

**‘We are planning waterway transport on the backwaters, ropeways and holistic health resort on the PPP model’**

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# ‘We are planning waterway transport on the backwaters, ropeways and a holistic health resort on the PPP model’

In an exclusive interview, **Suman Billa**, secretary, Kerala Tourism tells why winning the National Tourism Award for its Kumarakom rural tourism project, is the perfect start to a year during which the tourism board is set to launch its seaplane project and work aggressively towards positioning Kerala as the home of Ayurveda. **By Steena Joy**



**Suman Billa**

**Kerala being the birthplace of Ayurveda, how effective has been the two tier classification (Green Leaf and Olive Leaf) system in standardising the science in the state?**

You cannot undermine the importance of classification especially when it involves something like Ayurveda. When a tourist travels here, he needs to be assured that what he pays for is what he gets. Ayurveda is unfortunately not like a hotel room which can be viewed online. It involves

treatment. Thankfully we have good medical colleges and medical institutions in Kerala so the doctor pool is sufficient. Then we also have the reputed institutions of excellence like Kottakal Arya Vaidyashala, Vaidyaratnam and Nagarjuna who have been practicing unbroken Ayurveda for many centuries. At the second level we have the masseurs and the therapists for whom there are courses conducted by the Kerala Institute of Travel and Tourism Studies (KITTS). There are also courses done by Ayurveda practitioners like Pankaja Kasturi College of Ayurveda in the private sector. So all this ensures a steady stream of well trained manpower for the sector. The responsibility to ensure that the therapists work well lies with the doctor.

**When is the seaplane project expected to take off?**

The seaplane project will be launched by this April end. The three international airports at Thiruvananthapuram, Kochi and Calicut and perhaps

growth of tourism in Kerala. We take up these kind of projects on PPP model. We are planning waterway transport on the backwaters, ropeways in hilly terrains and an holistic health resort with all services like spa under one roof. For all these ideas we will support private participation.

**What steps are being taken to make Kerala a zero waste destination?**

There are two or three ideas we are working on. The problem is that there is a standard of hygiene that is expected of a major tourist destination and it is necessary to involve the local bodies. So we decided to let the local panchayats do their work of collecting the garbage; community groups like Kudumbashree are also involved in this. We have spent around five to six crore every year in organising this in Kumarakom and Kovalam. After collection, disposal of garbage was also a huge problem. To address this problem, we started a biogas plant on pilot basis in Kumbalangi

remain more of a voluntary classification system. Homestay owners know that they can attract tourists only if they meet the standards. So the pull should work more than the push.

**How will you use art fests like Utsavam and Nishagandhi to drive tourism?**

The Nishagandhi is a high profile festival which attracts the finest artists of the country to Kerala while Utsavam is more localised and for providing sustenance to local artists. Utsavam is doing a wonderful job and will continue. Nishagandhi being a premium gathering we plan to ramp it up to the global level. This year we instituted the first Nishagandhi Puraskar which was awarded to Mrinalini Sarabhai. We want to make Nishagandhi not just as an art festival but as a platform to discuss and ideate about culture with workshops and seminars. Next year onwards there will be live webcast/live streaming of the event. So enthusiasts can watch it from anywhere in the world.

like a hotel room which can be viewed online. It involves medication so we have to ensure not only the infrastructure but also that the manpower is well trained, that the medicines used in the treatment are of appropriate quality so that the health of the patient is not compromised. So the two tier classification was introduced - Green Leaf pertains to five-star standard while Olive Leaf is three-star. So whichever standard a tourist chooses, he is assured that he is in safe hands. Ayurveda is a traditional science so people can be easily fooled. When we go for the inspection, we check not only the premises, but also the staff working there and how trained they are and their educational qualifications.

**How can you ensure a steady stream of trained manpower for the sector?**

There are two types of manpower needed in the Ayurveda sector: one is the doctors who are critical to the

ports at Thiruvananthapuram, Kochi and Calicut and perhaps even Mangalore will be used as the hubs for the seaplane operations. The cost of the first phase is ₹13 crore for constructing the infrastructure like floating jetties, security screening equipment, etc. We will be charging an operating fee from the aviation companies. So far, five companies have expressed interest in starting operations. We have an Open Sky policy. We will create the infrastructure and anyone can come and fly as long as they have the aircraft and all the clearances from the DGCA. Initially the tourist destinations that will be connected will be Ashtamudi, Kollam, Kumarakom, Punnamada in Alleppey, Munnar and Bekal.

**Are any public private partnership (PPP) projects in the pipeline?**

Some projects do not straightaway attract investment but which also have the potential to catalyse the

we started a biogas plant on pilot basis in Kumbalangi many years ago. But the need for such plants was not felt so much. But now the problem has come back so we are putting up such plants in places with heavy tourist traffic like Kumarakom. We are involving the local households as well as Suchitwa Mission. While the households will bear 10 per cent of the cost of the equipment, Suchitwa will contribute 40 per cent and the Kerala government will fund the rest 50 per cent. In return, households will get cheap power for their homes.

**Are homestays in Kerala maintaining the quality benchmarks set by the tourism department?**

Like Ayurveda we have a classification system for homestays too like Diamond House, Gold House and Silver House. Of late there has been a proliferation of homestays. But we don't see any grave need to pull them up as this is a source of livelihood for many homes. We prefer it to

enthusiasts can watch it from anywhere in the world.

**What is the average length of stay of the international tourist in Kerala?**

The average length of stay is 17.6 days for the international traveller and this is largely because of Ayurveda. Visitors who come for Ayurveda are the long duration high paying international travellers. That's why it makes sense for Kerala Tourism to focus on this segment.

**What about promoting the MICE segment?**

The problem with MICE is that we do not have the facilities to hold huge gathering. MICE works completely on volumes. But it can also be profitless volumes so it has to be played carefully. Often the MICE venues here are being used more for marriages than for corporate events. Hopefully we will soon have one international convention centre in Thiruvananthapuram based on the PPP model. ▀