

Building a legacy

Anuraag Bhatnagar, Chief Operating Officer, The Leela Palaces, Hotels and Resorts, talks about how hospitality is making sweeping changes in the post-pandemic world and embracing the next phase in its growth trajectory

The Leela, a pure play luxury brand, was voted as the World's Best Brand by Travel + Leisure World's Best Awards 2021 and the Best Hotel Group in India by Travel + Leisure India's Best Awards 2020 and 2021 - for two years in a row. We catch up with Anuraag Bhatnagar, COO whose 26 years of experience in hospitality includes stints in Starwood, Marriott, The St Regis, W Hotels, The Ritz-Carlton Hotels and The Leela Palaces, Hotels and Resorts.

BUSINESS MATTERS

After the pandemic, hospitality has emerged much stronger. However, the last couple of years have been very hard on the industry as it experienced a near-complete closure of its operations. 68% of our business pre pandemic came from outside of India. So, we had to pivot during the pandemic. Post-pandemic immediate demand has been largely driven by leisure travel, weddings and staycations, and the industry has seen a surge in demand for resorts. With business travel now being authorised by companies across all sectors, and international borders opening up, we have the unique opportunity to reclaim India's lead as a destination of choice through compelling programming and storytelling. Our Leela Palace Trail that offers an experiential itinerary across a choice of 6 Palaces is our offering to the discerning global traveler and a showcase of India at its luxurious best. People are willing to pay a premium for the special experiences and unique services and we are committed towards curating these.

As a brand, The Leela Palaces, Hotels and Resorts holds its guests at the centre of everything it does and is committed to providing them with authentic and transformative experiences with the warmth of Indian hospitality. "Customers want to return to their normal lives and enjoy luxury services, including travel. And as they do, we have been ready to provide them with a safe and welcoming environment where they can continue to enjoy the distinctive experiences and unparalleled service that The Leela brand has come to be known for," says Bhatnagar.

CHANGING VISTAS

The pandemic has changed the world around us and the environment so rapidly that hoteliers have had to swiftly adapt to the new way of life and become more thoughtful in how they maintain safety for their guests, communities, and associates. "We know that the 'normal' we have returned to is not the 'normal' we knew. And the trends and behaviour predicted at the start of the decade are no more applicable. There is no denying that safety and hygiene are two of the most vital aspects, and this is here to stay." Our teams continued to deliver service excellence in a safe and protected environment with 'Suraksha by The Leela' -our comprehensive safety program, in partnership with Bureau Veritas. Today, all our hotels are Platinum certified. We were also amongst the first hotel brands in India to have a 100% vaccinated workforce reassuring guests of complete safety in our care," conveys Bhatnagar.

While the pandemic has been the biggest challenge in his career, Bhatnagar concedes that it has made everyone rethink their priorities. "Mindsets have shifted, and life goals have evolved. And therefore, the way we approach our personal lives, our people strategies and our businesses are very different now. Shifting focus from what 'is' to what 'will it be', staying agile and ready to adapt quickly, while making sure our guests, our associates and our communities were safe helped us navigate. Today we are far

stronger and far more agile than we were before the pandemic," he adds.

GOING GREEN

Changes of this nature have also fueled the demand for conscious travelling amongst individuals who are sensitive towards the cause of sustainability. Today's traveller wants to know about the impact their travel has on the environment. People are travelling with intent and purpose, and sustainability is at the forefront of travel decisions. Surveys have indicated that 46% of luxury travellers choose brands with a well-defined sustainability agendas.

Sustainable luxury today is changing the paradigm as guests seek fulfilling experiences in harmony with nature and sociocultural surroundings. "Over the last year, we have deployed over ₹400 million in Capex to reduce our carbon footprint through energy-efficient equipment and to increase our renewable energy procurement. We have integrated smart technology to help avoid waste of resources such as food purchases, electricity, and water consumption. Hotel design is now being built around the concept of 'net zero' -this includes recycling grey water, trying



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to achieve zero wastage goals, rainwater harvesting, deploying drip irrigation, etc. Every existing hotel is investing in technologies and processes that can integrate these elements within its operations. We are making a conscious shift towards renewable energy, which does not impact the guest experience but only enhances it by making it more meaningful. Our owned hotels are already at 36% renewable energy, and we are targeting 52% by the end of 2022; by 2030, we aim to be 100% renewable," explains Bhatnagar.

Though the hotel has already replaced the use of single-use plastics with sustainable alternatives, The Leela is also in the process of rolling out an in-house water bottling plant with zero single-use plastic - this measure alone will help eliminate the use of 3.2 million plastic bottles, which is equivalent to a carbon emission of 157 tons per year. Continuing to work towards this goal, The Leela is actively sourcing locally available resources - procuring food straight from farmers in the region, and also sourcing fabrics and consumables from local artisans and cooperatives. This step not only aids in reducing the carbon footprint but also helps support the local communities.

