

Business Standard

Staycations: Short and sweet option to regular holidays in Covid times

Staycations typically involve shorter travel at drivable distances. They are becoming popular due to curbs and risks involved in long-distance/duration stay

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Spread over 11 acres, Aahana resort at Corbett Tiger Reserve overlooks the Bijrani forest and offers opportunities for bird watching, nature trail and yoga

It's road trips over air travel during Covid-19 times as drive cations or staycations become the new trend. Take the case of Gurugram-based Vishal and Shibani, who chose Rishikesh which is only a six-hour journey by road, and sensibly carried their victuals in order to avoid making too many halts on the way.

“We wanted to go to a water body and the nearest was Rishikesh. It was such a beautiful break with the Ganga at its cleanest best,” said Shibani. They had booked a weekend at Taj Rishikesh which took care of all social distancing norms.

“The buffets were there, the only difference being that you needed to don a mask and only two people were allowed at a time. Tables were spaced out. Nobody was in a mood to attend vast community events like Ganga Arti, but since that is the high point of a trip to Rishikesh, the hotel had thoughtfully organised a mini arti on its premises. The hotel was strict about sanitising and masks, and would gently nudge guests with ‘can we provide you with a mask’ if they were found without one in lobbies and lifts,” she added.

Destinations in demand

Travel in the Covid-19 era is all about keeping it safe and simple and places that are high on 'nature quotient' are gaining popularity. Destinations such as Dharamshala and Bir, Goa, Darjeeling, Udaipur, Lonavala, Alibaug and Coorg are picking up in demand, according to travel consultants and portals. Says Sabina Chopra, Co-Founder and COO, Corporate Travel & Head Industry Relations, Yatra.com: "This year, due to the work-from-home scenario, many professionals have been wanting to step out and have opted for beautiful exotic locations as workcations or staycations. In these locations, there are many hospitality properties for which we have witnessed a spike in enquiries of about 23 per cent."

Hospitality outlets have been witnessing a surge in occupancy levels. This is particularly true in the case of locations such as Lonavala and Alibaug near Mumbai with properties like Amby Valley, Della resorts and Alibaug Radisson Blu doing particularly well. Likewise, resorts near Bengaluru, like Coorg's Evolve Back, Taj Madikeri, The Tamara and Welcome Heritage Ayatana are finding takers. Ditto for Delhi NCR's Westin Sohna and Karma Lakelands. The latter is a golf community spread over 300 acres in Sector 80, Gurugram. It has just launched luxury tents called Kamp Karma for those who want to enjoy an unconventional stay. It also has designer luxury villas. Says a Karma Lakeland spokesperson: "Karma villas are ideal for guests who want minimal interference - there is no need to enter an elevator or any such congested areas of the kind seen at a regular hotel. Meals come to your doorstep and there are no conventional buffets as guests can enjoy their breakfast buffets right on their table. In the era of Covid-19, we have launched a 'Karma Kares' programme for the safety of guests. From organic food to 100 per cent rainwater harvesting, we have left no stone unturned in our endeavour to be eco-responsible."

Hospitality properties are ensuring hygiene, and all touchpoints in public areas such as doors, handles, railings, are being cleaned continuously with a disinfectant or sanitiser. Says Ayu Tripathi, Director, Aahana The Corbett Wilderness: "Not only are the rooms cleaned and thoroughly sanitised using UV Technology before guests arrive, but we have contactless check-in facility too. Moreover our resort has individual air-conditioners in every room and no central air-conditioning."

Traditional travel hotspots like Goa and Udaipur continue to find favour and Yatra is offering special packages at properties such as Grand Hyatt Goa, Novotel Goa Dona Sylvia Resort, ITC Grand Goa resort, The Postcard properties at Moira/Velha/Cuelim. In Udaipur, you have The Oberoi Udaivilas, Taj Lake Palace and The Leela Palace. According to travel consultants, there are certain hubs such as Goa, Delhi-Rajasthan, the entire Bengaluru belt of Coorg, Kabini, where travel bookings have peaked with long weekends fully booked and December all sold out especially around Christmas and New Year. However, what is new is the "Free Cancellation, zero payment now policy". Many of these bookings are fully refundable or are made on the payment of one rupee. People are not exactly cancelling but are postponing the travel by a few days or weeks, owing to a surge in cases or change of rules pertaining to entry to a zone.

