



All Work All Play

Workcation topped the travel trends of 2021 as people combined work with leisure. With the pandemic's current wave receding, it could still be the preferred mode.

By NOOR ANAND CHAWLA

Since the age of 18, Aakash Ranison has been a nomad. This young climate activist, sustainability advocate and author has had no home base for the last eight years, hopping from place to place—in India and abroad—living in tents, homestays, guesthouses, hotels, and hostels. Ranison's longest sojourn was in 2020 when he was forced to camp at Nasogi village in Himachal Pradesh for six months till the first lockdown opened in June. In this period and the months that followed, he wrote a book on climate change, began work on another, created his third climate art installation, and collaborated on a documentary on veganism—while constantly on the move. Travel is life for Ranison, and work is a mere by-product.



Pamela Mukherjee @everycornerofworld

Hostels from Zostel and goSTOPS
Airbnb apartments
Holiday Inn Express
The Golden Tusk, Ramnagar Uttarakhand
Taj properties for luxury staycations
Treebo for budget stays

For public health professional Kanchan Chawla, travel is catharsis. The ability to work remotely gave her the opportunity to relive her childhood spent in a boarding school in Landour in Uttarakhand. For the last two years, she has been moving her husband, two kids, and pet dog back and forth between their home in Gurugram and the family

holiday home in this quaint hill town. Apart from providing her kids access to clean, fresh air and a choice of nature-specific activities, this practice gave her mental peace in difficult times.

Anuj Kumar Boruah travels because he finds it rejuvenating. Originally from Assam, he runs his public relations and digital communication agency,

Conversations Unbound, from Delhi. Making the most of the opportunity provided by the pandemic, he returned to his home state for three months, exploring Guwahati, Sivasagar, Kaziranga, Majuli and other places, while continuing to work. He returns to Delhi frequently to deal with business basics and is off again whenever he likes.

For each of them and many others, workcations are a deliberate lifestyle choice. Fortuitously, this choice has buoyed the floundering travel industry in tough times. According to hospitality giant OYO's fourth annual travel trends study called the OYO Travelopedia 2021, nearly 48 percent of Indians worked from home last year, 85 percent

of whom chose to take workcations or work away from home in a scenic location—nearly 27 percent of them stayed away from home for a month or longer. The trend is certainly popular. But is it here to stay?

YOU ONLY LIVE ONCE!

The privatisation of the Indian economy improved financial conditions and gave exposure to the rest of the world. Suddenly, Indians had both the money and the desire to explore, and the world was theirs for the taking. Three decades of a booming travel industry turned even the most closeted individuals into ardent travellers. And then 2020 threw a spanner in the works. Frequent holidays within India and the customary annual visit abroad, overnight business trips, destination weddings and everything we had begun to take as par for the course, came to a standstill. However, the human spirit is indomitable—it finds a way.

"The onset of the pandemic hit the industry really hard as the world experienced a first-of-its-kind disruption. Fortunately, once things opened, the leisure segment picked up due to pent-up demand and revenge travel,"

says Jatish Ghai, the South Asia Operations Manager of the Radisson Hotel Group. He is echoed by Sangjay Choegyal, the General Manager of Six Senses Fort Barwara, Ranthambore, Rajasthan, who thinks that with international borders shut, there was an increase in demand for Indian luxury resorts—the quaint and more picturesque, the better.

Luxury is certainly the buzzword for millennials living their best 'YOLO' lives. This is evident from the popularity of Luxury Escapes, an international aggregator that lists the best luxury travel deals in India, Australia, Hong Kong, Singapore, the USA, and the UK. Their Regional Head, Arun Ashok, highlights the shift in travel patterns—in the past, most domestic travel would occur over the weekends, now 30-40 percent of their bookings happen during the week, with more people choosing to work from exotic locations. He notes the average duration of a guest's stay is also increasing.

A Booking.com survey conducted in 2021 shows that around 68 percent of Indian travellers took workcations last year—a far higher number than in previous years. Case in point: Bipendra Upadhyay from Bengaluru, who has been living and working in Ramya



Aakash Ranison @aakashranison

Blue Jay Hostel, Rishikesh Uttarakhand
Young Monk Hostel and Café, Manali Himachal Pradesh
Osel Rooms, Kaza, Spiti Himachal Pradesh
Thupwang Guest House Leh

Resort & Spa, Udaipur, for almost an entire year. As an employee of Tata Engineering, he is the consultant appointed to the Vedanta Zawar Mines Power Plant at Udaipur. Ramya's remote setting amidst the Aravalli Hills appeals to him tremendously. The staff treat him like family, going so far as to include him in their local customs and festivals. The overall experience of high-end hospitality coupled with discounted long-term stay rates add to the attraction.