TECH TALK

Technology in hospitality is also making waves and playing a far more important role than ever. This has been a time for The Leela to pivot, reinvent and transform. Mobile-first technologies such as contactless payments have been in the market for a few years, with limited adoption. "However, recent behaviour signals a spike in adoption of technology as customers became more comfortable with who and what they come into physical contact with. For travellers and guests, mobile usage will increase throughout the travel journey, from passports and boarding passes to keyless hotel entry and digital checkout at hotels. Our hotels have implemented contactless check-ins and QR codes for menus to adapt to the new normal. We will soon be launching The Leela App that seamlessly integrates each of these functions," avers Bhatnagar.

HUMAN RESOURCES EDGE

Another challenge that the industry is facing is the shortage of trained staff. The Leela Group has developed a three-pronged talent strategy: Attract, Develop and Retain. "We want to be a talent magnet and attract the best talent there is in the industry. Our leadership team is a great example of how we have brought together the best and diverse talent in the industry as we evolve further and gear up to embrace the next new phase of our journey," he proudly states.

The Leela Leadership Development Programme (LLDP) has been conceptualised in response to a growing need for talent to support its expansion plans. This 15-month programme is designed to identify and groom the best talent in the industry and nurture luxury leaders of tomorrow, giving them a platform



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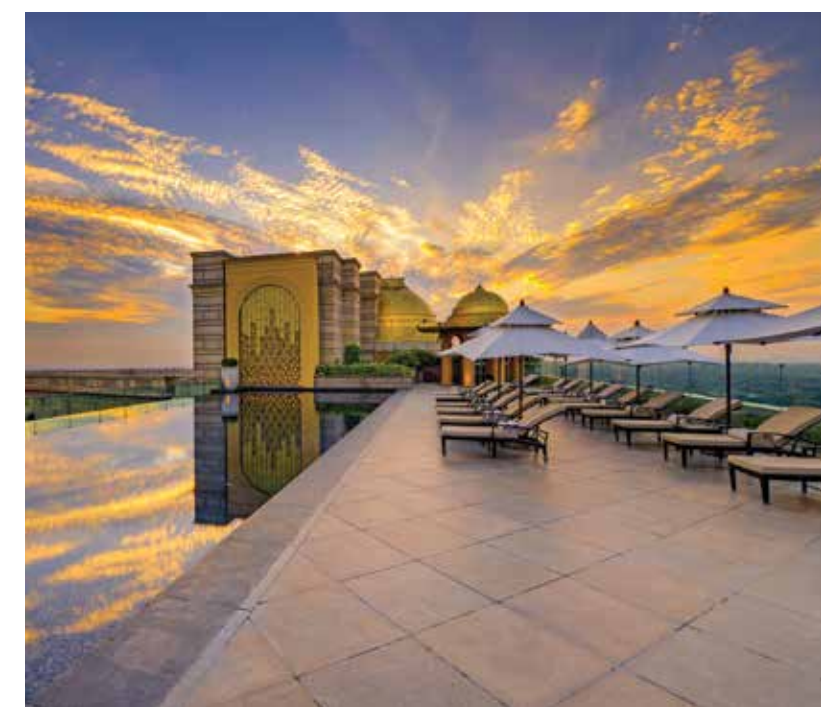
➤ Natasha Mehta,
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to carry forward The Leela's rich legacy while carving one of their own. The programme is built around a world-class curriculum, in partnership with the Indian School of Hospitality (ISH) and in alliance with Les Roches, an institute of higher education focused on reimagining hospitality education for today's generation and tomorrow's businesses. Available for both internal and external candidates, this programme is available for those who have a bachelor's degree in hospitality and one year of experience in a luxury hotel. The programme will develop the finest talent with a passion for hospitality and transform and fast-track their growth into managers and future General Managers within The Leela. "We also started a Palace Services Training program to build a pipeline of well-trained butlers and enhance our butler service. Anthony Holland, the founder of the British Butler Guild and a third-generation butler, is currently training our butlers across cities in India. We live by our commitment towards #LeelaCares. Even during the toughest times of the pandemic, we did not lay off any associates or cut salaries. We were the first hotel company to have a 100% vaccinated workforce and extended the facility not just to our associates but also to their families."

NEW VISTAS

To make more differentiated offerings to its guests, The Leela has rolled out several signature programmes to its guests at its properties. For instance, 'Tishya by The Leela' was conceived and launched as the brand's signature fragrance with an all-new range of exclusively crafted bath amenities. Tishya by The Leela celebrates the essence of India and the richness within with a blend of authentic and inspiring aromas and is inspired by the national flower of our country Kumud or lotus and the wonder flower - Nilgiri or Neelakurinji that blossoms once every 12 years. The signature fragrance, bath, and body collection have been conceptualised and executed in collaboration with Kimrica Hunter International, India's largest luxury toiletries and guest room amenities manufacturer. The range is 100% vegan, paraben and SLS-free and comes in 100% recyclable packaging.



