

‘India plans to double foreign tourist arrivals to 25 million in the next five years’

Mugdha Sinha, Director General, Ministry of Tourism, Government of India in conversation with Sumit Jha, talks about the evolving state of India tourism and the steps that are being taken to achieve their target of doubling foreign tourist arrivals to 25 million in the next five years.

How do you view India’s tourism trajectory, and what are the major milestones?

Over the last two and a half decades, the tourism landscape in India has evolved significantly. The first decade of the 21st century saw its peak in 2008, marked by the highest foreign tourist arrivals and strong hotel performance in terms of occupancy and revenue per room. However, this momentum was disrupted by the global financial crisis, which impacted the travel industry deeply.

In the second decade, 2019 became a standout year, recording over 10.5 million foreign tourist arrivals. The year underscored the growing infrastructure and aspirations of Indian tourism. Unfortunately, the global pandemic in 2020 halted this progress, with numbers dropping sharply.

Now, in the third decade, India is on an optimistic recovery path. By 2023, we have aligned with global trends, with domestic tourism driving the recovery. Investments in infrastructure – like roads, airports, and cable cars – are ensuring seamless travel borne on the wings of pilgrim travels, even to remote destinations and development of new detour destinations is driving the destination dupes.

How does India plan to achieve its ambitious targets, including 100 million foreign tourists by 2047?

India plans to double foreign tourist arrivals to 25 million in the next five years in a responsible manner while avoiding over-tourism. The focus will be on increasing revenue per visitor, emphasizing quality over quantity, and maintaining a sustainable tourism ecosystem.

By 2047, India aims to attract 100 million international tourists, contributing significantly to the economy. With strategic investments, improved infrastructure, and innovative tourism products, we are well on our way to becoming a USD 30 trillion economy while preserving our heritage and traditions. The foundation being laid today will support a vibrant and sustainable tourism industry for decades to come.

Infrastructure upgrades include doubling operational airports from 74 to 157 and developing 10 cruise terminals, several riverine cruises and 4 yachting sites. Enhanced air connectivity, with 900 wide-bodied aircraft on order, will enable long-haul travel. Additionally, partnerships with platforms like Agoda, Booking.com, MakeMyTrip, VISA, Master Card, etc. are being utilized for data-driven insights and targeted marketing. Focused international efforts, such as the India-ASEAN Year of Tourism 2025 and India-Spain Year in 2026, aim to strengthen India's visibility in key markets.

Is the closure of international tourism offices a setback?

Not at all. The closure reflects a shift in strategy. Representative agencies, India Missions abroad, and digital campaigns are now taking the lead in promoting India globally. This cost-efficient approach ensures that our tourism initiatives remain impactful and aligned with evolving global trends. For example, India's presence at events like WTM in London has generated significant interest. India is poised to become a global tourism leader with a comprehensive approach that blends tradition, tech driven innovation, and sustainability.

What unique opportunities does India have for tourism growth?

India is leveraging its traditions, talent, and heritage to create unique offerings. Initiatives like the Golden Pilgrimage circuit-Varanasi-Ayodhya-Prayagraj has surpassed the Golden Triangle circuit with the Mahakumbh2025 alone begetting 666 million visitors. Besides, the central vista dome train experiences, Maharaja luxury train, the Bharat Gaurav Buddhist circuit train, ocean and riverine cruise, Music Concert and Gastronomy and Festival Tourism are all on the rise. Moreover, 50 new destinations are being developed under the recently announced industry infrastructure status for hotels.

What is the government's investment focus to boost tourism?

India has committed INR 12,000 crores across schemes like Swadesh Darshan, PRASAD, CBDD, SASCI for destination development and management initiatives. These funds are being used to develop alternative destinations, promote sustainability, and create niche tourism products like eco-resorts, slow and spiritual travel, wellness and adventure tourism. Infrastructure development, including roads, cable cars, and airports, ensures connectivity to remote and pristine locations, enabling seamless travel experiences.

What role does sustainability play in India's tourism strategy?

Sustainability is a core focus. Green and eco-friendly infrastructure is being prioritized, from destinations to infrastructure – hotels, homestays, airports to cruise terminals. Skill development in soft tourism practices and behavioural change campaigns are being implemented to enhance guest experiences and improve perceptions of India as a tourist destination. Green and Clean tourism was a key priority in India's G20 Tourism Track.

How does technology and lifestyle evolution influence tourism?

Technology is a game-changer. The pandemic accelerated the work-from-anywhere culture, boosting long-term stays in destinations like Goa. Travellers now seek destinations where they can work and explore simultaneously, driving

demand for unique accommodations. Additionally, content creators and digital influencers play a vital role in promoting destinations, creating a “fear of missing out” (FOMO) among potential tourists. No wonder, #digitalnomadism is trending in 2025.

Additionally, India is exploring futuristic technologies like Heliport, Amphibian and Hyperloop for high-speed travel, which could revolutionize connectivity by 2035.

