



CRUISE CONTROL

As India's oceans and rivers are becoming a preferred mode of transport, the cruise industry is finally taking off in a big way in the country.

BY BINDU GOPAL RAO

The cruise scene in India is undergoing significant development. The Government is actively working to position India as a global cruise hub, aiming to increase cruise passenger traffic from 0.4 million to 4 million. There is also a plan to increase the number of cruise ships from 208 in 2023 to 500 by 2030 and eventually to 1,100 by 2047.

SAILAWAY

India's cruise industry has immense untapped potential, with a long coastline and river systems waiting to be explored. With Government support and increasing interest from travellers, the industry is set for significant expansion in the coming years, promising exciting opportunities for both domestic and international tourists.

"The allure of exploring new destinations, enjoying luxury experiences, and the convenience of a premium cruising experience have captured the imagination of a diverse range of travellers. This increasing demand has spurred the development of cruise infrastruc-



Jurgen Bailom, President and CEO, Waterways Leisure Pvt Ltd, Cordelia Cruises

ture, itineraries, and services to cater to the evolving preferences of our passengers, indicating that cruising in India has become a lifestyle choice for many, with Indians now considering cruising with their family and friends. In the pre-2019 scenario, 200,000 Indians used to go abroad for cruises, and now, with Cordelia, we've added an additional 200,000 Indians cruising within India every year, resulting in a 100% growth in cruise-goers due to the introduction of domestic cruises. This remarkable growth indicates a strong appetite for cruising among Indians," explains Jurgen Bailom, President and CEO, Waterways Leisure Pvt Ltd, Cordelia Cruises.



Antara Cruise suite

DEMAND DRIVERS

The cruise scene in India has been steadily developing over the past few years. India's growing middle class and increasing disposable income have contributed to a rising interest in cruise vacations.

"V Vidhyavathi, the Secretary of Tourism, has unveiled an ambitious plan to achieve a tenfold growth in India's voyage tourism sector over the coming decade. This substantial increase is anticipated to have a significant profitable impact, with the sector's profitable eventuality projected to rise from Rs 712 crore to Rs 35,500 crore by 2041. The profitable eventuality of the sector is also projected to rise from Rs 712 crore to Rs 35,500 crore by 2041," says Shylander Jindal, Managing Director, SKIL Travel.

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Shylander Jindal, Managing Director, SKIL Travel



Nirav Akshay Oza, CEO, Efcee Hotels



Antara Cruise

creased focus on developing cruise tourism as part of its 'blue economy' initiative. "With a burgeoning middle class and an increasing penchant for luxury travel, the cruise scene is rapidly developing. Companies are also collaborating with travel agencies to create tailor-made packages for Indian tourists. Collaboration between the Government and private sector will be crucial for sustaining this growth. Also, the introduction of themed cruises that focus on wellness, culture, or culinary experiences could be a unique selling point that attracts more Indian travellers," says Nirav Akshay Oza, CEO, Efcee Hotels.

POPULARITY CUES

A recent report by Thomas Cook India & SOTC's India Holiday Report 2023 highlights unique trends that suggests a 70% surge in cruise holidays/ sea-cations.

Rajeev Kale, President & Country Head, Holidays, MICE, Visa - Thomas Cook (India) Limited, says, "Cruises represent a unique value proposition for Indians; an all-inclusive holiday without the hassle of multiple check-in/ check-out and transfers. Cruises offer an exciting diversity of onboard entertainment: Broadway shows/ gala events, casino/ nightclubs; play zones for children; sports and adventure activities like rock climbing, zip lining and water sports; learning snorkelling/ scuba diving; also, gastronomic, shopping, spa-wellness activities, and shore excursions at ports of call."

While globally cruising is predominantly associated with the senior segment and many cruise companies are curating special holidays for this segment, SOTC is witnessing a strong appetite of over 80% vs. pre-pandemic from India's Gen Z, millennials, and young working professionals. This is in addition to multi-generational families and couples/ honeymooners. "A combination of factors has increased the appeal for this younger demographic including a range of high adrenaline activities onboard, affordable price points and access to financial models," says Daniel D'Souza, President & Country Head - Holidays, SOTC Travel.



