

Interview with Vibhas Prasad

Director, Leisure Hotels Group

By: Rohit Ashok

Leisure Hotels Group is the only Hotel Chain Company operating in the state of Uttarakhand with more than 30 years of hospitality experience. Their belief lies in the true Indian tradition of Atithi Devo Bhavo – “Guest is God”. To know more about their properties and their planning we did an exclusive conversation with the Director, Leisure Hotels Group - Vibhas Prasad. Vibhas is working with Leisure Hotels from the last eighteen years.

According to you what is the USP of Leisure Hotels?

Each of our properties are situated in natural surroundings that blend in with the environment and are ecologically sustainable. They are aesthetically pleasing and use local materials to create a sense of place & feel that is local. As we live so much at the properties, we aspire to serve food as it were our own home. The focus is on fresh ingredients, local Indian and international cuisines. It's ingrained in our culture to go the extra mile to bring a smile on our guests. We provide value for money offerings at each of our properties.

Have you signed any new hotels amidst this crisis?

Owners in Leisure destinations



continued to show great interest in our brand and are taking a long-term view strategy into their consideration. We are currently in various stages of dialogue with owners of 6 properties in U.P., Himachal Pradesh & Uttarakhand. The pace of such conversations has not been robust, largely due to the

uncertainty. But we're having productive conversations with owners who want to move forward.

What is Leisure Hotel's growth plan going forward?

We have a three-pronged approach toward business development. One is



through building our hotels and another is through management contracts of properties in strategic locations. As mentioned already we currently have two properties with Club Mahindra and two with Taj Hotels as well.

What is the marketing strategy you have adopted to promote Leisure properties?

No one-size-fits-all model can be applied to unlock new opportunities and possible demand sources. The need of the hour is to stay connected with guests through all the possible mediums like social, email, and digital medium. Creating a trust through our communications on ‘Hygiene, Safety & Sanitization’; ensuring that the guest’s money is safe providing them Flexi Cancellation & Amendment Policies;

Offering Perks on Direct booking and attractive packages with value add-ons would remain a key strategy. We will continue to focus our feeder markets, targeting the right demographics with the right content & offers.

What is being done by way of having a more sanitized environment in Leisure Hotels?

With social distancing being the need of the hour, we have tweaked the regular processes and activities to ensure that least human contact is required:

- Digital Check-In & Check-Out and digital payments is already a new normal
- All touchpoints in public areas like a door handle, elevator buttons, countertops, tabletops, railings, etc. are cleaned continuously using a

sanitizer/disinfectant. These practices are also in place in guest rooms during the morning housekeeping service and at turn-down in the evening

- Protocols are in place for staff in the kitchens, restaurants, in-room dining, business centres, and banquet halls to sanitize their hands every time they serve food or touch food-related items
- Updated and detailed cleaning checklists, including the use of professionally identified chemicals and agents for all areas including laundry, are being followed and monitored closely. All supplies and materials are sanitized before being admitted into the hotel premises. Correctly formulated hand sanitizers are in place in all guest rooms and

at all public spaces and include the entrances, lobbies, corridors, business centres, cloakrooms, etc. Our cars are disinfected after each use, as is luggage, before entering the hotel

- Masks and disposable gloves are being worn by all team members at all times and changed frequently. Housekeeping staff use fresh gloves for every room they service
- Restaurants and seating in the lobby have been reconfigured to ensure safe distances are maintained between guests
- Temperature readings of guests and associates are taken at the entrance of the hotel
- A guest check-in self-declaration form is in place which covers COVID-19 symptoms. Any guest who indicates these symptoms is required to undergo a medical examination prior to check-in
- If any of the parameters for our guests or colleagues are not normal, a medical examination and medical assistance are provided immediately
- Professional agencies and doctors are on standby for sanitization of all areas should there be anyone detected with a positive sign of COVID-19
- Detailed Standard Operating Procedures are in place in case of a positive COVID-19 diagnosis where a guest or a colleague needs to be quarantined

What are some of the new sustainable initiatives taken by Leisure Hotels?

Sustainability in hospitality is a topic that has been debated for decades – as tourism grows in popularity worldwide; hoteliers are tasked with how to ensure their hospitality doesn't harm the environment. The Group is committed

to employing the best environmental and ecological practices in technology, equipment and operational processes.

Eco-tourism has acquired a great significance in recent times as it has the potential to bring about the economic development of the local communities and also protect our natural heritage. It has been designated as an industry and no industry can survive without protecting and improving upon its product. We have realized that unless the welfare of the local communities is taken care of, the ecosystem around cannot be at peace and hence we have adopted a number of strategies.

To support the local communities to reduce their dependence on the forest:

- We are proud that our activities at The Corbett Hideaway alone provide livelihood and support to more than 250 families directly or indirectly.
 - Training and capacity building programmes for the local unemployed youth viz. Nature Guide training.
 - Providing an outlet for the marketing of the locally made handicraft.
- To conserve Natural Resources:
- We are working on the utilization of non-conventional energy resources that have a direct bearing on the economy of the local community.
 - Controlling weed from invading the natural habitat i.e Lantana Bushes. This also helps conserving precious wood.
 - Recycling of bio-degradable waste and converting it for positive uses.
 - Recycling of liquid waste to stop contamination of natural freshwater bodies.
 - We are promoting Mahasheer conservation in its natural habitat and also trying to enhance avian density which would have a bearing on the overall biodiversity of the region.

To promote Environmental awareness programmes:

- Thousands of visitors have benefited from our programmes and interaction with naturalists to make them environmentally conscious and motivated enough to participate in conservation programmes.
 - We support local school groups in environmental education activities.
- To support Wildlife Management:
- We welcome and provide infrastructural facilities for workshops, symposia and conferences related to wildlife conservation.
 - We motivate forest personnel by way of rewards for meritorious services.
 - Provide tactical support in patrolling as and when asked.

Which segments of hotels will bounce back faster?

We envisage recovery to be strong, particularly on the domestic fore as the sector is devastated. The industry will bounce back as there is huge demand for business and leisure travel and not to forget the large social events and wedding industry. Already, some leisure markets are seeing a good recovery. We expect the recovery to be in double digits once the vaccine is freely available. Inbound, exhibition sectors will also recover in a year or two.

How long do you think it will take for the industry to stabilise?

The COVID 19 pandemic and the impact of the Indian lockdown have had a disastrous impact on the country's hospitality sector for now and perhaps forever. It will probably take another 1 - 2 years to come back to pre-COVID levels or till the time the vaccine comes out. □