

If it's Nanda Devi, it must be peach chutney

Responsible tourism catches the fancy of globetrotters as they discover it is fun to benefit the land they visit



GOUTHAMI AND PALLON GARHWALA



Shaam-e-Sarhad Rural Resort (above), operated by the Hodka community, and its restaurant (left)

jams, peach chutney and mango pickle to England. Our mission was multi-pronged. We wanted to generate employment in a remote mountain town, pay fair prices to small farmers and encourage them to value add to the raw fruit by finding them a market and hence eliminate the exploiting middlemen. I think that has now been accomplished," says Arora.

Gouthami of Kutch is working on a similar approach — a rural resort called Hodka. Promoting women empowerment and local livelihoods, her centre invites travellers to meet the villagers and understand their livelihoods. "Here, one is made to attend embroidery, pottery and block printing workshops. We want people to realise the time and sweat that has gone into making the artifacts and that they are sold so cheaply in the local city markets," she says.

An online trip organiser, Kalra is trying to do his bit towards the concept. At MakeMyTrip.com, for example, besides advice on the best places to visit and things to buy, we provide customers holiday



ANURAG AND ASHISH ARORA



Guests at the Himalayan village Sonapani (top) and herbs grown in the green belt (above)

packages with pre-tour resting material, historic and cultural backgrounds of communities they will meet at the destinations, the local words for greetings and permissions, etc., to ensure a harmonious and enriching experience," says Kalra.

Dr. Venu V, secretary, Kerala tourism goes a step



ANIL KURIYAL



Tourists make the most of their stay at the Kufion Basics resort in Uttarakhand (above)

ahead. He is working with International Centre for Responsible Tourism (ICRT) India, to organise a conference in the state to promote responsible tourism in destinations. "The international conference will review progress of responsible tourism and initiatives of destinations, hotels and tour operators, hold discussions on how tourism can contribute to local economic development and poverty reduction and consider its environmental impact," says Venu.

Picking up speed globally, with developing countries leading over the developed, the concept is now making travellers, tourism industry and policymakers use tourism to help the economy in more than one way. The most exciting aspect remains consumers' interest.

Globally, sites like the responsibletravel.com, are registering an increase of 70% in bookings year on year. "The main attraction for our tourists is the



KERALA TOURISM



'God's own country,' Kerala, continues to beckon tourists from all over the world (above)

wonderful holidays they can go on. Responsible tourism offers more authentic experiences; it is this which people want — even more than being responsible," says Justin Francis, CEO of online travel agency www.responsibletravel.com.

The interest among the tour operators, though, is solely business. "Increasingly, institutional shareholders of very big tourism businesses expect businesses to be good corporate citizens, as they feel this reduces business risk," says Francis. In case of policymakers, he feels there is a change in outlook. After tracking just the number of tourists for years, the tourism ministers are fast recognising that mass tourists might not be good for the economy or natural and cultural heritage.

Ram Badrinathan, analyst, PhoCusWright Inc, a travel industry research authority, believes that compared to other countries in the Asia-Pacific region, India has been forced to adopt responsible tourism. "Due to the nature of Indian destinations and their ecology, large-scale tourist projects are often difficult to implement. Popular tourist destinations from India, Kerala and Rajasthan can't lend themselves to Las Vegas or Singapore," he says.

As Badrinathan says, Indians may be new to the responsible tourism lingo, but they have no way but to travel responsibly. And soon you could be telling your colleagues about how the tomatoes you sowed last summer have shaped up.



A responsible traveller is expected to protect the environment, respect local cultures, benefit local communities, and conserve natural resources

B

Jyoti Verma

BACK from a week-long trip, software professional Anil Verma is busy telling folk tales of Garhwal to colleagues. A few kilometers away, his wife Pragati, is describing *lingdo*, a wild vegetable grown in the jungles, to her co-workers. The couple has narrated each moment spent at Kufion Basics, a resort in Uttarakhand, including even petty limitations. Like, there is no electricity, phone or TV. That food can't be served in the room. No question of opulent continental delicacies served in steep bone china dishes. "Nothing beyond what nature has to offer to people. With no gadgets and luxuries, it is intended that travellers directly connect with nature. The philosophy of Kufion Basics is simple: back to basics in this eco-friendly paradise," reasons Anil Kuriyal, promoter of the resort.

Well, it's not that these resort owners are attracting tourists to promote wild vegetables. This is what they call responsible tourism. A bigger subject globally, responsible tourism is a new way of travelling for those who care to contribute to the environment, eco-system, local values and economy during their tours to host destinations.

What's the benchmark for responsible tourism then, you might ask. Deep Kalra, founder and CEO, MakeMyTrip.com explains: "A responsible traveller is expected to protect the environment (its flora, fauna and landscapes), respect local cultures, traditions, religions and built heritage, benefit local communities (both economically and socially), conserve natural resources (from point-of-origin to destination)."

So, if Kuriyal has the Vermas checking in, Vishal Arora, co-founder, Himalayan Village (www.himalayanvillage.com) has a couple from Switzerland to brag about. During a visit in November 2005, Arora shared with them the potential of the fruit processing industry at his resort. "Located near Nanda Devi, Sonapani is appropriate to grow fruits like apple, pear, apricot, etc. There is still no industry there, I told them, thanks to troublesome middlemen and lack of a market. The dialogue took the visitors to nearby villages and orchards, speaking to fruit growers themselves. This eventually led to a business venture under which we would soon be shipping the first batch of peach and lavender/apricot-cardamom