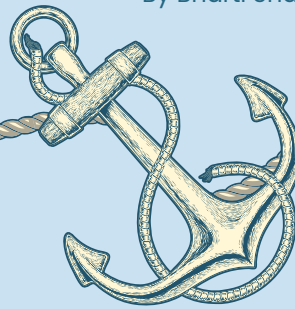


Anchoring in the Troubled Sea

The resilient travel industry had its share of gloom in the past one year. It was the first and the hardest hit from the pandemic and would be the last to recover. How did we hold on, what kept us moving and what has been our anchor in these constant high tides? Here's to each one of us, we've struggled like a fish in muddy water but we know the day will come soon, when we rise like a Phoenix.

- By Bharti Sharma



Maneuvering into fresh voyage

The past year has been like a nightmare for all of us, economies across the world came to a standstill due to the horrors of the COVID19. As lockdowns were enforced it compelled humanity to ponder over the choices they've made in the past decades, and a thread that stood out universally was

that our tourism industry was the most fragile and thus crumbled like a house of cards. Everything that we took for granted was easily snatched away from us, even our freedom to breathe fresh air. With the imposed lockdown, the industry started shattering and the losses we faced are etched in the books and our minds forever. Being travel professionals we were hit the hardest, not just in terms of business but our lifestyles too. Travelling! something that we

travel professionals hold most dear to us was taken away from us at the snap of the fingers. There came a point we started missing the boarding calls at the airport, site inspections at the hotels, late-night calls from the clients, walking carelessly on the streets of our favourite destinations and meanwhile planning the best holiday experiences for our clients. But, who knew this was just the tip of the iceberg. It was going to be the longest, most turbulent-hit flight

of our lifetime; that one flight we would have gladly missed the boarding call for! Weeks into the lockdown, with overindulgence into banana bread and dalgona, missing our workplaces and meetings, the absence of in-person meetings and presentations, gave birth to a phase of webinars. None of us in the industry would've contemplated over the old guards of the trade embracing this technological shift so smoothly. With our traditional



WRECKING BALL

industry professionals who even detest the idea of using laptops for communication embracing technology, the acceptance of webinars augmented substantially. "Learning and discovery never stopped all this while. As a company, we engaged our teams constantly to better equip them with knowledge and concentrated on as much learning as possible during 'no business days in the past year.



PRATEEK HIRA

The idea was that when the time comes, they could deliver more and much better. We consciously abstained from selling products and only focused on equipping our clients with more knowledge so that they too, in turn, could reformulate their products and optimise the existing ones to the best of their advantage," asserts Prateek Hira, President and CEO – Tornos and Co-founder & Director - River Rhapsody

We saw every branch of tourism from hotel chains to NTOs, from associations to agents and even

state tourism boards participating in the race, and how. "History, food trails, heritage, sustainability, optimism, unity, future prospects became an order of our daily lives through this new accepted medium of communication and publicity," Ravi Gosain, Managing Director, Erco Travels.

Where webinars took charge of our daily business interactions, more technology was waiting around the corner to equip the trade for keeping up the momentum. The next big technology happened and we got to see the biggest travel exhibitions online. Now, travel exhibitions to us industry professionals are like elections to political organisations "Hey, are you going for ATM Dubai?" has been a go-to ice-breaking line for every industry member alike. We wait for the exhibitions around the year, and why not it's where we get to meet hundreds, thousands of people under one roof showcasing the best of their products, and networking with people from around the globe with eternal energy. Everything about exhibitions smells like the sweet aroma of honey, right from travel arrangements to networking nights.

Though the pandemic was here to take away all this, the resilient industry had no plans of giving up this easy, even to the deadly virus. The path-breaking technology of conducting travel exhibitions online was a breath of

fresh air for the travel trade globally. The success of the platform can be seen as stalwarts like ITB, WTM, ATM and Pure chose the medium and connected the industry globally. This year has brought with it challenges, losses, hardships, fear none of us had anticipated in our lifetimes but this has also been a year of hope, re-analysing, finding strength, opportunities, humanity and has taught us some unforgettable life lessons.

Prateek believes it's still a long road ahead with a few opportunities as well. He comments, "Each adversary in business only makes a good professional wiser, who always treats it as a learning exercise to better manage the business in the future. When things are running fine we seldom care or relook at them. It's only when things slow down or stop, does one think of reengineering, rediscovering, realigning, up-skilling, strategizing, cost-cutting et al. I think we all just did that all this while and probably for the first time in our

careers in such a large measure. Looking at verticals we analyzed, what was an unnecessary flab in the business, what were the leakages and the means to plug these to better manage the show in the future."

The lifeguard we never got!!

