

# From hidden gem to India's next hospitality frontier

Tourism has always been one of the most powerful bridges between cultures, communities and economies. In recent years, Northeast India has begun to step out of the margins of India's tourism map, emerging as a sunrise region in the country's hospitality and travel story.

## A late start that became a turning point

For much of its history, the Northeast remained underserved by organised hospitality. It was only in December 2014 that the region welcomed its first five-star hotel. Within the next three years, two more followed. While this timeline may appear delayed compared to other parts of India, it marked a decisive turning point.

What followed was a gradual but steady transformation. Increased economic activity, rising tourist inflows and growing policy attention have ensured that hospitality in the Northeast is no longer playing catch-up. Instead, the region is shaping its own distinctive identity—one rooted in culture, nature and authenticity.

## Tourist footfall and infrastructure-led momentum

The momentum is reflected clearly in the numbers. Tourist footfall across the Northeast doubled in FY 2024–25, with states such as Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim recording growth in excess of 100 percent, following the established high-footfall markets of Assam and Meghalaya.

This surge is underpinned by infrastructure development—improved air connectivity, expanded road networks and upgraded airports—making destinations that once felt remote far more accessible. Recently, Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma projected that Guwahati will host as many as 11 five-star hotels within the next three years, a development poised to significantly boost GDP contribution and employment generation.

## India's hospitality boom and rising investor confidence

The Northeast's rise is part of a broader national trend. Across India, the hospitality sector is witnessing robust expansion, driven largely by domestic travel. According to industry estimates from IDBI Capital, investments in hospitality are expected to reach USD 1 billion by 2028, while the sector's overall value is projected to approach USD 60 billion.

Domestic travel is emerging as the primary engine of growth, with trips forecast to rise from 2.5 billion in 2024 to 5.2 billion by 2030. Strong RevPAR growth across markets highlights a favourable demand-supply dynamic, reinforcing investor confidence in new destinations—including the Northeast.

### Why the Northeast stands apart

What makes the Northeast particularly compelling is its differentiation. With unparalleled biodiversity, layered cultural traditions and improved connectivity, the region has all the ingredients to evolve into a global tourism hub.

For a new generation of travellers seeking immersive, meaningful experiences, the Northeast offers authenticity that goes beyond conventional tourism—whether through indigenous cuisines, living cultural traditions or landscapes that remain largely untouched.

### Changing global travel preferences

Globally, travel choices have evolved in the aftermath of the pandemic. Wellness, sustainability and cultural immersion now play a far greater role in destination selection. Travellers increasingly value places that combine tranquillity and authenticity with modern comforts—and the Northeast aligns naturally with these expectations.

### Boutique luxury and experiential hospitality

Hospitality players in the region are responding with boutique-led luxury and experiential stays that integrate local art, materials and cuisine with world-class service standards. A notable example is Rhino & River, a wildlife retreat near Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary, which blends farm-to-table dining with village walks, birding trails and Brahmaputra river experiences—transforming a stay into a cultural exploration.

Similarly, the presence of branded luxury hotels in Guwahati and Shillong, such as Vivanta Shillong and Novotel Guwahati, signals growing confidence in the region's ability to attract upscale travellers while raising service benchmarks.

### Beyond leisure: business, MICE and spiritual travel

The Northeast's tourism narrative now extends well beyond leisure. Corporate travel, MICE (meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions) and spiritual tourism are gaining traction, with the region increasingly hosting business events and cultural gatherings that previously bypassed it.

### Employment, dignity of work and local impact

Perhaps the most meaningful impact of this growth lies in employment generation. Hospitality is among the most labour-intensive industries. Every new hotel creates hundreds of direct jobs and many more indirect livelihoods across transport, handicrafts, agriculture and experiential tourism.

For the youth of the Northeast, hospitality offers not only employment within their home states but also dignity of work and exposure to global standards—without the need to migrate elsewhere.

### The imperative of mindful, sustainable growth

As growth accelerates, sustainability must remain central. The Northeast is a biodiversity hotspot with fragile ecosystems. Tourism development must therefore prioritise eco-sensitive design, responsible sourcing and deep community engagement. The goal should not be mass tourism, but high-value, low-impact experiences that protect both culture and environment.

### A region ready to welcome the world

The Northeast today stands at a defining juncture. No longer a hidden corner of India, it is a region ready to welcome the world with confidence. With visionary policy support, rising investor interest and evolving travel preferences, the coming decade could belong decisively to Northeast India's hospitality and tourism sector.

For those of us deeply engaged in this journey, this is not merely a business opportunity. It is a chance to reshape perceptions, create meaningful livelihoods and offer travellers memories that endure. The story of tourism in Northeast India has only just begun—and its future promises to be as extraordinary and diverse as the land itself.