

# Travel portals click on telecom cos to woo customers

## Yatra Already In Tie-up With RCOM, MakeMyTrip In Talks With Airtel For Air Ticket Bookings

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TRAVELLERS are on the go. So are travel portals, which are now offering convenience of searching and booking air tickets using mobile phones via SMS. To woo holiday makers and expand their reach, travel portals are getting into exclusive tie-ups with telecom players. While Yatra.com has tied up with Reliance Communication, MakeMyTrip.com is in talks with Bharti Airtel to give customers the option of booking air tickets on their mobile phones. Vodafone, which has always betted big on value-added services, is set to join the bandwagon as well. It will be cementing ties with one or more travel portals.

Sample this — India has 9.27 million internet subscribers (PC) against 31.30 million users who access internet through their mobile handsets, GSM or CDMA, to

access e-mails, download content and for online transactions, according to the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (Trai). In other words, one out of every five mobile users in the country subscribes to the internet through his handset. To tap this potential and reach out to about 190 million mobile users, travel portals are providing mobile as a platform to search and book holidays.

Though travel portals are introducing SMS booking options, it will take some time for the trend to catch up among travellers. At present, mobile phone is mostly used for seeking travel information. For instance, Indiatimes.com currently offers 'search and select' option to travellers who want airfare options on their handsets. Customers can send a SMS to 8888 to get cheapest available airfare. "Our 8888 service is quite popular among customers, therefore at present we are not looking at tying up with a telecom player,"

said an Indiatimes.com official.

Meanwhile, other travel portals are firming up plans to tie up with telecom majors. India's largest mobile operator Bharti Airtel is close to entering into an exclusive alliance with MakeMyTrip.com to enable its 45 million subscribers get access to the travel portal's content on their mobiles. According to sources, the deal is likely to be signed this week.

MakeMyTrip.com recently tied up with Nokia also to give customers the option of booking an air ticket on their mobile phones using a downloadable JTMA (Java to Mobile Application). "We are also in talks with a telecom major which will enable passengers to book tickets using WAP or GPRS (General Packet Radio Service)," MakeMyTrip.com co-founder and chief marketing officer Sachin Bhatia said. Though mobile travel sales are fairly new, MakeMyTrip.com estimates that 5% of its sales will be generated through

mobile phones by end of this year.

Payments for SMS booking can be made by giving the credit card details to the IVR (Interactive Voice Response) system.

Travelguru.com which tied up with Airtel in Karnataka, is also now looking at tying up with a telecom player to provide WAP-based ticket booking option across the country. "At present travellers cannot pay via a SMS. But we will soon develop an end-to-end mobile booking solution," says Travelguru.com CEO Ashwin Damera.

Yatra.com, has designed applications to support even non-WAP enabled users. If you do not have GPRS enabled handset, you can search for flights and fares via SMS and can also book air-tickets by sending a query to Yatra. If your handset is GPRS enabled, then you can search, book flight tickets and do complete transaction (including payment) on a mobile friendly format. Currently, the application supports almost all WAP enabled phones

— Nokia, Sony Ericsson and Samsung. It will be soon available for Motorola users.

At the same time, the company has entered in an exclusive tie-up with Reliance Communications where subscribers can book hotels in addition to travel tickets. "This works as a late generation model where customers can search and request a booking on their mobiles after which Yatra executives will call back to book hotel and ticket. Yatra will offer cash-on-delivery option in 15 cities for such mobile bookings," explained Yatra.com co-founder Dhruv Shringi.

Currently, mobile bookings account for a minuscule part of the Yatra's business, but Mr Shringi said that the tie-up with mobile firms will help in increasing the share of mobile bookings to 20% in next three years. With mobile users base expected to grow to about 300 million by 2010, travel portals don't want to miss the mobile buzz.

