

The Bespoke Wayfarers

In the business of luxury travel, the boutique holiday creator is the indispensable purveyor of once-in-a-lifetime experiences

By **Neeti Mehra & Nishant Bangar**

A private seaplane charter at Whitehaven Beach, Australia

"All journeys have secret destinations of which the traveller is unaware." — Martin Buber

Philosopher Buber sums up succinctly what an affluent luxury traveller seeks from his boutique holiday creator: an experience that is unexpected, distinctive and tailor-made especially for him.

The task at hand is scarcely as simple as it sounds. Figures from the United Nations World Tourism Organisation pegs tourism arrivals worldwide to hit the one billion mark by the end of 2012. With so many people traversing the globe in search of something unique, the real challenge is to find a destination that is hitherto unseen, to attract the top-of-the-pyramid traveller — the luxury voyager.

The desi luxist

The annual *World Wealth Report* by Merrill Lynch Wealth Management and Capgemini estimates that the number of millionaires in India has surged to a record high of 1,53,000 in 2010, making the country's High Net Worth Individual population the 12th largest across the globe.

Couple the above figures with statistics from the Union Ministry of Tourism. In 2010, 740.2 million domestic travellers scoured the country for refreshing breaks; the Indian nationals' departures to foreign lands in the same year were 12.99 million, and foreign tourist arrivals were 5.78 million. One can only gauge how resilient the travel market is in the country, despite the volatility of the world economy.

A cross-section of the travel service provides claim that the wallet heavy Indian traveller is typically a wealthy honeymooner, a free individual traveller (FIT), or a multi-generational family

voyager. On an average, they take one long vacation every year, normally during the summer months, coupled with a few weekend breaks through the year. Elaborates Karan Anand, Head, Relationships, Cox & Kings, "The profile of these travellers are self-made businessmen and professionals who have earned their millions in the last couple of years. They are aware of what's on offer and only want expert advice on how to get it at a reasonable price."

Sonu Shivdasani, Founder, Soneva, a group of luxury resorts, believes that there are different kinds of luxury consumers. The ones who travel to his resorts are people who have acquired wealth and a taste for finer things in life, and are now in search of experiences that are exclusive, out-of-the-world and provide mental and physical relaxation. "The Indian market is only about 5 per cent for us at this point, but it is definitely growing," he says.



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— Karan Anand



a lagoon in Barcelona

Photograph: Nicolas Claris

now the most quoted report by the luxury media, projected a very robust growth of the industry in the country. Between 2009 and 2010, the years studied in the report, the luxury industry grew at 20 per cent. Services, which include travel, grew at 23 per cent, above the overall average rate. The report also goes on to state that within the services category, luxury travel by itself grew at a rate of 22 per cent. While the report stated that the major reason for this was an increase in inbound travel, luxury travel service providers in the country are very bullish about the growing Indian travellers, who are mostly selecting international destinations. "The segment of Indian luxury travellers into Queensland is growing at a considerable rate year-on-year. It's still very niche but the yield out of this segment is very high," says Ryna Sequeira, Marketing Manager — India, Tourism Queensland.

Queensland is one of the new sought-after luxury destinations in Australia, with Sydney and Melbourne becoming common and run-of-the-mill. Travellers to the country Down Under prefer destinations like Palm Cove and Port Douglas in Tropical North Queensland, Lizard Island in the Northern Great Barrier Reef, Hayman Island and Hamilton Island in Whitsundays in the central Great Barrier Reef, and Gold Coast and Sunshine Coast in Southern Queensland. "Indian luxury travellers are looking for holidays that are larger than life and tick the most luxurious destinations off their bucket list as they travel year-on-year.



They are willing to spend lavishly on extraordinary experiences for the most part as long as they see value for money in their spend," says Sequeira. The requests of travellers are definitely lavish. They recently had a client who stayed for seven nights at the super luxurious Palazzo Versace in Gold Coast and requested for a self drive Hummer through the period of the stay.

Pound foolish, value wise

Despite the Euro zone turmoil and fears of a cool down in emerging markets, Bain & Company estimates that global luxury goods sales will exceed €200 billion in 2012. The consulting firm further expects an average of seven to nine per cent annual increase in global sales. Clearly this implies good news for the luxury travel market.

