

HVS Monday Musings: Island Tourism: Uncovering India's Undiscovered Gems

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India's vast coastline is peppered with some of the world's most stunning, untouched, and unexplored islands. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands, as well as Lakshadweep, are home to the majority of these. Both islands have become popular tourist destinations in recent years because of their beautiful landscape, rich biodiversity, and unique experiences ranging from historical landmarks to water sports and adventure activities. Pre-COVID in 2019,

Lakshadweep hosted over 7,000 tourists, whereas the Andaman & Nicobar Islands welcomed over 500,000 tourists. While the foreign tourist arrivals in Andaman & Nicobar have stayed relatively stable, domestic tourist arrivals doubled during 2012-2019. Despite these outstanding growth figures, tourism on these islands remains mostly undeveloped and undiscovered.

Several challenges have previously inhibited the rise of tourism on these islands, with the lack of essential facilities and infrastructure, such as airports, jetties, and internal roads as well as the scarcity of quality, branded hotels and resorts being the key concerns. Bali and Maldives, for example, have over 200 and 60 luxury hotels, respectively, while Andaman and Nicobar Islands currently have only one branded luxury hotel, indicating a significant supply deficit. Other major deterrents have included a lack of mainland access and expensive airfares. Access to the islands is also limited due to security issues related to their strategic location.

The government has taken numerous measures to develop these islands into world-class tourist attractions, realizing the huge potential tourism has in the region's economic and overall growth. Tourism infrastructure in Andaman & Nicobar, for instance, is being developed under the Coastal Circuit as part of the Swadesh Darshan Scheme. The Union Government and NITI Aayog are also focusing on the islands' holistic and long-term development as tourism destinations on par with prominent Southeast Asian beach destinations such as the Maldives, Bali, and Mauritius. Model tourism projects, both land-based and water villas, are being planned for development under a public-private partnership on a design, build, finance, operate, and transfer basis, with all clearances required for the projects being given upfront. Infrastructure improvements are currently underway to improve communication and transportation to the mainland. Yacht marinas, jetty facilities, and ferry projects are being built to improve marine connectivity. Another important aim is to increase road connectivity as well as the development and expansion of airports to enhance air connectivity.



Summary

The Indian government is taking various steps to develop the Andaman & Nicobar Islands and Lakshadweep into world-class tourism destinations. However, several challenges have previously inhibited the rise of tourism on these islands. Read on to know more.

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An air circuit has been developed under the regional connection project (UDAN) to encourage 'heli tourism' using existing helipads. Seaplane services are also under consideration to further increase connectivity. In addition, the recent introduction of cruises between mainland India and some Indian islands can be a game-changer going forward. Digital connectivity, high-speed telecommunications, and internet services are also being enhanced, as these are important infrastructure requirements for the new-age tourist. These measures, paired with the islands' closeness to other well-known tourist attractions in Southeast Asia, should help the islands gain popularity with both domestic Indian tourists searching for beach vacations and international visitors in the future.

The government and all related parties, however, must exercise caution while executing the development plans to avoid the issues and severe environmental impact that have been seen in other island destinations, such as the Maldives, because of rapid expansion. The Maldives government and resort owners have learned from their mistakes and are now working together to reduce carbon emissions and protect the environment, particularly the coral reefs around the islands, by using solar energy, recycling waste and sewage, and actively engaging in coral gardening and conservation.

Similarly, the ecosystem of the Andaman & Nicobar Islands, as well as Lakshadweep, are both extremely vulnerable, and development plans must strike a balance between tourism growth and sustainability. Destination management strategies should be implemented by closely monitoring the number of visitors to protect the region's ecology, the privacy of locals and tribal people many of whom are unwilling to interact with the outside world, and above all, to preserve the serenity and tranquillity of the islands.

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About **Mandeep S Lamba**



Mandeep S. Lamba, President – South Asia, oversees the HVS global hospitality practice for South Asia. He has spent over 30 years in the hospitality industry of which the last 19 have been in CEO positions. Having worked with leading International and domestic Hotel Companies such as IHG, Radisson & ITC Hotels, he also set up joint venture companies with Dawnay Day Group UK and Onyx Hospitality, Thailand to own and operate hotels in India giving him a broader exposure to the hospitality business.

An established industry leader, Mandeep has won several awards and recognitions in India and abroad for his accomplishments and contribution to the hospitality industry. He is a Certified Hospitality Administrator from the American Hotels Association (CHA), a member of the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors, UK (MRICS) and a member of the Tourism Council of CII (Northern India). His views are often solicited for television and print media as a spokesperson for the hospitality & tourism sector.

Prior to joining HVS in 2018, Mandeep was the Managing Director, Hotels & Hospitality Group for JLL.

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