

# Sales turnaround, with India's south proving an enticing drawcard



Tea Gardens, Thekkady, Kerala

Sales of India product have been hit in recent times by everything from the Mumbai attacks (in 2008 and again in 2011), to the GFC. But latent interest in this fascinating destination and improved infrastructure are helping to improve sales figures for Australian wholesalers and agents.

By Lee Mylne

INDIA'S appeal to Australian travellers of all types has not waned, according to wholesalers who report an increase in interest in both types of holiday and destinations within India.

Travel Indochina product manager for India, Eric Finley, says there has been a trend toward southern India over the past two years, with regions like Kerala gaining a higher profile and recognition among Australians.

"Our 'Spice of the South' tour has had a lot of interest; in fact it is our best performer for the coming season," says Finley, adding that this trip was one of the original destinations for Travel Indochina's entry to India.

"People are looking to go to the south rather than just doing the Golden Triangle and Rajasthan," he says. "Some of that is return travellers

looking for new destinations, but there is a lot of interest and coverage for Kerala in Australia and more people are recognising how different that part of the country is."

Finley says India also has an interesting range of new hotels which are combining heritage and modern elements, such as the Indrawan Hotel in New Delhi, which features in Travel Indochina's new Handmade Holidays brochure, out this month.

Sujata Rahman, managing director of Abercrombie & Kent in Australia says emerging trends for India include multi-generational trips, perhaps celebrating special occasions – Christmas in a Rajput palace or on a converted houseboat on the backwaters of Kerala – or girlfriend getaways.

"India is the ultimate destination for women travellers," she says. "It has colour, music, art, an amazing culinary heritage, well established

wellness practices and therapies, ancient monuments, exciting designers, textiles, jewellery, rugs and antiques.

"A&K guides are sensitive to the needs of women travellers and allow flexibility during a day's touring to accommodate specific interests and desires."

Raman says that an encouraging level of enquiries with travellers planning in advance for the peak season in India, November to February, had dropped off after the Mumbai bombing incident in July.

Simon Hills, founder and managing director of Icon Holidays and Icon Journeys, says the Australian market to India is only now recovering from the Mumbai bombing in 2008.

"In 2008 we also experienced an extraordinary devaluation of the Australian dollar against the US dollar, and then in the following years the industry has had to deal with

the GFC and any one of a number of other dramas. These have all contributed to a relatively stagnant outbound growth to India from Australia," he says.

Melbourne-based Natural Focus Safaris also says India continues to be a challenging destination for wholesalers, but despite that reports a growth in bookings of more than 15 per cent for the 2010/11 season due to a strategy of promoting areas that are off the beaten track and considered safe havens for tourists.

India's strong cultural identity, its traditions, diversities and eccentricities are one of the countries biggest drawcard. This, along with better infrastructure such as tarmac roads, vehicles of an international standard, world class airports and a higher standard of accommodation and services, the destination is becoming more appealing for tourists, they said.

## ‘There is just so much to see and do in India,’ says agent

MANY factors come into consideration when booking travel to India, which can be a more difficult and different destination to sell than others, according to travel agent Nick Whitehead.

Nick, a team leader at Flight Centre Lane Cove, says planning an India itinerary depends a lot on how long the client has to travel and what their budget is.

“India is a really big country, and it depends on whether they have a week or a month, and what their interests are,” he says. “The north of India is vastly different to the south.”

He says a popular itinerary is the northern “golden triangle” of Delhi, Rajasthan and Agra, taking in the Taj Mahal, which is a “must” for most first-time visitors to India.

“Our clients who want to travel to India are

largely in the 45-plus age group, and often are in early retirement, with time to spend travelling,” he says. “For clients like that, we are able to tailor-make tours for them to include the places they want to visit, or they just take a tour out of a brochure.”

Nick says travellers to India benefit from having a longer time to experience it, and suggests that two weeks is not enough.

“I think that you really need at least three weeks – or more – to go to India, and the last two bookings I’ve done have been for six weeks.

“We really will steer our clients towards longer holidays because there is just so much to see and do in India. It is a big country, and even if they only want to see one area, perhaps like Cochin, they need the time.”

## Wildlife experiences lead growing demand for India tours, says A&K



EMERGING trends for travel to India include wildlife experiences and themed walking tours, according to Abercrombie & Kent managing director Australasia Sujata Raman.


Raman says India this year has made up nearly eight per cent of A&K’s sales, with business to the destination more than 140 per cent up on the same time last year.

Among the emerging trends and hot destinations in India, Raman says she sees a lot of interest in wildlife encounters.

“Safaris to Central India to see tigers in their natural habitat are hot. Coupled with luxury lodgings it’s an exciting way to experience the country’s jungle wilderness, bird and animal life, and we work with the Taj Safaris lodges in Madhya Pradesh.”

Themed city walking tours are also popular. A&K can tailor walking tours for travellers with special interests such as the architecture of Delhi; shopping in Jodhpur; food in Kochi; photography in Jaipur; spiritual sights in Varanasi or literary haunts of Mumbai.

Left: Female Bengal tiger at the Ranthambore Wildlife Sanctuary



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# Icon India sales double with Journeys program boosting demand

ICON Holidays' growth to India has doubled in 2011, helped by the introduction of the Icon Journeys program.

Icon's founder and managing director Simon Hills says the Icon Journeys program, which features a series of set itineraries, has led to a dramatic increase in interest and bookings.

"Icon's independent and fully bespoke private FIT business has shown growth of more than 50 per cent, and the new 'Journeys' program has taken off strongly, almost reaching the size of the already strong Icon Holidays program in less than six months," he says.