➤ Anjali Mehra,
Chief Brand Officer and Senior Vice
President Marketing



FOOD FILES

In line with a focus on clean eating, the brand has also launched Aujasya by The Leela, a signature wellness programme aimed at redefining the road to holistic well-being. A unique blend inspired by traditional and modern practices, Aujasya is built around the two Rs of well-being - Restore (Food) and Renew (Mindfulness). It encompasses a collection of authentic experiences that build vivacity and promote the vigour of life.

"Our first pillar is built around food and nutrition and was built in collaboration with Dr Ankita Jalori, an eminent food and nutrition consultant. We are now gearing up to launch our second pillar around Mindfulness (Renew)," says Bhatnagar. The hotel procures locally available food straight from farmers in the region, which is probably why Megu at The Leela Palace New Delhi made it to the list of Asia's 50 Best Restaurants and Chef Shubham Thakur is included in the HT City 30 under 30 Chefs list.

When it comes to F&B, Leela's focus has been towards making it more eclectic and fun with an energy and a vibe that makes dining a memorable experience. "Authenticity of flavours is key; but we are trying to bring in more innovation.



A lot of chef exchanges with international chefs who have had experience with Michelin Star restaurants, events, and activations where we can experiment as well as showcase and partnerships with beverage companies and lifestyle/ luxury brands where there is a synergy of brands. Experiential dining, unique experiences and quality over quantity is the focus."

PARTNERSHIPS & MORE

The Leela also partnered with the 15th edition of Jaipur Literature Festival (JLF) 2022 for a noteworthy celebration of Indian heritage, art, culture, and tradition that both brands truly exemplify. JLF, brings together a diverse mix of the world's greatest minds from various fields and genres to express and engage in thoughtful conversations. They have also collaborated with India Art Fair Delhi to curate special experiences for their guests with art as a passion and will be sponsoring a week-long Polo tournament in Jaipur from October 3rd to October 9th.

The other program that is making waves for the brand is 'Icons of India by The Leela', which celebrates the essence of India and its richness through partnerships with India's finest and the world's best. The brand has collaborated with inspirational Indians who have been recognised globally for their exceptional work while emulating what is truly Indian. The Icons of India includes an exemplary list of individuals, such as Manushi Chhillar, Nobel Peace Laureate Kailash Satyarthi and sarod virtuosos Amaan Ali Bangash and Ayaan Ali Bangash. "Together with the Icons of India, The Leela will create a robust calendar of experiences to engage and inspire guests through a shared passion for wellness and social impact. While we will continue to expand the events and activations with our Icons, we are also looking at adding new Icons," says Bhatnagar.

Through its association with Kailash Satyarthi, The Leela supports 11 Bal Mitra Grams or Child friendly villages. Within 1 year of its association over 4000 children have been impacted positively and The Leela has committed to expand this association to make

this more meaningful with every new hotel that joins the portfolio.

LOYALTY MATTERS

The Leela has also redesigned their guest loyalty program Leela DISCOVERY, together with Global Hotel Alliance (GHA), to meet guest expectations for instant recognition and rewards. An extensive member feedback study and new consumer behaviour conducted by GHA showed that travellers are asking to be rewarded instantly and fairly; not just for nights stayed but also for spending, in a clear and straightforward way. He further explains that "We curated and introduced Leela DISCOVERY that is modelled around three member-centric concepts: a new digital rewards currency, DISCOVERY Dollars (D\$); Recognition, with more tiers and multiple ways to progress and benefits from the first stay; and Live Local, inviting members into the hotels even without a stay, through offers and experiences, from pool access to spa days to dining and many more other amenities to provide memorable stays to all our patrons." The Leela DISCOVERY offers our members benefits across 40 hotel brands in over 80 countries.

The brand embraced the next phase in its growth trajectory with the opening of three new hotels, including the landmark debuts of The Leela Palace Jaipur and The Leela Gandhinagar, and their second foray in Bengaluru with The Leela Bhartiya City Bengaluru in 2021 and is now opening The Leela Kovalam, a Raviz Hotel and The Leela Ashtamudi, A Raviz Hotel with a beach and backwater experience that completes the serenely beautiful Kerala itinerary. "For us it's about purity of concept, where quality rules over quantity. We want to be the best representation of 'True Indian Luxury' and deliver service that defines the graciousness of Indian hospitality. We continue to explore opportunities for growth and expansion in key gateway cities, marquee leisure destinations as well as in wellness and wildlife," concludes Bhatnagar. ■



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