the metro's business hub- Sector V in Salt Lake, the special economic zone (SEZ) and commercial hub of



▲ Bhawna Verma

New Town. We have banquets and meeting spaces ranging from 275 sq. ft to 10,000 sq. ft that can accommodate 800 guests for a single event. Our hospitality group has positioned itself at a fast pace to cater to an upsurge in MICE demand. The corporate sector is returning with high expectations and we are determined to cater to their demand. We are emphasising on domestic MICE business and there is a huge pent-up demand in this segment. Global MICE has taken off slowly and, going by the current MICE trend pegged on local business, it involves less travel and environmental issues are of highest concern. Ensuring the safety of our employees and guests and providing green hotel are some of the highly significant concepts."

Going by the upcoming trends that will dominate the global MICE sector, the focus will be on sustainability. Verma further said, "When it comes to the global hospitality scenario, the MICE segment is laying stress on sustainability and the preference is for organic food, contactless and paperless transactions and less travel duration. Customers are vouching for recycled stuff and green engagements in hotels. Hybrid events and digitisation of MICE are emerging. Venues are booked through digital platforms. The service designs and deliveries have undergone transformation like the absence of salt and pepper shakers on the table, use of disposable cutleries and electronic menus."

With COVID-19 cases waning and easing of pandemic restrictions, big-ticket conventions and corporate offsite tours comprising MICE business have begun picking up pace. **Rajib Roy Choudhury, Senior General Manager, Vedic Village Spa Resort,** commented, "We have received substantial pick-up in MICE enquiries and bookings over the past one and half months since leisure travel is reviving in a big way with the increasing emergence of revenge tourism. Our resort prides in having large indoor and outdoor banqueting spaces



▲ Rajib Roy Choudhury

that enable us to implement the COVID protocols with ease. With international skies opening up, we are receiving a plethora of enquiries from the corporate segment. Conferences and meetings have started in a big way and our resort has geared up to welcome the Restart, Remodel and Revival mode of the MICE industry. Sprawling over 150 acres of land area, our resort has abundant venues and the banqueting capacity ranges from 10 to 1,000 visitors making our resort a perfect destination to host MICE of varying sizes. The fascinating array of culinary options for diners deserves mention that can be customised for the entire MICE event." Roy Choudhury pointed out that the main trendsetters for MICE are the automobile industry, pharmaceuticals, manufacturing, Information Technology and IT-enabled services that are likely to drive demand for MICE in the current year.

"There will be further pick-up and rise in demand for MICE in the second and third quarter of the calendar year. The corporate groups are organising their teams together for team building; strategic planning, relaxation and recuperation events that had come to a halt over the past couple of years. The period of January was unsuccessful while visitors were hesitant in February, but March was quite robust. Corporate MICE is happening and companies are organising conferences with around 300 guests. We have received queries to host conclaves for 600 visitors. There has been a drastic surge in the number of corporate offsite that are incentive-based, performance-based stays or staycation for reviews and planning."

Some of the new norms that have been laid out at the resort include sending off visitors directly into their rooms on arrival, the online collection of photo identities of visitors, multiple buffet sections with courses at different points, disposable masks and sanitisation stations all over the resort. "New corporate groups have

emerged in the sphere of technology and transport. Inter-state travel has made MICE appear bolder. MICE is all set to emerge as the main generator of revenue in the coming times," quipped Roy Choudhury.

Take a glimpse of the existing MICE infrastructure in a five-star set-up in the capital city of Odisha. **Samir Ghose, General Manager, Welcomhotel by ITC Hotels, Bhubaneswar** informed, "At a time when MICE enquires have begun moving,



▲ Samir Ghose

our hospitality group is looking forward to receiving guests keeping with stringent health, safety and hygiene norms. All ITC hotels across the country have received 'WeAssure' business assurance certification for adopting health, safety and hygiene protocols. MICE is a significant event and the demand for a convenient venue is on the rise. Our hotel serves as the right choice for banquets, corporate events, weddings and conclaves. Replete with 107 sprawling rooms, a hall spread over 4,500 sq. ft area devoid of columns and soaring to 22 ft. high and a verdant lawn of 20,500 sq. ft, our hotel has a dedicated team to look after the MICE events." It offers a magical luxurious experience to guests at the advent of MICE bookings and lasts till it winds up.

The hospitality player emphasises on the well-being of visitors. Ghose said, "We are accentuating more on domestic MICE flow in Bhubaneswar and the major sectors are cement, pharmaceuticals and agriculture. Weddings constitute a crucial part of the MICE sector. Factors like quality of air, water, digitally-enabled services and social distancing are of great significance in our property. The tantalising fare offered at banquet events blends the best of regional culture and cuisine along with global dishes. The presence of social media and technology in our daily lives is another significant trend that offers infinite possibilities."