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Kerala focuses to preserve the ecology and local culture traditions

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Shri P Bala Kiran

Kerala has been in the tourism industry for the last 30 years and has created a brand for itself as an alluring leisure destination, particularly in Western Europe. Kerala Tourism has now rejigged its strategy to substantially increase the number of footfalls, doubling the international tourists and increasing the domestic tourists by 50 per cent in five years. In order to achieve this goal, 65 lakh new tourists need to visit Kerala during this period. Shri P Bala Kiran, Director, Kerala Tourism shares more.

Bharti Sharma

The state government has chalked out a multi-pronged strategy to make Kerala a 365-day destination, which offers not only leisure but also caters to a diverse range of segments such as adventure tourism, MICE and activity tourism. Also, tourism in the state used to focus on South Kerala, which is evident from the fact that 90 per cent of tourists come to Kochi, Thrissur, Munnar, Idukki, Kumarakom, Alappuzha and Thiruvananthapuram (for Kovalam). Apparently, Kerala's northern parts used to attract lesser number of tourists. Talking about the strategies and new advancements, Shri Bala Kiran shares, "Domestic tourism has also been on the upswing for Kerala tourism. Till late, state's tourism season used to extend from October to March and the remaining six months (April-September) were what was known as lean season. The strategy now is to have a geographical spread across the entire state and woo tourists with new products during the lean season. One such product is the ongoing all-Saturday Champions Boat League (CBL) which made its debut this year and goes across three and a half months (August-November). A tourist visiting Kerala during this season can witness at least one snake boat race on a specified time for which tickets are available online."

As part of its diversification strategy, Kerala Tourism has started the hugely popular 'Monsoon Raga Festival'. The idea is to develop Kerala as an art destination. The Onam festival, which falls in the lean season, is being positioned at the national level. He comments, "As for North Kerala, two major tourist attractions have been chalked out. One is a river cruise tourism project where 8-9 rivers are being connected. Second is the ₹150-crore

Thalassery Heritage Project, which is designed to promote the Dutch, Portuguese and French heritage. The three airports in close vicinity (Kannur, Mangalore and Kozhikode) providing easy connectivity can be leveraged to turn North Kerala into a tourism hotspot."

Two other segments which are being aggressively promoted are adventure tourism and MICE tourism. Elucidating on the developments on this front, Shri Bala Kiran tells, "Almost 65 per cent of people in India are below 35 years of age and the youngsters look for activities and adventure as tourists. All 14 districts of Kerala now provide some sort of adventure activities, and it has been backed up by adventure tourism guidelines to ensure basic levels of safety. Efforts are also underway to project Kerala as a robust MICE destination. The Kerala chapter of Indian Convention Promotion Bureau is being launched to tap into this segment which will give a fillip to tourism in the state. Big conferences are now happening in the state, especially with the coming up of Grand Hyatt Lulu Convention Centre. In fact, the whole of Kochi is being developed as a MICE destination in a big way."

Tourism in any state will have to reinvent itself if it has to survive in a highly competitive marketplace. Kerala has made Responsible Tourism as the mainstay of its tourism policy and activities. Shri Bala Kiran says, "Our traditional marketing strategy was to promote Kerala as a place where a tourist can cover hills, tea gardens, forests, beaches and backwaters within three hours or in a 50 km radius. But now we are also showcasing Kerala's culture and the people before the tourists. Through RT and four heritage projects of Thalassery, Muziris, Alappuzha and Travancore, Kerala is unfolding its new facets before tourists. Kerala Tourism's new campaign, Human by Nature, is part of that strategy."

Responsible Tourism is the only way to sustain tourism in the coming years. Tourism is not only about increasing footfalls; it is also about preserving the ecology and local culture traditions of a destination. Kerala surely wants to witness increase in the number of tourists but in a responsible manner so that the socio-economic benefits of tourism are reaped by the local community. Commenting on the few projects, Shri Bala Kiran shares, "Kerala launched RT 12 years ago on a pilot basis in four to five destinations. It has now been mainstreamed in all the 14 districts while the number of people engaged in 16,000 RT units has gone up to 80,000. These units have been tied up with various hotels, resorts and Ayurveda centres to provide services to them and earn money. Parallel to that, local people are being made aware of environmental sustainability by encouraging them to discard plastic, use LED lights and learn waste management."

The pioneering CBL, patterned on the IPL format of cricket, has been launched in an ambitious way. It's also the best example of responsible tourism, wherein the benefits of tourism will be going to 3,000 boat rowers who are fishermen or teachers or local employees. "It will be a game-changer in the months to come. Earlier, boat races were largely scattered and these were such as village-level festivals. Now, it has been completely professionalised, standardised and commercialised with the backing of government support, industry sponsors and franchisees. This is the first season of CBL and already 12 lakh people have witnessed boat races live in various backwaters and more than 10 times of them have seen it on television. Tourists coming here can experience snake-boat races live like they see the Chinese Dragon Boat Races or the Thames River Festival," he concludes.