Even though the pockets of luxury travellers are deep, they are value conscious. Arturo Ortiz, Director, Tourism Office of Spain in India, describes the Indian luxury traveller as experienced, knowledgeable and fussy. "Price and value play a

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Likuliku Lagoon Resort, Fiji Islands

key role in luxury travel. While a high price point may signify exclusivity, the importance of value for money now cuts across all strata of travellers. He does not mind splurging on a holiday, but will still want value for his money spent, and add-ons that delight him," he says. Budgets are rarely a constraint for this segment. Anand adds, "Spends range from US\$ 20,000 and have no upper limits."

The search for authenticity

The one glove fits all strategy doesn't work for the luxury segment. A number of variables go into planning the experience. According to luxury travel network Virtuoso's *2012 Luxe Report*, the number one reason for a traveller to pack his bag is the desire for authentic experiences in new destinations. The report found that the largest influences on consumers' travel decisions are recommendations from friends and family combined with the advice of the travel consultant, the offer of once-in-a-lifetime experience, and value for the money paid. Agrees fashion designer Anita Dongre, who spends many vacations in Africa because of her wildlife enthusiast husband. "Our holiday destinations are usually influenced by our friends' recommendations and then our travel agent takes it forward," she says.

Added to the above, the Internet and the access to virtual tours, social media, and television shows

expose travellers to new places and experiences.

The business of bespoke

In a world where every nook and crevice is marked by satellite and visible on maps, sniffing out the next hotspot is quite a task for the bespoke operator. Private villas with butler services; adventure sports like sky diving, deep-sea diving and yachting; luxury rail journeys; river and ocean cruises; gourmet tours; arty and cultural holidays; self drive holidays; and travel to offbeat destinations such as Burma, Lebanon and South America are popular with the Indian luxury traveller.

Discovering the next big destination is the result of a mélange of initiatives and collaborative efforts of all the stakeholders involved: luxury operators, the destination promoters, hotels and other tourism product providers. Marts such as the International Luxury Travel Market held in Cannes attracts buyers and sellers from across the world. Plus local offices of organisations such as The Leading Hotels of the World, one of the world's largest luxury hospitality networks, brings the world's most iconic properties to the doorstep of the luxe operator.

Kuoni India has a wider choice of destinations to offer to their clients and have noticed that many luxury travellers choose countries that weren't really on the travel list earlier. "Destinations like

New Research

Virtuoso, one of the world's largest luxury travel by-invitation-only organisation, comprises elite travel specialists worldwide, who rack up over US \$9.6 billion annually in travel sales. It has just released the *2012 Luxe Report*. Some of the key findings for the luxury travel market are as follows:

