

Indian travellers are turning to offbeat retreats, experiences

On the itinerary: Luxury camping, tribal homestays, heritage cities

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Mumbai resident Alpa Jani had holidayed in Manali twice but the lure of the Himalayas drove her to the destination a third time over in November. However, instead of a city hotel, she opted to stay in a dome-shaped tent that offered scenic views of the Dhauladhar ranges and the Manali valley.

Like Jani, a growing number of tourists are ditching the comfort of city hotels for offbeat destinations and experiences. "Our seven geodesic dome-shaped tents are booked till the end of January," says Akshat Jain, co-founder of GlampEco, Manali.

An engineer by training and a mountaineer by heart, Jain started offering glamping experience in November 2019. "Most of our guests are from Mumbai and Bengaluru who crave solitude and scenery. We do get repeat booking requests, too, but because of limited inventory, there is a long wait time," says 31-year-old Jain.

Holiday makers are re-imagining travel plans and choosing different experiences like camping, paragliding, forest walks or biking — all away from the crowds, which are a no-no in the time of Covid. A raft of advisories by the state governments in the wake of the pandemic, too, has triggered interest in less crowded, niche attractions.

"Alongside regular trips to Goa or Rajasthan, we have also seen demand for offbeat experiences. Recently, we assisted two families for diving trips to the Maldives" says Loveleen Arun, director of Panache World, a luxury travel specialist from Bengaluru. "People are also exploring experiences such as river cruises in the Northeast and skiing holidays in Gulmarg in Kashmir."

"The Omicron variant is, however, turning out to be a dampener for fresh bookings and some people are postponing their trips," she adds.

Around 40 per cent of queries come for unusual or offbeat destinations and experiences, says Rajeev Kale, president & country head (Holidays), Thomas Cook India. "What's surprising is that the demand is not restricted to millennials or young professionals but includes families and the 45-plus age group. Our biking trips are finding strong resonance with C-suite honchos," he adds.

"Some of the most popular offbeat experiences within the country include the living root bridges and canoeing in Dawki lake in Meghalaya; white water rafting in the Subansiri river in Arunachal Pradesh; rock climbing at the Satpura moun-



AWAY FROM THE CROWDS

■ **Three-fold surge in demand for domestic tourism** compared to the winter of 2020, say some travel companies

■ **Odisha hosting three-month-long "Eco Retreat"**, with glamping opportunities at seven locations

■ **Madhya Pradesh govt to inaugurate Mandu Festival in December-end** to showcase city's heritage, culture, architecture and paleontological history. On offer: heritage walks, cycling tours, rural experiences, hot air balloon rides

■ **A start-up is promoting tribal homestay in Bastar, Chhattisgarh**

■ **Popular with tourists:** living root bridges, canoeing in Dawki lake (Meghalaya); white water rafting in Subansiri river (Arunachal Pradesh); rock climbing; skiing, and snowboarding

tain range; and winter sports like skiing, snowboarding and ice skating in Auli and Gulmarg," says Daniel D'souza, president and country head of SOTC Travel. D'souza adds that the company has witnessed a three-fold surge in demand for domestic tourism compared to the winter of 2020.

Camping holidays in Kukas outside Jaipur and Jaisalmer along with desert safari are also seeing a spike in demand, according to Yatra.com.

A desire to experience something different after being cooped up because of the pandemic is prompting people to explore new locales. Uncertainty with respect to foreign travel is also a factor driving this growth. With countries tightening Covid-19 curbs, international travel is becoming costlier as also difficult.

Says Michelle Raghavan, owner of Nisarg Agro Healing Farm in Karjat in Maharashtra's Raigad district: "Increasingly, people are preferring a differentiated experience over a cookie-cutter holiday."

A stay at the Nisarg's rustic farmhouse with coffee and

pepper plantations costs ₹5,500 per person for two nights (including meals), but Raghavan says she often ends up letting these places out cheaper to bargain hunters.

State governments, too, are doubling their efforts to promote local destinations with an emphasis on community participation and eco-friendly measures. These initiatives come at a time when Indian travellers are looking to connect with local communities. According to Booking.com's 2022 travel prediction, 78 per cent of Indian travellers believe that it's important that their trip is beneficial to the local community at the destination.

Last week, Odisha Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik inaugurated the three-month-long "Eco Retreat" event, which provides glamping opportunities at seven locations in the state. The initiative began in 2019 with a single site, Chandrabhaga beach in Puri. It then increased to five destinations and now includes seven sites consisting of beaches, hill stations and also the bank of the Mahanadi.

The Madhya Pradesh government is also offering luxury tent accommodation and activities like heritage walks, cycling tours, rural experiences and hot air balloon rides at its festival in the ancient fort city of Mandu. The festival is being held from December 30 to January 3, while the tents will stay pitched till the end of February. Mandu, located in the Dhar district of western Madhya Pradesh, is known for its stunning views of waterfalls, lakes and its monuments. Some of the structures in this region have been designated as Unesco World Heritage sites.

In Chhattisgarh, meanwhile, travel firms and the government are promoting tribal homestays in Bastar district. "Apart from learning about tribal traditions and local metal craft, guests also visit the Kanger Valley national park for its wildlife, waterfalls and caves," says Jeet Singh Arya, founder of travel start-up, Unexplored Bastar. "While these homestays have been organised for the last few years, it has become more organised now." He adds that the local district administration is supporting community tourism by providing funds for homestay projects. "It has also launched a website that provides destination information and lets people book itineraries," says Arya.