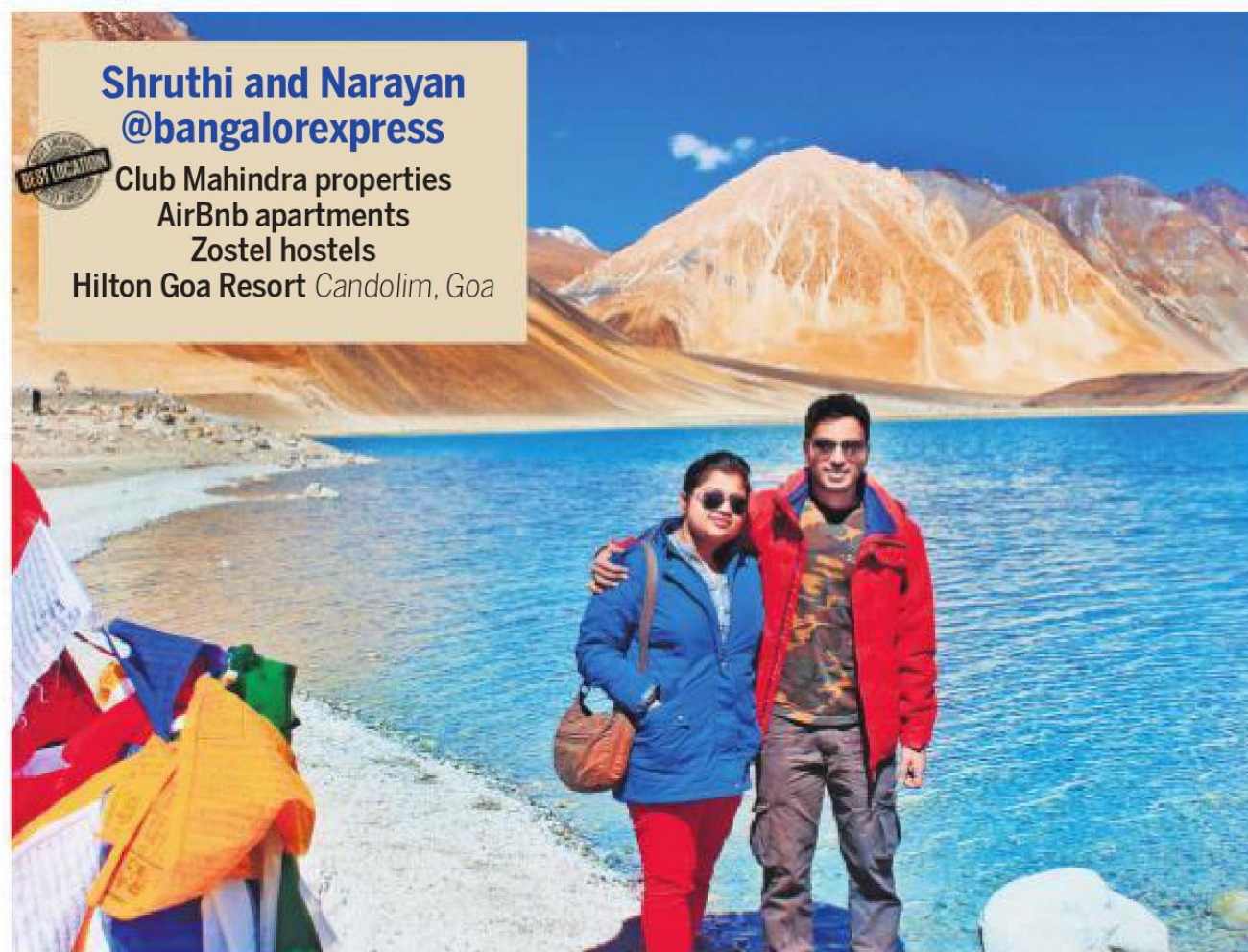
WORK FROM WILDERNESS (WFW)

OYO Travelopedia 2021 also reveals the top destinations chosen for workcations. The clear winner with 53 percent of surveyors choosing them is the ambiguous category of 'offbeat domestic destinations'. This was followed by mountainous regions which received 35 percent of votes, while 24 percent of respondents chose beach destinations. "In Himachal and Uttarakhand, places like Manali, McLeodganj, Tirthan, Bir, Kasol, and Mukteshwar are very popular, but only from

April to October. Then people prefer Goa from November till March. Rajasthan is also a hot destination in the winter months. It's largely a seasonal choice," says Govind Gaur, the founder of Workcation at WanderOn, a platform that lists properties suitable for all kinds of travel, but especially workcations, within varied budgets.