How is India positioning itself as a global tourism destination?

India is leveraging its vast cultural and natural wealth, including 43 UNESCO sites and 3,696 ASI-protected monuments. Countries like Thailand and Turkey, with fewer resources, attract more tourists. This highlights the need for India to enhance visibility in global markets and improve its price competitiveness.

Upcoming infrastructure like the Navi Mumbai and Jewar airports, along with cruise terminals and pilgrimage trains, enhances accessibility. The focus is also on improving soft skills, and sustainability to ensure India becomes a preferred global destination year-round.

Is there a plan to replace the iconic “Incredible India” brand with the “Chalo India” campaign?

Absolutely not. “Incredible India” remains the Ministry of Tourism’s flagship outreach brand with a strong 20-year recall value. The “Chalo India” campaign is a complementary initiative targeting a specific audience – the Indian diaspora – and encouraging them to act as brand ambassadors to invite their non-Indian friends to India, contributing in the building of an aspirational India that is also a preferred global destination.

Through this campaign, they are encouraged to invite at least five non-Indian friends to visit India. The process involves registering on a dedicated website

where they can provide referrals. Each referral generates an auto-generated code, granting their non-Indian friends a double-entry gratis e-visa. We have already issued one lakh such e-visas, enabling these referred friends to visit India. Essentially, this initiative leverages network marketing principles, involving Indian citizens in promoting the nation as a travel destination.

These campaigns coexist and serve different purposes to enhance India's tourism outreach.

How is the Ministry managing marketing and promotions for such initiatives?

Marketing has certainly been a challenge due to budget constraints, which are not always aspirational for large-scale campaigns. However, we've adapted by integrating a more unified approach to marketing. Previously, there was a siloed system with separate budgets allocated for domestic and overseas promotions. Now, we are collapsing these silos, focusing on a comprehensive strategy for promoting India.

While we will continue some domestic promotions, the majority of our marketing efforts are directed towards international audiences. Once we secure the necessary approvals, we plan to roll out a robust marketing campaign to reach a global audience effectively. In the meanwhile, we are banking on our Indian Missions abroad as also the tour operators and representative agencies to keep up the momentum.

What collaborative efforts are being made with international partners?

Collaborations with global Online Travel Aggregators like Agoda, Booking.com, Make My Trip, etc. are being utilized to gather market intelligence and data on tourism trends for bespoke products. Such MoUs will enable India to access insights and inventory data insights from different markets. In exchange, for "Incredible India" marketing content on its platforms.

This partnership supports informed decision-making and promotes India in key international markets.

What steps are being taken to promote niche tourism and address infrastructure challenges?

The government is emphasizing bespoke tourism by identifying and promoting niche products like Buddhist circuits, pilgrim and spiritual tourism, and adventure, film, festival and musical concert tourism. For instance, developing religious circuits like the Buddhist Circuit can attract tourists from countries like Thailand, Japan, Taiwan, Korea, and Vietnam. Historical data shows how Bodh Gaya transitioned from a “mini-Japan” in the 1970s to a hub for Thai and Vietnamese tourists in subsequent decades.

Another example, India could position activities such as hot air ballooning, similar to Turkey’s success with Cappadocia. Soft adventure activities at Bir Birling, Rishikesh, Gulmarg, Goa etc. with adequate protocols and safety can help in drawing global young audiences, as can amusement parks. To address infrastructure challenges, there is a focus on tier-2 and tier-3 cities, which hold immense potential due to their mix of pilgrimage, leisure, and business tourism. The government is also assessing connectivity and accessibility issues, such as the availability of high-end luxury vehicles in tourist destinations, to enhance the visitor experience, along with multi-modal connectivity, accommodations and amenities at attractions.

How are masterclasses and training programs integrated into tourism promotion?

Masterclasses are a vital part of tourism promotion. These sessions, often held alongside major events like SATTE and OTM, train tour operators and travel trade professionals on India’s unique offerings. The idea is to create a network of trained specialists who act as India’s tourism ambassadors, both domestically and internationally. Moreover, continuous training programs running 365 days a year will ensure that tour operators remain updated on India’s evolving tourism landscape, thereby driving sustainable and informed promotion efforts.

How is the government addressing the growing demands in hospitality infrastructure?

The government is actively analyzing demand-supply dynamics in key markets. For instance, while cities like Goa are preparing for future demand with an increase in hotel room inventory, others like Delhi face land constraints, limiting new developments. Tier-2 cities such as Amritsar, Ayodhya, and Agra are being prioritized for infrastructure enhancements due to their significant potential in religious, leisure and business tourism. By focusing on amenities, accessibility, accommodations, and authentic experiences the government aims to ensure that India remains a competitive and attractive destination for both leisure and business travellers. And of course, we are looking to diversify big time into MICE, Medical Value and Wed in India Tourism.