Five emerging travel trends

1. Family and multi-generational travel
2. River cruises
3. Adventure trips
4. Luxury cruises
5. Celebration travel

Top travel reasons

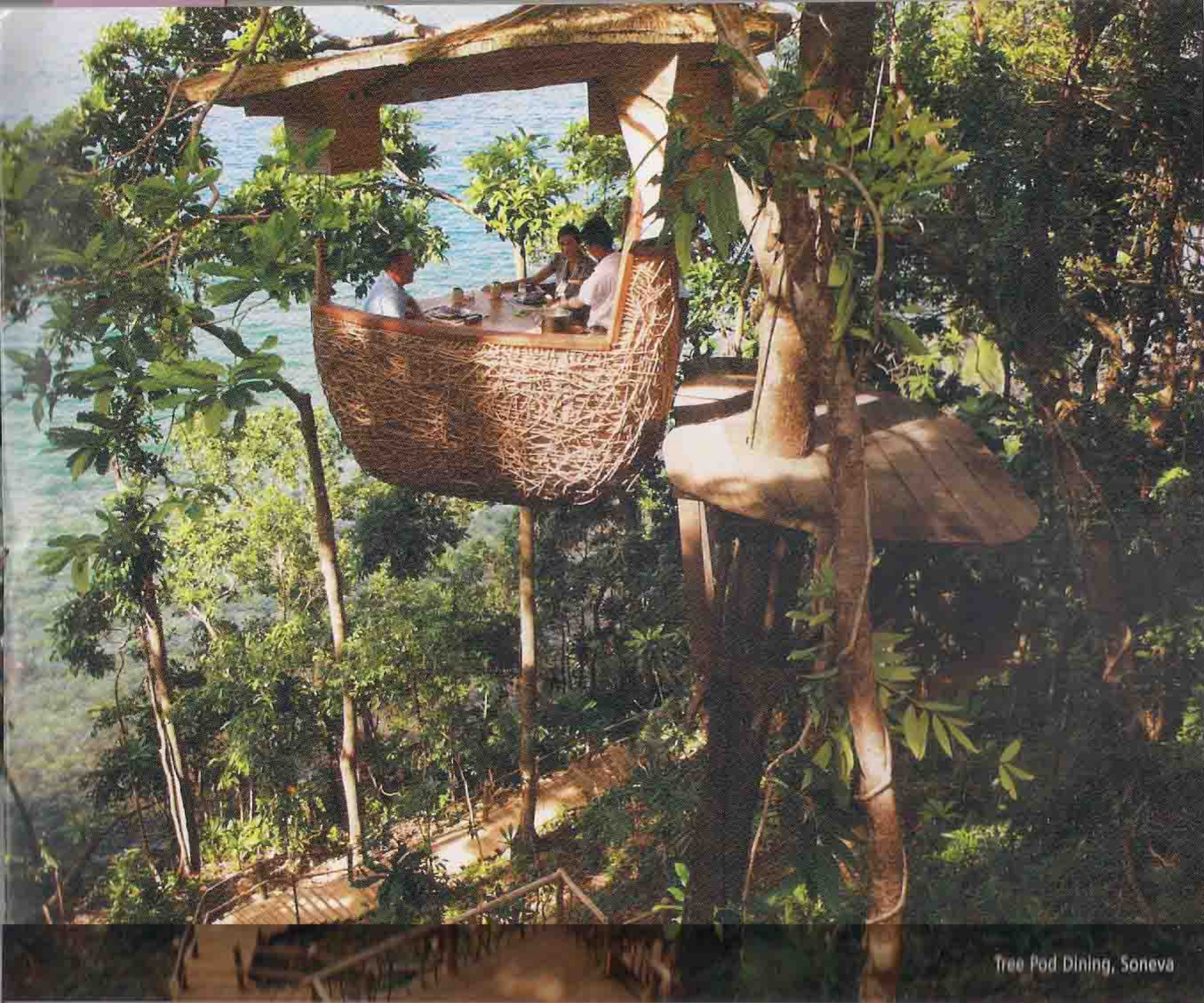
1. Seeking authentic experiences in new destinations
2. Relaxation
3. Personal enrichment (voluntourism, cultural experience, learning, etc.)
4. Spending time or reconnecting with loved ones
5. Discovering new experiences in previously visited (or more familiar) destinations
6. Seeking adventure

The most important determining factors for clients when choosing a vacation

1. The right destination
2. Once-in-a-lifetime experiences
3. Value for money paid
4. Price
5. The activities available

Left-right: Catalunya Formula 1 Grand Prix; Camp Nou, Barcelona; Sky diving in Spain





Tree Pod Dining, Soneva

"Luxury holidays offer unique experiences of global standard. They are highly customised and cater to the requirements of the individuals. It goes beyond regular sightseeing and exceeds expectations to create life-long memories"

— Rajiv Duggal



Turkey, Korea, Vietnam, Uruguay, Namibia and Cambodia are emerging as interesting options and are expanding the range of destinations on offer," says Duggal. However, apart from these new destinations, the always lusted for holidays in Europe remain to find favours from Indian travellers. "Castle holidays in stunning locales of Ireland, England and Germany are also popular with luxury holidaymakers. They have a rich and interesting history and staying in a castle hotel offers a unique and luxurious experience," Duggal adds.