Staycations in city hotels for a brief stay are also on the rise. Says Rishabh Bhargava, Commercial Director, Hilton, Bangalore Embassy Golf Links: "Typically people opt for a one-day stay, with requests for early arrival and late departure, giving them enough time to relax at the hotel. Once a swimming pool, kids play areas and spa are operational and ready for use, the average length of stay for a staycation may increase, with some guests opting to stay for more than two nights as well." Bhargava says it is difficult to ascertain what a guest is willing to spend. However, a typical staycationer is availing only what is part of the package or may choose to buy a meal at max. There isn't any additional spend on ancillary services like laundry, car-rental, and mini-bar. With so many restrictions in place, the new normal has changed the overall experience. Guest expectations are for the hotels to provide hygienic and clean facilities. People also want to try out new places on each staycation, hence the repeat clientele is also less.

In overseas destinations, Maldives has been a bestseller. Every hotel is on an island and there is natural separation from vast crowds. "Our Maldives numbers are 80 per cent of pre Covid-19 levels," says Hari Ganapathy, Co-Founder, Pickyourtrail, "Apart from Maldives, we find naturally endowed destinations such as South Africa also opening up. It's a matter of time before an air bubble is established between South Africa and India for the numbers to explode." Countries with a tourism-driven economy, such as Sri Lanka and Maldives aren't banking on the vaccine but on fast-tracking Covid-19 PCR tests where the results come

within an hour. Dubai is finding favour because of its pro-active mechanism of contact tracing, testing and its fervour to return to normal life, even as it gears up for Expo 2020 scheduled next year.

How to plan your staycation

Get a Covid-19 test before you travel. It is highly recommended to take your negative test result along when you travel to make your experience smoother and hassle-free. One must check traveller guidelines for the planned destination. Factor in the risk profile of the place in question. New Zealand, for instance, has a better Covid risk rating than London. Maharashtra has made RT-PCR test a must for four states--Delhi, Rajasthan, Gujarat and Goa.

Avoid weekends, especially long ones. Says Rajat Mahajan, Partner Deloitte India: "Better to avoid long holiday weekends such as the Gurgurab weekend which tends to see everyone heading for holidays. Even if you plan one, a Sunday check-in and a Tuesday check-out will be far more efficient, not only on your wallet but also from a safety perspective."

The lesser the better

Group tours or travelling with extended family and friends is not a good idea. People with low immunity or vulnerable to contracting infection on account of underlying health issues must avoid travel. Adults in the 25-55 age group are best suited for a staycation. But even they must take all necessary precautions during the pandemic.

Says Akash Datta, Senior Vice President, Consulting & Valuation, HVS (South Asia): "After being cooped-up in their homes for months and following a mundane WFH routine, people have started travelling again for a change of place. One must keep abreast with the rules and guidelines on Covid testing by the state and central governments, which may evolve from time to time. Choose a location that has a limited number of cases and decide on the ideal mode of transport. Several hotels are offering heavy discounts but it would be prudent to evaluate the properties on their safety and hygiene protocols. Follow the government and hotel guidelines to the tee to ensure not only their own safety but also the safety of other guests, hotel staff etc."

Travellers are increasingly preferring resorts and homestays and opting for branded hotels, as guests 'trust' them to be 'safer' due to the implementation of extensive Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), hygiene and cleanliness norms. Five stars and four stars don't tend to cut corners. Says Deloitte's Mahajan: "what you don't see behind the scenes is automation taking place in terms of robotic housekeeping, zero contact services, disinfection services, remodelling of entire laundry services. Bigger brands with financial muscle have the wherewithal and process efficiency to invest in hygiene and safety."

