

20 mega destinations to attract tourists to India

India is developing 20 places, including Agra - the home to Taj Mahal, as short-halt destinations to attract more foreign tourists at an estimated cost of Rs.5 billion.

Speaking at the first Great Indian Travel Bazaar-2008, Tourism Minister Ambika Soni said here Monday that the areas for the 20 mega projects have already been identified and for each project the central government would provide Rs.250 million which would be used to beautify the areas.

Ajmer in Rajasthan has been chosen as a pilot project, she said.

Apart from lone destinations, the government is also developing seven circuits, which will have three sites in a row that could be visited by the tourists, and for which an amount of Rs.500 million has been earmarked, Soni said.

'We want people to come for short stays. A person from Bangkok could come to Guwahati or [Jaipur](#) straight away,' she said at the three-day travel mart, organized jointly by the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (Ficci), tourism ministry and the Rajasthan Tourism department.

The travel fair, which would be an annual feature to market Indian tourism exhaustively and intensively to the target countries, will focus exclusively on inbound tourism. Over 160 foreign buyers from 42 countries are participating in the event.

The minister said the money would be invested on improving the sanitation and garbage collection in these chosen 20 destinations.

Soni said the government was already investing on constructing two- to three-star hotels or dormitories for travellers in these destinations.

'We helped the state government to prepare the list. After these 20 destinations have been developed, we will than target 20 other destinations,' she said.

Giving details of the mega projects, Leena Nandan, joint secretary in the tourism ministry, said the sites were selected on the basis of the number of national and international travellers visiting the place. Being a world heritage site was also a factor in selection.

Besides Agra, the selected sites include Hampi (Karnataka), Dwarka (Gujarat), Benares (Uttar Pradesh), Aurangabad (Maharashtra), Mahabodhi temple (Bihar) and Mahabaleshwar (Tamil Nadu).

Among the circuits that are being developed is the Ganga Heritage River site in West Bengal.

Nandan said these sites would be more beautified and illuminated along with landscaping, and building proper parking bays.

'The aim is also to connect them through train and airways. We have already spoken to the railway ministry and civil aviation ministry in this matter. We are also ensuring that more budget rooms are available for the tourists,' she told reporters.

She said as the government was aware of the constraints in adding more hotel rooms, incentives were being given for building budget hotels.

The whole project would take three years to complete, she added.

Nandan said work had already started in and around the Mahabodhi temple in Bodhgaya in Bihar.

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