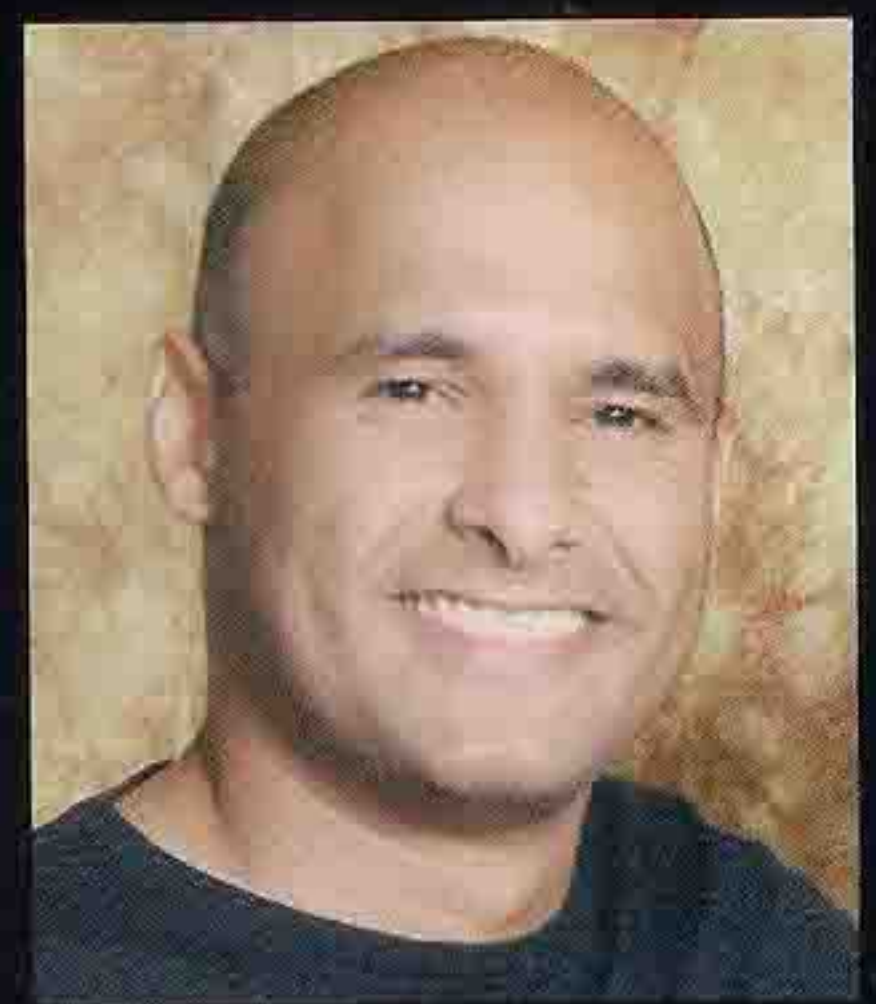
Kajal Somaiya, India Representative of Tourism Fiji has seen Indian arrivals to the exotic island nation spurt by 25 per cent in 2011 over the previous year, the result of a mix of aggressive marketing. Annual multi-city road shows, training, sponsored visits, and advertising and social media campaigns have lured in the well-heeled honeymooner and family traveller, with majority of the itineraries tailor-made by luxe travel agents and operators.

The relevancy of brick and mortar

Tourism Queensland is definitely not letting go of a country that promises to be a great upcoming market for them. Rather, they use every strategy that they can to promote their destinations in India. "In February, Tourism Queensland in association with Emirates hosted 10 CEOs of top Indian travel companies in the Gold Coast, Brisbane and surrounding regions, focussing

on providing the best in luxury that Queensland has to offer," says Sequeria. The group has a dedicated website for India (queenslandholidays.in) and also a microsite on honeymoons, hosted by the popular wedding blog, weddingsutra.com. A wise decision. "Like all travellers, luxury travellers are using the Internet more now for booking as well as for research, and are active participants on social media networks like Facebook and Twitter," reports *The Future of Luxury Travel* by International Luxury Travel Market Asia. "Nevertheless, they value the expertise of seasoned travel agents and will invest in building an enduring relationship with the right consultant. It is especially with the luxury sector that travel agents have an expanding opportunity to build a lasting and valuable clientele," the report adds.

According to yStats.com's *Global Online Travel Report 2012*, online travel bookings will represent almost a third of the worldwide volume by the end of 2012, a trend continuing in emerging economies, including India. But the luxury market seems safe for now. The *2012 Luxe Report* affirms the value that high-end travellers place on working with a professional travel advisor. "Trust, reliability and the fact that the agent is always accessible play huge roles in developing a rapport between an agent and a client," adds Catherine Oden, Director, Atout France, India. It is this rapport that makes a knowledgeable luxury specialist so invaluable.



VIEW POINT

Daniel Maior
Founder
377 Luxury

"At 377, we look into every minute detail to ensure that the whole experience is unique"

The concept of 377 is very simple although not easy to put in practice — to create handmade travel experiences. While dealing with luxury clients, one of the most important things that you have to keep in mind is exclusivity. We interpret that as providing dedicated personal assistance. At 377, we look into every minute detail to ensure that the whole experience is unique.

