

“Research well and book on time to save while travelling”



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From tips on travel savings and trends to the group's new iPrefer loyalty programme and app, Arpit Pant talks on a range of topics to Riju Dave.

You claim to be the world's largest independent hotel brand? What exactly is an independent hotel?

There are two types of traditional hotel brands. One set, as described by the industry, is 'hard brand', which are hotel management or ownership companies often with international presence, say, the Marriott or Hyatt. On the other hand, hotels like The Imperial in Delhi, which is a single owner hotel at one location, qualify as independent hotels. Also there are regional chains like the Oberoi Group or the Taj Group in India. These hoteliers or owners have invested a lot and made a hotel brand identity unique to the place they are in. So they may not be inclined to get a hard brand because they've built it with passion and want to run it their way. This is where Preferred Hotels & Resorts comes in as an independent hotel brand. We support these hotels by providing key services so that it helps provide a level playing field

against hard brands and other competitors.

What is the reason for your fast pace of member hotel acquisition in the past year?

India as a market is growing. In terms of occupancy, 2016 was the best year after 2007, with 64% occupancy in the hotel space. The government is also doing a lot to promote India as a destination, be it for corporates or leisure. So hotels have a big opportunity and there are a lot of international brands coming to India. They bring their international strength, distribution and sales. As a regional company or an independent hotel, you are competing with them and need back-up support. Preferred offers a strong partnership—infrastructure, connectivity, distribution solutions, global sales and marketing services, and iPrefer loyalty programme. Globally, there has been a rise in owners, operators, and management companies seeing the value in regional brands and independent hotels, and the recent acquisitions can ensure that these grow at a stable pace. In 2016, we entered five countries, which increases our brand strength.

With so many accommodation options available now, what's your differentiator?

We have five collections across the globe—Legend, LVX, Lifestyle, Connect, Preferred Residences—which are different products at different price points. This means the guests have the option to choose the price segment, location and style of service, and can also earn and redeem points irrespective of where they stay.

A traveller picks a hotel chain's loyalty programme because he wants to stick to certain specifications. Why would he want to go to a different hotel each time with your iPrefer loyalty programme?

iPrefer started as a value-based programme in 2006, and in 2013, we upgraded it to a point-based one. In 2016, we re-engineered it to a two-tier programme, whereby for every dollar spent, the guest would get 10 or 15 points, which could be redeemed for cash-value vouchers and used for dining, spa, other on-property expenditures, or payment against room charges at an iPrefer hotel. In 2017, we initiated the i-Prefer app, which can help a guest know his point status, stay history, book a hotel, or get a member-only discounted rate.

The advantage for independent hotels is that they get the benefit of a hotel chain, con-

necting with 650 hotels globally. As a guest, you don't have to stay at the same standard hotel everywhere you go. It allows you another level of opportunity and experience, which you wouldn't get if you were bound by points. If you go to a new place, you want to stay at a global hotel chain, but if you want to experience local culture, you will prefer a local chain. So it provides an even playing field to the guest as well as the hotel.

What are the future staying trends?

Trends are going in all directions. The trend of heritage hotels is coming back in India. Airbnb was a trend which came out of nowhere and people could give their rooms to stay. Luxury is a trend in which more and more people are investing. The latest is the technology trend like pods, single beds and hourly rates. So consumer is the king because he has multiple options.

How can a person increase savings while booking flights and hotels?

First, you should research well. Second, take the decisions on bookings at the right time. A lot of us continue to wait for the rates to fall. Third, if you are doing multiple destinations, choose your hotels correctly. If you are going to a gateway city for business, you will have limited time. So you don't require a luxury hotel because you won't have the time to enjoy it. But if you are with your family in a destination resort and want to enjoy the hotel, then spend the money on comfort. Choose the flights, accommodation and transport depending on the destination and experience you seek.

Should you make your own itinerary or opt for packages?

An aggregator gives a set itinerary, which means that it can be cheaper, but you are bound to follow it. If you want to do something on your own, then you should choose and decide yourself. It also depends on who you are travelling with and what you want to do. If you are with your parents, an itinerary may work best, but if you are with a friend, you may want more flexibility. Besides, hotels these days are trying to offer rate parity, that is, providing the best rates on their sites, but there are times when aggregators, because of their strength to buy in bulk, may give you a better deal. So, it's best to conduct proper research on the destination you are going to.

“Choose hotels according to destinations. If you plan to explore and have limited time, don't pick a luxury hotel.”