Reshma Mehta, the Founder of travel curation companies Re-Meh and Triya Zikhara, believes that workcationers are looking for locales that offer treks and trails to explore whilst working, local culinary experiences or tea plantations and vineyards to enjoy on the weekends, and rustic farmstays to experience a simpler life. After all, only work on a holiday makes for dull telling indeed. The ultimate draw, it seems, is the delight of working from the wilderness (WFW). A host of travel companies, hotels and resorts are offering alluring package deals that combine an idyllic getaway with the essentials of a workspace—good wi-fi, clean rooms, homely food, and easy accessibility.

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Shruthi and Narayan @bangalorexpress

Club Mahindra properties
Airbnb apartments
Zostel hostels
Hilton Goa Resort Candolim, Goa

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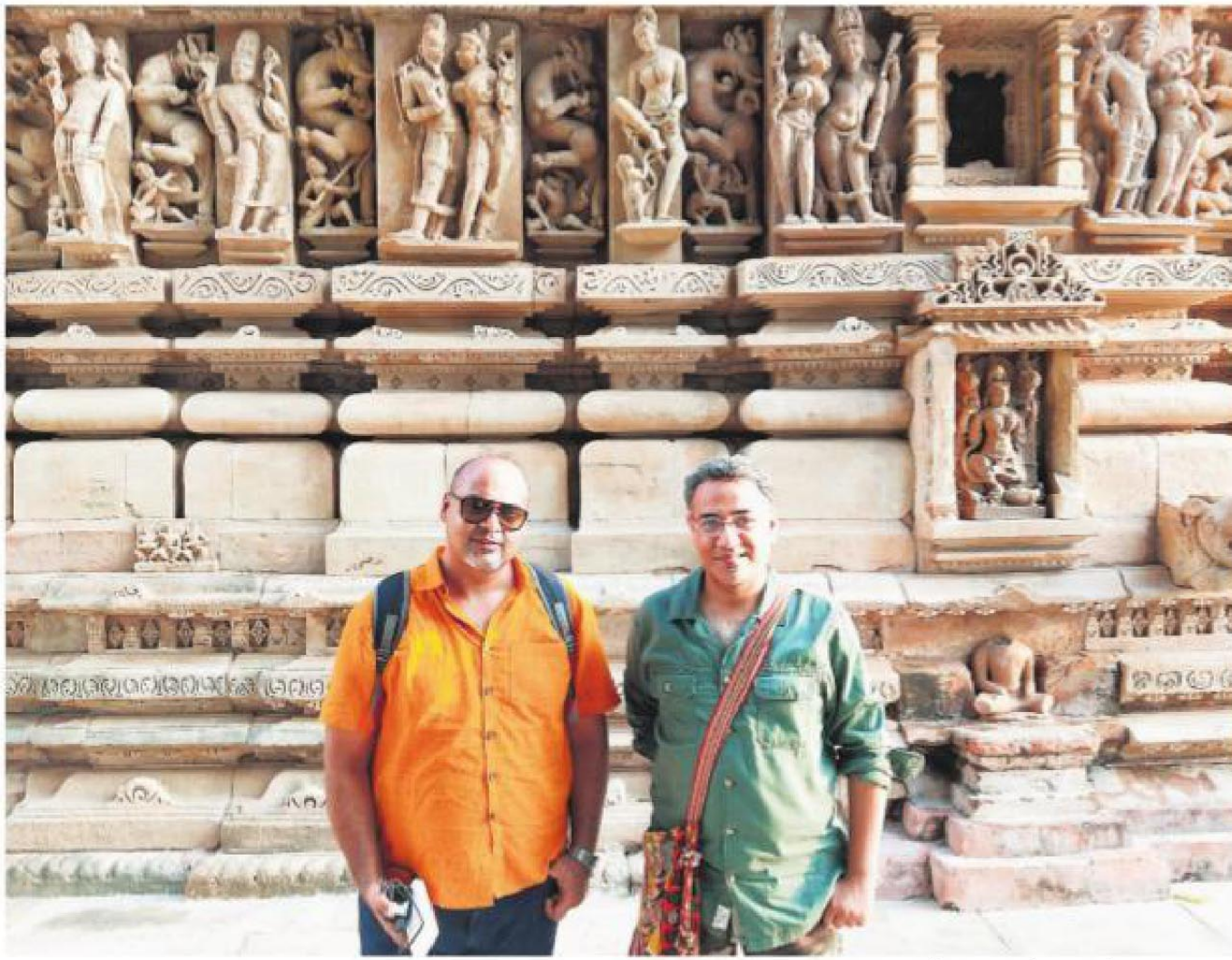
Lincoln Bennet Rodrigues, the founder of the Bennet and Bernard Company that owns luxury holiday homes in Goa, has seen an influx of people wanting to stay in Goa for longer periods of time. Those who already own homes in Goa are looking to purchase second homes to add to their rental incomes. He shares that gated communities promising hygiene and safety are the most coveted.