Luxury travellers in emerging countries like India and Brazil are very similar to those in Europe or the US. They have travelled extensively and are now looking for new destinations, unique experiences and a tailored service right from their first contact with the travel service provider. In other words, they want to feel special. For example, a very well-off couple asked us to provide them with a very simple experience in a local fishing village. The unique expression and desire was the ultimate expression of luxury for the couple.

For a luxury travel provider, choosing the right partners is a huge responsibility. They are an important part of providing the unique experience to our clients. At 377, we ensure that we are always in touch with all our partners, even if it is just a phone call, to guarantee that they meet — or go beyond — our quality standards.

The main marketing strategy for a service provider like ours should be the activity itself — to serve clients in the most perfect way. A good experience will definitely invite new members through word of mouth.

(377 Luxury is a Brazil-based bespoke travel service provider. 377club.com)



Hayman Island Resort, Australia

"The segment of Indian luxury travellers into Queensland is growing at a considerable rate year-on-year. It's still very niche but the yield out of this segment is very high"

— Ryna Sequeira



In India, opportunity exists for further growth in the segment, as bespoke travel planners are few and far between. "There is a vacuum. There aren't many expert luxury travel providers in India. Customisation in providing services such as selecting high-end hotels, packages, itinerary as per travellers' needs, innovations in sightseeing, and dining experiences are offered by select luxury brand operators," explains Ortiz. While metros have specialist luxury operators as well as big operators who run separate luxury wings, it is the aspirational traveller with no dearth of wealth, residing in Tier II and III cities who have limited access to services of bespoke travel experts.

The way business is being transacted is changing, slowly, but surely. Keenan Tham, Partner, Trilogy, an avid traveller looks for services, comfort and peace of mind while short-listing a holiday and pays heed to friends' recommendations. However, he never visits a place without researching online, and usually completes the booking process over the Internet. Is this new breed of luxury travellers a threat to the existence of the bespoke operator?

Not yet as the nuances of a human interface cannot be substituted, says Seemaa Makhija, Owner & Managing Director, Travel Voyages. She adds cautiously that a majority of Indian travellers still prefer the comfort, ease and flexibility of planning holidays with a luxury travel specialist.

A case in point is Route to Destinations, a boutique travel agency that works on creating experiential holidays, not only for individuals but also large corporate groups. "I do a lot of research and send my clients information and presentations on various destinations, hotels and resorts to choose from. When the service has to be personalised, I travel with the group," says Mahashweta Biswas, Founder, Route 2 Destinations.

The shortlist

Old-fashioned legwork is necessary especially when the stakes are high. Makhija believes there are no shortcuts to the perfect tailor-made itinerary. She emphasises that on-ground, first hand research is imperative to ensure a traveller gets exactly what he wants from the destination.

The room is at the heart of decisions once

a destination has been decided. While palace vacations in India are popular, internationally, iconic, historical, villa and wellness properties are preferred. Nikhil Agarwal, Sommelier and Director, All Things Nice, feels the location is of prime importance. Decadent hotels, plush luxurious rooms, quaint, celebrated restaurants, fine bars, and impeccable butler service are what he looks for.

Finally, the range of activities a destination can offer is what seals the deal so that multi-generational families with diverse interests can enjoy a vacation at their own pace. Oden says, "France wants to reach out to Indian luxury travellers by showcasing activities that can appeal to a wide clientele." Thus, a relaxing stay for the older generation in an elegant Relais & Châteaux property amidst vineyards is accompanied with a biking holiday for the rest of the family. Oden feels that luxury experiences need to be complete in all respects to be enjoyable to all.

Like everything else, luxury travel trends as well will change. If it's Tropical Queensland and Vietnam for now, it could be a Norwegian holiday tomorrow. However, what will remain is the need for bespoke travel, where consumers demand holidays that is made just for them. Be it a driving trip around the Grand Canyon, a flotilla in the middle of the Indian Ocean or a ski villa in the French Alps, converting dreams into reality is the next step of luxury travel.

To make it happen, for those whose time is at a premium and fortune is in abundance, the bespoke operator is indispensable. He's the pedagogue who demolishes the fine print and is just a phone call away to ensure that even in the heart of the Pacific Ocean, you will get your cup of Silver Tips Tea with a sliver of lemon at the stroke of midnight, just like you have it back home. •