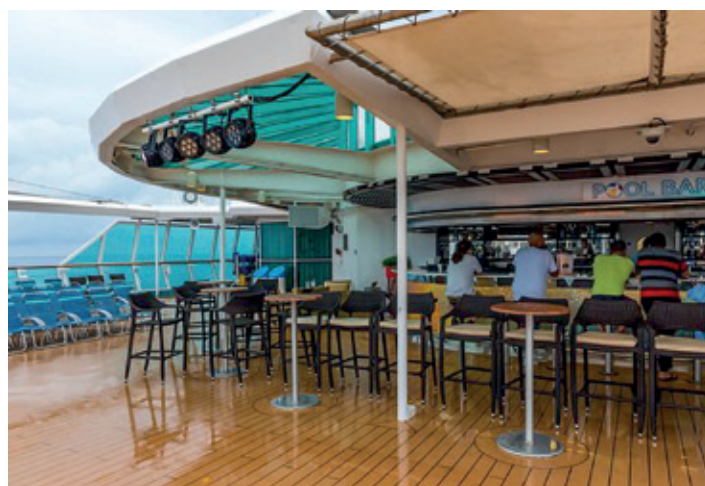
Dining area at Cordelia Cruises



Rajeev Kale, President & Country Head, Holidays, MICE, Visa - Thomas Cook (India) Limited



Daniel D'Souza, President & Country Head - Holidays, SOTC Travel



Pool bar at Cordelia Cruises

tourism, timber, and wildlife tourism. Cordelia Cruises offers a range of itineraries that explore India's beautiful coastal regions and were the pioneers of sailing the way to the Lakshadweep and making it more accessible for tourism. After successful sailing to Sri Lanka this year, they are looking forward to Dubai and the Middle East next year. At the end of 2023, Antara River Cruises will introduce Catamaran Cruises in Odisha. These two-suite catamarans will take you to the heart of 'Bhitarkanika', popularly called the mini-Amazon, and tour the estuarine region of the Brahmani - Baitarani River systems and their tributaries.

RIVERRACE

River cruising is gaining immense momentum in the country as well. With its large number of rivers and an extensive coastline that runs approximately 7,500 kms, it is evident that the benefits of river cruising will also spill over to ocean cruising.

"India's National Strategy for Cruise Tourism has suggested active development of river cruises. The plan outlined by the Ministry of Tourism for river cruises along national and state waterways, is on the right track

INFRASTRUCTURE IMPETUS

Upgradation and modernisation of anchorages are being carried out at seven major anchorages in the country including the flagship. A new international cruise terminal is coming up in Mumbai with a total cost about Rs 495 crore. The outstation will have a capacity of handling 200 vessels and 1 million passengers per annum. Similar structure upgradation is taking place in Goa, New Mangalore, Kochi, Chennai, Visakhapatnam, and Kolkata.

VARIED ITINERARIES

Under the ambitious PM Gatishakti National Master Plan, a tourism-related structure is also being developed with a focus on shipping, swash





➔ Cordelia Cruises

and with requisite support from all stakeholders it would lead to the growth of the river cruise industry. Furthermore, the new draft National Tourism Policy augurs well for rapid development of cruise tourism in India as it includes cruise tourism-friendly policies, efforts of the Task Force set up for cruise tourism, and the Government's plan to open as many as 111 waterways in the country," says Raj Singh, Chairman-Group, Heritage River Journeys.

CHALLENGES GALORE

The cruise industry in India is poised to capitalise on the surge in cruise holidays, with the Government's commitment to developing cruise infrastructure and increasing capacity. However, the industry in India faces several challenges, including inadequate port infrastructure, limited tourist offerings at docking ports, short docking times for travellers to explore, a mismatch in booking lead times, and negative perceptions about affordability and seasickness among Indian travellers.

"Amongst the key challenges that are faced by the river cruise industry includes educating customers as well as travel agents to tap into the right audience about the cruising experiences. River sailings are quite different to sea/ocean sailings as the vessels are smaller and allow for more halts and an opportunity to travel with like-minded people to experience life, culture, architecture and engage with locals along the river rather than being entertained on board. Furthermore, as the cruise industry grows, challenges for requisite infrastructure such as development of inland river ports, jetties and cruise terminals will also need to keep pace," says Singh.



➔ Krishna Mohan, MD, Southern Travels



➔ Raj Singh, Chairman-Group, Heritage River Journeys

GROWTH CHART

The Indian cruise industry has substantial growth potential. It aims to grow tenfold over the next decade, driven by rising demand and disposable incomes. A Krishna Mohan, MD, Southern Travels, says, "Currently operational cruises in India include Ganga Vilas, Sunderban Luxury Cruise, MV Mahabaahu Cruise, Lakshadweep Cruise, Luxury Vrinda, River Ganges Heritage Cruise, Goa Cruise destination, Costa Neo Classica Cruise, Kerala Backwater Cruise, and Andaman Islands Cruise. The Government is planning new cruise circuits in multiple states along India's coastline and river systems. According to industry reports, the Indian cruise market is expected to grow at a CAGR of approximately 20% to 25% in the next five years. The Government also aims to attract 40 lakh cruise tourists by 2041, up from approximately 2 lakh tourists as of 2019. These numbers are promising and indicate strong future growth." 📈