The industry has noted a marked increase in interest for lesser-known destinations, such as the coastal areas of Gokarna, or the mountains of the northeast India. "The domestic leisure and luxury travel sector is at the core of the travel industry's revival in 2022. Travellers, especially the younger generation, are keen to take up workcation deals as they can stay put in an idyllic location, work on the weekdays and explore the destination on the weekends," explains Chirag Agarwal, the Co-founder of TravClan, a B2B platform that helps travel businesses by optimising their offerings and services.

GET, SET, GO

Every couple of months, Anish Sathe, an IT professional from Bengaluru, packs his bags, drives to the beautiful hill station of Coorg, and settles in—he explores new hotels and frequently returns to those he likes. Trekking through verdant coffee plantations and enjoying simple yet delicious food are his only breaks from Zoom meetings and work deadlines. The easy six-hour drive between the two places is the main reason for his frequent visits. The OYO survey supports this finding, as over half the respondents said they prefer to travel by private or rental cars, 35 percent picked buses and trains, while only 14 percent were keen on air travel.

Locations within a driveable distance are definitely preferred for long-duration travel. Dr Amarpal and Harpal Singh Gulati—an interventional cardiologist and the owner of a food processing unit respectively—are brothers who saw an opportunity in the popularity of driving-distance homestay holidays. They converted their



Sundeep Bhatia and Bedabrata Chakraborty @delhifundos:

Misty Mountains, Jhaltola Uttarakhand
Kohinoor Resort, Naggar Himachal Pradesh
Any hotels in Shantiniketan and Digha West Bengal

family holiday home in Buran-shkhanda near Mussoorie, Uttarakhand, into a premium homestay called Barefoot Bungalow, and have had many families and groups of friends staying with them since then. Vista Rooms, a luxury rental homestay startup, also cashed in on this trend after the pandemic. Their impressive collection of properties spans the entire country and even Dubai. Co-founder Ankita Sheth says their customers mostly include families with small children and elderly parents, or startups consisting of small teams—sometimes for months at a time. Driving distance and easy accessibility majorly influence choice of properties.

However, the venue is not the sole consideration for workcationers, many of whom view the vehicle as an essential part of the vacationing experience. "With the travel landscape changing post-Covid-19, the culture of caravanning has also caught on in India. We have received an overwhelming response for our caravans—both for renting and manufacturing. Since caravans fulfil electricity requirements, one need not worry about charging their devices or losing connectivity. In fact, with a caravan one can choose to work from the most remote locations like near a riverbank, on a beach, on a cliff, among other adventurous spots," shares Jigyasa Joshi, Co-founder, Carvaa Travelers, a caravan rental service provider.

Those who can afford it turn to luxury modes of transport. Mumbai-based Book My Charters offers private jets, helicopters and yachts for rent, and saw a 60 percent increase in their number of clients in 2020, with the numbers steadily increasing since then. Luxury transportation is booked for a variety of reasons, including medical emergencies, business trips and serving high net-worth leisure vacationers. Even once domestic flights resumed,

travellers seemed keen to opt for private jets to avoid crowds and the virus.

ALL FOR THE 'GRAM'

In a world where social media reigns supreme, travel choices are largely dictated by content consumed online. Travel blogging—always a popular genre—has picked up tremendously post-pandemic. The reason? People want what they can't have. Delhi-based Sundeep Bhatia and Bedabrata Chakraborty, Graphic Designer and IP lawyer respectively, moonlight as travel bloggers on their website DelhiFunDogs. They shed light on this subject, "Many people have cut down on annual vacations after Covid-19 and are travelling vicariously like never before. Travel content gives them hope, positivity and perhaps some momentary relief. Towards the end of the first wave, we volunteered to be part of a travel project on how to travel with precautions. Given the response to that project, and to subsequent trips, we firmly believe that travel content has become even more popular after the pandemic. Many who can't muster the courage to travel choose to travel through the web."

