

How a turbo charged cruise industry can become another symbol of bold and self-reliant India

Be it a cruise ship or a cargo ship, they not only give a boost to transport and tourism but they create a new light of development wherever it passes.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi

The cruise industry supports an impressive 1.2 million jobs and contributes a staggering \$150 billion to the global economy annually. The Ministry of Tourism, Government of India is actively engaged in robust endeavors to foster the growth and development of cruise tourism. The sector has always been a strategic pillar of economic growth and an important part of national tourism strategies with its power to contribute positively to local communities, revive traditions, and encourage infrastructure development, cultural exchange, and preservation. Under India's G20 presidency, on the sidelines of the 4th Tourism Working Group Meeting in Goa, two thematic discussions were held on cruise tourism to seek invaluable insights on the challenges and opportunities in the growth of cruise tourism globally and deliberate on effective strategies to position India as a cruise tourism hub.

With a coastline spanning over 7,500 kilometres and an extensive network of navigable waterways connecting around 400 rivers and counting with an infrastructure of 12 major and 200 minor ports, India possesses an extraordinary advantage for coastal and river-based cruise tourism. The 4th Tourism Working Group Meeting also witnessed the launch of the "Draft National Strategy for Cruise Tourism", which envisions to make India a preferred cruising nation for deep sea cruises, coastal cruises, river cruises and yacht cruises by leveraging the natural, historical and cultural advantages of India and the country's tourism travel and hospitality skills. The Cruise Tourism strategy centring around eight strategic pillars encompasses vital aspects such as ease of doing business, integrated tourism around cruise terminals, fiscal support, skill development, and the establishment of an effective institutional structure. By fostering a favourable environment for the cruise industry to flourish, India aims to quadruple the number of cruise ships operating within its waters in the next two decades.

State-of-the-art infrastructure, vast natural resources, and strong political will and support is only part of the winning formula that the Indian government is betting on in order to guarantee a sustainable cruise tourism industry in the long term. The ambitious plan for a vibrant cruise industry in India which was launched along the by lines of G20 is also strategically developed to respond to the global cruise industry challenges like gender gap and climate impact and aims to position India on the map as a model for sustainable and responsible travel in water.

Beyond sustainability towards regeneration

Traditionally known for its carbon-intensive vessels and mounting waste production, encompassing everything from trash to sewage and greywater, the global cruise industry has fallen under the shadow of port over-tourism and environmental degradation. This has cast a significant cloud over its standing as a responsible mode of travel. Alarming statistics reveal that cruise ships and maritime vessels contribute nearly 3% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions yearly, tarnishing the scenic beauty they traverse. Presently, only a mere 0.1% of

ships worldwide employ zero-emission technology, emphasizing the long journey in greening the cruise industry.

With policies for waste management, plastics reduction, wastewater treatment, sustainable ship design, and responsible sourcing of resources India needs to go beyond sustainability and not only ensure zero ecological footprint of cruise operations but also add back to the environment by investing in technology, engaging stakeholders, and fostering innovation. With accelerated inclusive and resilient growth being one of the six priorities set by India's G20 Presidency, it is a great opportunity for the Indian cruise industry to transform itself into a champion of responsible travel and offer the world a new regenerative model.

A leap from developing women to women led development

The commitment to sustainable cruise ships goes also beyond emissions. Gender gap in leadership is another problem that has long plagued the sector. In a study of the major publicly listed cruising conglomerates globally, it was found that only 36% of the workforce is female, which is below the travel and tourism industry's average gender balance of 50%.

Furthermore, with every rung of the career ladder women climb in cruising, the percentage drops even more sharply than across the other travel and tourism sectors. Only 3% of the C-Suite or Excom are women and there are no female CEOs or Chairs amongst the major listed players. So, the cruise industry has a two-fold target one to get more girls to join the sector and two to elevate more of them to leadership positions.

With women-led development as the guiding light, India's G20 presidency paves way for ensuring gender balance in the cruise tourism industry. In developing a sustainable model for the cruise industry, if India can recognise, nurture, and support stakeholder partnerships that value the role of women in leadership as a blueprint for sustainable growth it will be setting a new benchmark for the sector globally.

Blue economy igniting growth

The new policy plan recognises that the blue economy is a critical player in the global fight against climate change and by nurturing offshore renewable energy, decarbonizing maritime transport, and greening ports, the blue economy contributes to the collective efforts to mitigate the impacts of climate change.

India's commitment to the Blue Economy is not only laudable for the economic gains but also for how the policy envisions uplifting the lives of coastal communities and safeguarding marine biodiversity. The launch of schemes like the Pradhan Mantri Matsya Sampada Yojana, which focuses on sustainable fisheries, and the Maritime India Vision 2030, which charts the course for coastal infrastructure, underscore India's commitment to developing the blue economy in harmony with the environment.

The ocean encompasses 97% of Earth's water and supports 80% of all life forms. Beyond the ecological implications, the blue economy weaves a complex web of economic interactions that traverse continents. With the ocean's vast potential, it has the power to shape not only economies but also the trajectory of our planet's future.

Conclusion

The cruise industry has been waiting for a long time to be revolutionized. With India's G20 Presidency affirming the nation's commitment to environmental stewardship, blue ocean economy, women led development and technological breakthroughs, India's cruise industry is not merely seeking growth; it's shaping a paradigm that honours the oceans and rivers, takes actions to mitigate climate change, diversifies local economies and navigates a course toward a more sustainable global cruise industry. Best practices from the sector discussed during the G20 Tourism Working Group Meeting in Goa highlight how government support is paramount for this endeavour and India is all set to sail under favourable winds toward setting a model for sustainable and responsible model for travel.