



Travel Tech

Several new technological innovations are now being employed to make travel hassle-free and this is a win-win for all stakeholders.

BY BINDU GOPAL RAO

Technology and travel are the perfect combination and this plays a crucial role in the way we travel to the vacation destination, what we do once we are there and even in the time after we have come back from our adventure.

NUMBER CRUNCHING

Research states that the global travel retail market size was valued at \$51 billion in 2021 and is projected to grow to over \$96.11 billion by 2029. Tech innovations like QueueBuster are reshaping the hospitality and travel industry by empowering businesses across various sectors. “From revolutionizing restaurant operations at bustling food courts to optimizing retail experiences at resorts, theme and amusement parks, and airport terminals, advanced POS solutions are streamlining billing, inventory management, and restaurant operations. This tech integration ensures seamless transactions and enhanced customer experiences, ultimately elevating the journey for travellers worldwide,” says Varun Tangri, CEO and founder, QueueBuster. Travel technology has made it easier, convenient, and more personalised for travellers to experience the world, as well as for industry players to operate their businesses. “Our aim at Booking.com is to make travel



Varun Tangri, CEO and founder, QueueBuster

more seamless and flexible for everyone around the world. Currently, our website and app are available in 46 languages and dialects and make it easy to search for, compare and choose from several travel options to create just the right experience. In 2023, we added Hindi as a language option, enabling native-speaking travellers to read detailed information, find deals and discounts, view their bookings, manage their accounts and move with ease, with an intention to engage them in an experience that was local and relatable,” says Santosh Kumar, Country Manager for India, Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Indonesia at Booking.com

PLANNING RIGHT

Today’s tourists are more independ-

ent. They search for information on the web, interact online with other travellers to ask about their experiences, and can book hotels and flights with the best prices from anywhere. Shyam Bhethanabotla, Chief Technology Officer, Cygnett Hotels & Resorts says, “Mobile apps are the most prominent technology that is being used by almost everyone to access information, order food, provide feedback, book, and manage their reservation on the go. Virtual and Augmented Reality (VR/AR) also help our hotels to give insight to guests towards the service or product that he/she is interested in through virtual tours, images, videos, etc. For example, when reserving a hotel room online, the guest can observe a series of images that show what the room is like, the different services and spaces offered by the establishment, as well as get an idea of the dimensions of such



Santosh Kumar, Country Manager for India, Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Indonesia, Booking.com



Shyam Bhethanabotla, Chief Technology Officer, Cygnett Hotels & Resorts

a place. Our focus on big data has helped us to improve the services offered in our hotels and as a result to personalize and customize the services as per the demand. In the hotel industry, optimizing the utilization of human resources is critical. AI-powered tools help us to schedule teams at our disposal more efficiently through occupancy forecasts and productivity data from operation departments.”

STREAMLINED EXPERIENCE

Hoteliers are constantly exploring and implementing new technological innovations to elevate the travel experience for guests. From contactless check-in and mobile room keys to virtual concierge services and smart room technology, the goal is to give guests a seamless and personalised stay. Rayan Aranha, Vice President, Hospitality & Commercial, Brigade Group, says, “At our operating and upcoming hotels, we have implemented and are in the process of implementing several technological innovations to streamline and enhance the travel experience. These



SriLankan Airlines self check-in

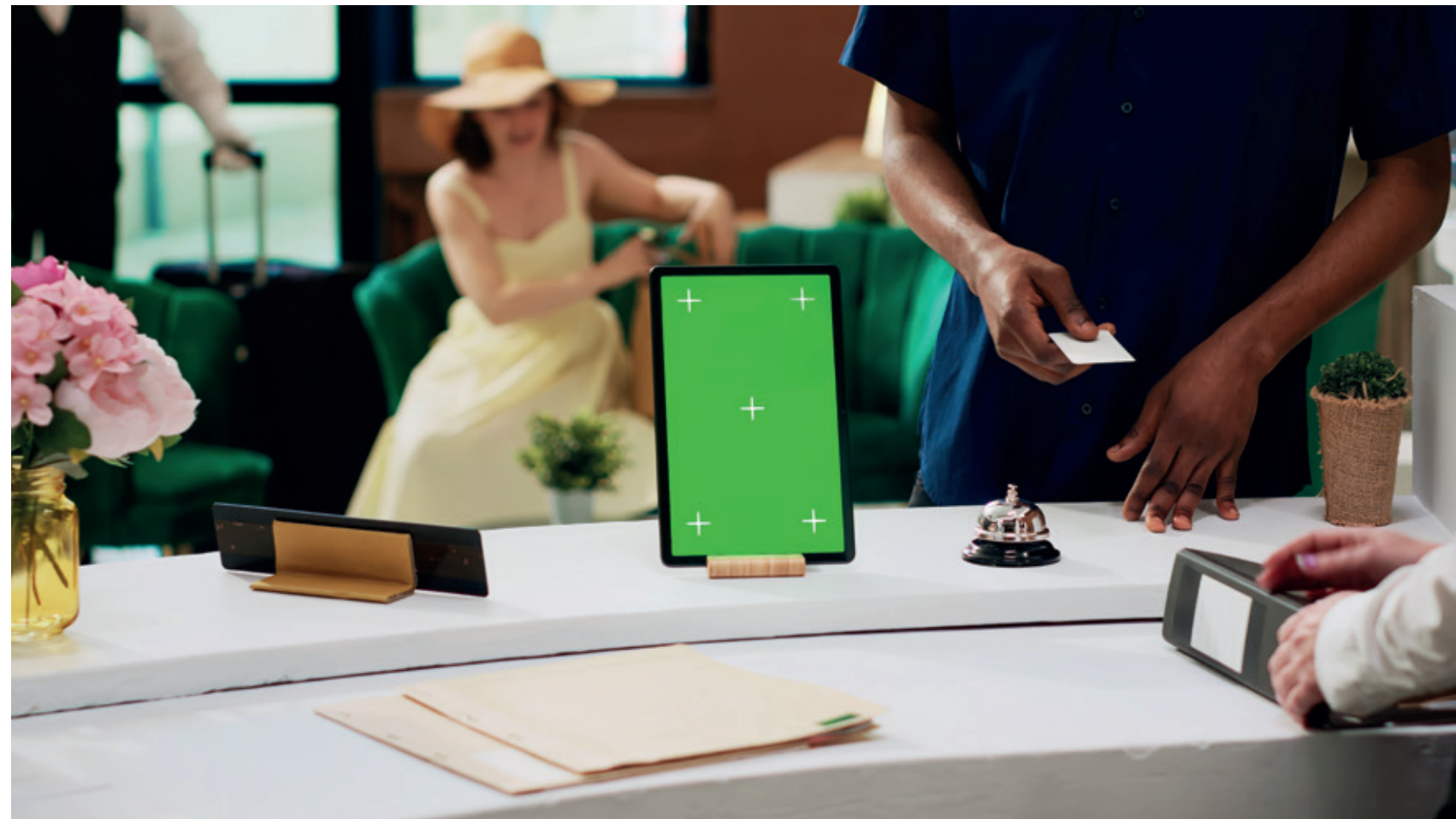
include biometric authentication for seamless access, contactless check-in and check-out using mobile apps to minimize physical interaction and expedite the check-in/check-out process, smart room controls, digital menus, and digital concierge services. These innovations will work collectively to streamline various aspects of the guest experience. Contactless processes will reduce physical contact, enhancing safety and hygiene. Smart room controls will empower guests with personalized and seamless control over their environment. Chatbots improve responsiveness, ensuring quick and accurate assistance.”