Similarly, Shruthi, architect, and Narayan, IT professional, together make up travel blogger duo @bangalorexpress on Instagram and their website. Work-save-travel-repeat was always their motto, but it was only after the pandemic that they found the flexibility to enjoy workcations of their choice. For them, workcationing is a boon, as it allows them to create content for their followers and break the monotony of being stuck at home.

In addition to vicarious enjoyment, people are turning to digital media for inspiration and ideas on where to travel and how to plan their trips. Travel articles or blogs, travel shows and YouTube videos—everything is game and consumed in large amounts. Acacia Hotels and Villas in Goa has hosted a number of influencers and celebrities, including the likes of Ashmit Patel, Kusha Kapila, Samir Kochhar, and Komal Pandey. They moved lock, stock and barrel for weeks on end to create travel content and inspire wanderlust among followers.

Travel vlogger Pamela Mukherjee of @everycornerof-world asserts that destinations are decided on the basis of social media trends. It is a cycle—people who are working from the mountains or beaches enjoy documenting their experience on social media, and those watching this content want to emulate them by doing the same. Abha Mondal, a travel blogger based in England, feels the same way. "Travel content can be very alluring. I've visited many places after seeing pictures online and after finding out about them through social media. I know many fellow travellers who are travelling and working at the same time."

WHERE ARE WE HEADING?

Chirasree Pal from Kolkata, Senior Manager with American Express, has been working from Goa for the last three months. Though she loves being near the beach, she unabashedly points out the challenges of working

away from one's regular space, including lack of access to uninterrupted internet connectivity, and the bad posture that often results from not working at an optimised desk. This begs the question—will the workcation trend continue once the situation becomes stable long-term?

Sahil Anand, Managing Director, Acacia Hotels and Villas, Goa, does not believe so. "I really don't think that the world can survive on the work-from-home culture for too long. I feel that most people have the highest productivity levels in their office space as there are no distractions there and sometimes your nature of work does not allow you to work virtually for too long. I don't see this trend lasting, it's only a matter of time till it comes to an end," he shares. Cyrus Noronha, the co-founder of Caravela Cafe and Coworking space in Goa, agrees with him, adding that it may work for a few companies but won't for others. They are supported by a recent Booking.com survey that polled 24,055 travellers across 31 countries and territories, and found 73 percent of them stating holidays will be strictly 'work-free' in the future.

However, other market players are more hopeful. Mehul Sharma of Signum Hotels and Resorts, spread across North India, expects this trend to move up by 20 percent year on year. Mayur Sontakke, the founder of NomadGao, a co-working and residential space in Goa, believes that the past two years have shown people there is more to life than working in the office. He feels that while 70-80 percent of Indians will go back to the office in the short run, companies will have to keep their models flexible to retain talent long-term.

Whatever the future may hold, it is evident that unique and offbeat travel options focussing on wellness with a side of adventure will continue to hold sway. In September 2021, hospitality behemoth Airbnb presented a round-up of key travel trends emerging in India. Their data revealed that the number of searches for unique listings as of June 2021 was 94 percent higher compared to the same period in 2019.

Places like The Malabar House, Fort Cochin, and Purity, a backwater resort in Kerala—both members of the Relais & Chateaux group—partner up to allow their guests the flexibility of exploring historic Fort Cochin and enjoying the backwater village life, while working in a tranquil environment. Svastika in Tanjavur, Tamil Nadu, makes up for the dip in religious tourism by packaging itself as a wellness retreat, though it functions as both. Major city hotels are also changing their marketing spin to attract those looking for unusual experiences. Pilibhit House in Haridwar, a boutique heritage hotel located on the banks of the river Ganges, promises an unparalleled cultural experience in India's heartland; while the JW Marriott, Bengaluru, plays up its location—opposite the gorgeous 300-acre Cubbon Park.

With Covid-19 slowly gaining international acceptance as having become endemic, no one can predict what direction travel and work life is set to take. Aditya Sanghi, the Co-founder of Hotelogix, a cloud-based management solutions provider to hotels, sums it up, "This travel buzzword will continue drawing attention as long as the WFH model allows people to embark on workcations, and as long as they can fulfil their professional obligations from anywhere."