What can the guest expect?

There are quite a few surprises in store when travelling during the Covid era. Hotels are pulling back the typical buffet formats. Some high-end resorts are not doing housekeeping daily, but only on a need basis.

Your mobile is your genie and indispensable to your travel now. Technology is being used for a low-touch experience in all facets, with mobile check-ins encouraged even once guests have arrived in the lobby. Room keys may also become redundant, with virtual rooms keys on smartphones becoming the way forward.

Says HVS' Datta: "Contactless check-in and check-outs and digital menus have become a standard. Self-service buffet has made way to assisted buffets at most hotels. Restaurant capacity has been reduced to maintain social distancing and most hotels provide in-room dining and outdoor dining facilities. Many chains are also investing in new cleaning technologies such as electrostatic disinfection misters and ultraviolet light technology in their quest to implement the best-in-class measures to ensure the safety of not only their guests but also their employees. These measures help rebuild guest confidence and trust."

The importance of medical staff is being felt more than ever before at every hospitality property. The guest's safety has now become top priority, and all properties now have doctors-on-call and a task force that understands the seriousness of medical issues and is trained to take preventive actions in certain cases. Says Hilton's Rishabh Bhargava: "Hotels usually have a doctor-on-call facility available, though none of the

hotels will have experts on premises to handle Covid-19-positive patients. Hilton Bangalore hasn't reported any emergency cases, but it does have an emergency room on stand-by for use as a quarantine facility in case any guest or team member shows symptoms, before he is moved to a hospital for more intense care by the experts.”

People’s perceptions and preferences are evolving with increased spotlight on safety and hygiene in today’s Covid-19 world. Hotels have adapted quickly to this change to ensure the safety of their guests and employees alike. Safety, hygiene, security are the cornerstones of travel in times of Corona and have emerged as the true luxury.

Factors to consider while planning your next Staycation:

- Keep yourself abreast of the rules and guidelines issued by the state and central governments, which may evolve from time to time (for instance, does the destination demand a Covid test result?)
- Choose a location that has very few cases and decide on the ideal mode of transportation – air, road etc.
- Several hotels are offering heavily discounted rates but it would be prudent to evaluate the properties on their safety and hygiene protocols.
- Follow the government and hotel guidelines to the tee to ensure not only your own safety but also that of other guests, hotel staff etc.

Source: HVS

Table: What you pay and what you get

Property	City/town	Rates
Della Resorts	Lonavala	Rs 11,160 per night, breakfast included
The Tamara	Coorg	Rs 18,612 per night, breakfast included
Aloha on the Ganges	Rishikesh	Rs 9,000 plus taxes, breakfast included
The Naini Retreat	Nainital	Rs 11,000 plus taxes, breakfast included
Niramaya Retreats Surya Samudra	Kovalam	Rooms start at Rs 10,496, Heritage Classic Rs 11,186 with breakfast
Aahana the Corbett Wilderness	Jim Corbett	Base Category Room Corbett Club Rs 18,000 inclusive of taxes and all meals included, per night; 4-bedroom Villa for 8 pax at Rs 46,000 per night inclusive of taxes and breakfast
Karma Lakeland	Gurugram	Kamp Karma Rs 8,400 plus taxes including breakfast for 2; Karma villas Rs 70,000 plus taxes for a 4 bedroom villa with breakfast for 8 pax; 3-bedroom villa Rs 55,000 plus taxes with breakfast for 6 pax
Hilton	Bengaluru	Package with two meals starts at 5,499+taxes
Radisson Blu Udaipur Palace Resort & Spa	Near Fateh Sagar Lake , Ambamata, Udaipur	Rs 8,122 per night, breakfast included
Novotel Goa Dona Sylvia Resort	Cavelossim Beach, Goa	Rs 11,000 per night plus taxes

Source: Market Research (Travel Portals, Hotels)