The tourism sector is an ecosystem with varied constituents interacting as a system. If one constituent stops functioning, it creates a multiplying effect on the entire ecosystem. Somehow, the government failed to understand this phenomenon while drafting the much-hyped stimulus - 'Atma-Nirbhar' during the lockdown and again in the latest union budget, where the tourism sector was completely ignored and hung out to dry. The entire industry, with each of its constituents, had their hopes pinned on the stimulus after facing the wrath of the lockdown on their businesses with the government basically denying



the industry its right to earn a livelihood and as such a stimulus was our only hope to revive. Substantiating the context, Rajeev Kohli, Joint Managing Director, Creative Travel added,



RAJEEV KOHLI

"It has been over a year since our business came to standstill. The stress of being an employer, a business owner is enormous, especially in a country like ours where the government has been more than uncaring. We have all reached our breaking points. As each week passed, plans and ideas changed. Every idea we have had has been tested. I wish we could say that we did things differently, but the core fact is that there has been close to no business operation for the inbound industry. So even what we tried did not go far."

It felt like a labyrinth with new difficulty unwinding every passing day, it was only then the stimulus was announced by the Finance Minister and the whole sector was devastated with a question mark on our livelihood and future. "The pandemic has

been an enormous reality check for businesses across the world, across all segments. Conventional wisdom was turned upside down. All the rules we knew, all the systems we planned, all the ideologies we followed - everything hit the wall. When the pandemic started, I was very optimistic about a fast recovery and the resilience of our industry. But as the months passed, my mood has changed. Optimism has changed to exhaustion," emphasises Rajeev. Yet, there was a silver lining in this devastation too; it left us more united than ever before. Like a family, the whole industry united their efforts in reaching out to the government demanding support for the industry on the ventilator. The erstwhile calm and rhythmic industry demonstrated their revolutionary side, some got down on the streets of Delhi risking the already roaring Covid19, others took to Twitter expressing their apprehension on this social media application with

different hashtags trending every other day while all the trade associations unanimously lobbied for their members and industry as a whole. However, despite all the concentrated efforts of the many, the government ignored the tourism sector then and repeated the same performance again in the Union budget 2021. The once-booming tourism sector, contributing 10 per cent to the country's GDP and employing millions of workforce across the spectrum has been left to drown or find the shore by itself.

The darkest hour is just before the dawn...

Hope presented itself in the form of travel bubbles and unlocks progression. Domestic flights resumed operations with a rise in passenger numbers every passing day. Destinations such as Maldives, Dubai, Kenya, Qatar, Tanzania, Bahrain joined by a few others came forward like saviors for travel enthusiasts and

honeymooners roping in the chunk of Indian outbound. India is now the top source market for the Maldives while other countries with travel bubbles are witnessing great inbound from India as well. The tourism department of Maldives, Kenya and Dubai even hosted familiarisation trips for potential agents in India, which radiated hope among the fellow industry members.

However, with recent developments in the travel sector paving the way for the transition toward normalcy, associations and organizations are still reckoning with the pandemic's impact on the sector and beyond.



Travel Businesses are more of passion rather than just business, and it is very hard for a travel professional to change tracks and be out of it. It was always a myth that travel professionals will now shut and do something else. Most the businesses have survived without the business in the last year and many are now opening up. Some have already started to have a trickle while those in inbound and outbound are hoping for a trickle from this October on. This has been possible, as travel professionals are passionate about travel businesses and in spite of all adversaries they stood rock-strong with grit and determination.

- Prateek Hira



Unlocking newer shores

When the going gets tough, the tough gets going; and we travel professionals have proven that we're the toughest. Sitting and sulking is definitely not our way of life, even with the challenges of the pandemic, so we had to do something, right? "It might come as a surprise to many but we formed a new company too, 'River Rhapsody' that owns and operates riverboats and organises river-side camp-stays - quite a contrasting diversion from the traditional land products that we have been offering for the last 27 years. We all knew tourism will come back and it is on its way. It's time now for all of us, to be 'Tourism Ready'. Having no business was surely no reason to be lethargic, instead, we had and probably still have a bit of time, to look for opportunities within and around us and to better position ourselves in the tourism business than we ever were," shares the optimistic Prateek on roving into newer experiences.

With both agony and hope, the self-reliant industry went forward with the burden to settle it all on its shoulder. "There have been so many redundancies and organisational changes in the global travel industry that when we restart the business, we will in some ways be starting from scratch in many destinations. We also tried domestic travel with a new luxury facing brand, but the competitive landscape of selling to the domestic market has just made making serious margins unviable. So now the focus is on when we will reopen," opines Rajeev.



RAVI GOSAIN

"Going forward, we all should be open to adapt to new business techniques and come out of the past as quickly as possible. I strongly believe the situation keeps on changing; it may prolong but won't remain there forever. The tourism industry will surely survive and come back strongly. It was after six months we realised this pandemic will affect us longer than we all thought. But now since the majority of the countries including India is getting vaccinated, our hopes of survival and revival looks better, so we started communicating with our clients and working on the future roadmap. Still, we don't have a clear timeline when we will be able to start a business but our hopes are brighter than 2020," Ravi shares insights on hopes for 2021.