THINGS PEOPLE LOOK FOR WHEN BOOKING A WORKCATION

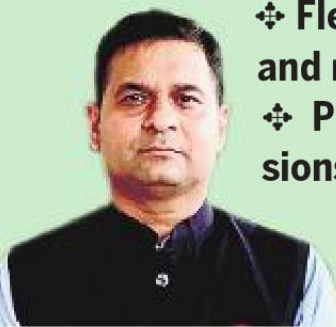
- ❖ Larger spaces
- ❖ Self-sustained communities
- ❖ that ensure health, hygiene and safety

LINCOLN BENNET RODRIGUES
Founder, The Bennet and Bernard Company that sells luxury holiday homes in Goa



- ❖ Dedicated place, preferably in natural surroundings
- ❖ Reliable internet connection

- ❖ Flexible mealtimes, tea/coffee and refreshments all-day
- ❖ Places that provide excursions, experiences, activities



AMIT KR THAKUR General Manager, Pilibhit House, Haridwar

- ❖ Ease of accessibility to the resort/hotel
- ❖ Assurance of safety and hygiene
- ❖ Recreational facilities at the hotel/resort

SIDHARTH KOUL Director, Sales and Marketing, JW Marriott, Bengaluru



- ❖ Locations that fulfil their desire to pursue something new while at work— beach destination, hill station, marine resorts, animal reserves, farmstays, vineyards, tea estates etc
- ❖ Learning the local culture, trying local cuisines, and exploring heritage properties

- ❖ Pocket-friendly workcations
- ❖ Comfortable homestays with home-cooked meals and cleaning services
- ❖ Those who love to cook prefer a holiday home/apartment with a kitchen

RESHMA MEHTA Founder, Re-Meh and Triya Zikhara Travel Agencies



- ❖ Work-life balance
- ❖ Places that facilitate mindfulness and well-being, while allowing them to be productive at the same time

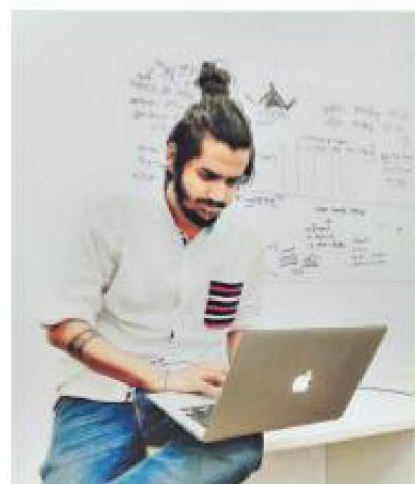
SANGJAY CHOEGYAL, General Manager, Six Senses Fort, Barwara, Ranthambore



- ❖ A stable net connection
- ❖ Power back-ups
- ❖ Accessibility to a market

- ❖ Comfortable table and chair set-ups
- ❖ Homely and tasty food

GOVIND GAUR Founder, WanderOn and Workcations



- ❖ Contactless check-in, door unlocking, in-room amenities, payments, check-out
- ❖ Ergonomically designed workstations
- ❖ Access to printers and other essential office accessories

- ❖ Easily accessible charging points

- ❖ Tech assistance
- ❖ Discount on room rate, food and beverages
- ❖ On-call doctor, flexible check-in and check-out



ADITYA SANGHI Co-Founder, Hotelogix

- ❖ Sanitation and safety
- ❖ High-speed internet, power backups, kitchen access, and laundry
- ❖ Wheelchair accessibility, children's play area etc
- ❖ In-house theatres and bar-beques

- ❖ Pet-friendly properties

ANKITA SHETH Co-Founder, Vista Rooms Homestay Rentals



Workcation
Taking a short break from your regular working routine but still being able to fulfil your employment obligations and resting at the same time.

Revenge Travel

When people crave breaking free from their life after Covid-19. Often stems from 'lockdown fatigue' or exhaustion that escalates on account of the monotony of being stuck at home.

Bleisure: Practice of combining business travel and leisure travel in one trip.

Live Anywhere

A programme spearheaded by AirBnB where 12 individuals were selected from hundreds of thousands of applicants to live on Airbnb for the next year and provide valuable feedback.

GOAT (Great-est of All Trips)

After two years of tame travel experiences, people are looking to go big on their next vacation and are aiming to make it a GOAT.



Vitamin Vacay

Travel as considered an essential part of wellbeing.

Friendcation

Travelling with large groups of family or friends.