"Two of the key attractions of the new program are that each journey is available 365 days of the year and the inclusions are fabulous."

Inclusions offer such experiences as a half-day spent tending to a young elephant in southern Kerala, a full day learning Indian cultural dance, percussion and traditional painting in the Central East, cooking classes in all destinations, visits to World Heritage sites, exploration of remote and authentic villages, a walking tour in Mumbai, distant and rarely visited wildlife



Cochin, Kerala

parks, tiger safaris, houseboats and many more.

"We have really covered India from the north to the south and the east to the west," says Hills. "Each of our set itineraries has four levels of accommodation choice."

Examples of itineraries are the 16-day "Tigers and Temples" trip, priced from \$4217 per person (twin share), the 16-day "Southern Spices" itinerary priced from \$2494 per person (twin share), and the 12-day "Classic Rajasthan" from \$2342.

## Ram World says India – has 'everything'

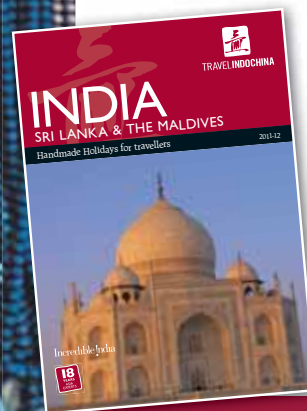
ALL the colour and culture of India is presented in the Incredible India tours packaged by Sydney-based Ram World Travel.

The new Ram brochure features a range of "beautifully thought out" tours designed to encourage Australians to visit India, says managing director Ram Gusain.

"At present the overall market to India from Australia is very slow, and the reasons for this need to be analysed or investigated," he says. "India is a safe destination and worth visiting, as the whole world is found in India. It offers everything that one needs in a holiday. The hotels range from three-star to five-star deluxe, super deluxe and heritage hotels, and small palaces converted into hotels, where one can stay like a king or a queen."

With the strong Australian dollar, India also offers value for money, with shopping the greatest bargain, he says. Among the best deals at the moment, Gusain suggests the 15-day "Pink City-Taj-Tiger Wildlife Tour", which covers the palaces, forts, art and architecture of Jaipur, the Taj Mahal, and tiger sighting in Ranthambore Wildlife Sanctuary, priced from \$3780.

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# Tempo Holidays releases India deals



Taj Mahal

TEMPO Holidays has a range of India tours on offer, including the seven-day “Golden Triangle” tour from \$881 per person (twin share).

Departing from Delhi, highlights of the tour include a visit to the pink city Jaipur, home to the Amber Fort and the amazing Palace of the Winds, and to the Taj Mahal and the Moghul Agra Fort. It is valid for sale and travel until September 30, 2012.

The 14-day “Trails of the Tiger” will have strong appeal for wildlife lovers, and is priced from \$2668 per person (twin share). The itinerary starts in Delhi and includes game drives through Kanha National Park, prime tiger wilderness and the inspiration behind Rudyard Kipling’s famous Jungle Book, and through Pench National Park. It is valid for sale and travel until June 30, 2012.

Departing from Bangalore, the 11-day “Southern Holy Places, Jungles and Backwaters” explores southern India and includes the magnificent Maharajah’s palace in Mysore, game drives at Nagarhole Tiger Sanctuary and an overnight deluxe houseboat cruise in the tranquil Kerala backwaters. It is priced from \$1830 per person (twin share), and is valid for sale and travel until May 31, 2012.

All packages include accommodation and breakfast daily, as well as entrance fees for attractions.

## September opening for Sofitel Mumbai

SOFITEL Luxury Hotels will open its flagship Sofitel in Mumbai in late September.

The new hotel is part of a \$US106 million investment and India-wide expansion by Sofitel and Accor Hotels, with the group expecting to develop a network of around 100 hotels in India over the next decade.

The \$106 million hotel will have 302 guest rooms, including 31 suites, and five restaurants and bars.

Located 30 minutes drive from Mumbai International Airport, Sofitel Mumbai Bandra Kurla is located within the prestigious International Finance and Business Centre of Mumbai commonly known as the Bandra-Kurla Complex or BKC.

## Ascott opening first India property

A 96-UNIT serviced apartment complex rebranded as Citadines Richmond Bangalore opens this month as Ascott’s first property in India. Ascott has six other properties with more than 1300 apartment units under development in India.

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## NFS promotes Kerala’s ‘hidden gems’

MELBOURNE-based Natural Focus Safaris has launched its 2011/12 India brochure, with greater emphasis on the south Indian state of Kerala.

The new 12-day “Hidden Gems of Kerala” tour visits spice and coffee plantations, the forts and colonial architecture of old Kochi, and takes a safari to search for tigers, bears and other exotic wildlife in Nagahole National Park.

Accommodation is in boutique properties such as the Brunton Boatyard in Kochi, the secluded Tranquil Resort on a coffee plantation and the Orange County Kabini retreat at Nagarhole. Prices start from \$3992 per person (twin share) for travel from January 11-31, 2012.

Natural Focus Safaris has developed a portfolio that offers the “best tour options” to India’s most recognised hotspots while also catering to an emerging market of travellers who want to get off the beaten path with a selection of explorations that incorporate India’s “hidden gems”.

Tours offer a wide range of options including stays in India’s bustling cities to small boutique hotels in rural settings, houseboats, wildlife lodges, rail journeys, home stays, and even opportunities to stay in picturesque palaces and history soaked heritage buildings that have been reborn as five-star-plus hotels; all of which can be mixed and matched allowing agents to cater to their clients every whim.

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# India



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