GUESTS FIRST

Technology in hotels is all about contributing to the overarching goal of enhancing the guest experience and streamlining various aspects of travel. Vipin Bisht, Information Technology Manager, The Westin Resorts & Spa Himalayas, says, “Our commitment begins with the user-friendly ‘Marriott Bonvoy’ app, designed to facilitate reservations effortlessly. Guests can enrol and make reservations with unparalleled convenience, shaping their preferences for accommodations, meals, and personalized preferences. Elevating the guest experience, our app enables real-time queries through a responsive chat feature, allowing individuals to articulate their room preferences, dining choices, and personal preferences with ease. To streamline the check-in process, we’ve implemented the use of iPads, ensuring a swift and efficient arrival experience.” In fact, personalisation is taken quite seriously within the industry like building most technology in-house. Sarang Purandare, VP, Tech, Product & Growth, SaffronStays, says, “This choice provides us with significant operating leverage, setting us apart from competitors who may rely on standardized SaaS tools. By developing our technology, we ensure a custom fit for our unique needs and objectives, enabling innovations that are closely aligned with our vision of customer delight in hospitality and sustainability and scalability of the business.”



Booking online made easy through apps



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Vipin Bisht, Information Technology Manager, The Westin Resorts & Spa Himalayas



Sarang Purandare, VP, Tech, Product & Growth, SaffronStays

NOVEL SOLUTIONS

SriLankan Airlines uses multiple technological solutions powered by leading software in aviation to facilitate convenient air travel for passengers. “We have an ongoing programme to harness innovation across various passenger contact points. This includes personalisation in shopping, merchandising and passenger engagement through omni-channels using AI-enabled systems. SriLankan Airlines has also rolled out systems to create a hassle-free airport experience with self-check-in, self-service bag drop and mobile boarding facilities in the Bandaranaike International Airport,” says Chamara Perera, Group Head of Information Technology, SriLankan Airlines. Additionally, Booking.com has launched the AI Trip Planner (currently available in the US and UK) which is built upon the foundation of our existing machine learning models. Their vast

data and machine learning models combine to give customised solutions to our customers. It takes the trip-planning process one step further with personalised recommendations for destinations and accommodations.



Contactless payment

OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

Implementing new technological innovations in the hospitality industry can be challenging due to various factors. The cost of acquiring and integrating new technologies, along with the need for staff training, can strain budgets and resources. “Ensuring seamless integration with existing systems and infrastructure is crucial but can be complex and time-consuming. Additionally, maintaining and updating these technologies to ensure optimal performance requires ongoing effort and investment. Balancing the desire to provide modern, tech-driven experiences with the need to cater to all guest preferences, including those who prefer more traditional methods, adds another layer of complexity. Despite these challenges, the benefits of implementing new technologies, such as improved guest experiences and operational efficiencies, make overcoming these hurdles worthwhile for hotels committed to staying competitive in the industry,” says Bhawani Singh Shekhawat, Director of Rooms, The Westin Mumbai Garden City.

Sarbeswar Behera, Multi Property IT Manager, JW Marriott Bengaluru Prestige Golfshire Resort & Spa, adds, “With the increasing connectivity of hotel systems, there is a heightened risk of cyber-attacks and data breaches. To prevent that, we use encryption, Firewalls, and intrusion detection systems, to protect against unauthorized access and malicious activities. Also, various regulations and standards governing the use of technology in the hospitality industry, such as PCI DSS (Payment card industry data security standard) for handling payment card data, requirements for digital accessibility, non-compliance can result in fines, penalties, and legal liabilities.” Going ahead, guests will continue to seek out ways to experience the world and it will be more important than ever before for brands to leverage technology to create a seamless, frictionless experience, perfectly tailored to every customer. **■**



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