

Goa choking on its tourist success, says trade

Goa's infrastructure is beginning to crumble under the load of visitors, says the tourism industry that has called for an immediate upgrade of facilities.

The state, which has a population of 1.4 million, receives some 2.5 million tourists each year. Of this, between 300,000 and 400,000 are foreigners, mainly from Europe.

'We cannot indefinitely push for more tourists. Our infrastructure is not sufficient, and it needs an upgrade,' said Ralph de Souza, president of the Travel and Tourism Association of Goa (TTAG) who is from the locally prominent de Souza hoteliers group.

TTAG believes Goa's lone Dabolim airport urgently needs 'expansion and modernisation', including area for its arrival lounge, proper conveyor belts, and parking bays for aircraft.

Dabolim airport is controlled by the Indian Navy, prompting industry and politicians to say it is badly bottlenecked.

'A few years ago, Dabolim got half-a-dozen flights a day. Today there are over 40 flights daily, plus international flights, charter flights, and naval flights,' said de Souza.

Parking bays are insufficient, and parallel taxi bays are needed, he added. A new proposed airport would take 'at least eight to 10 years' to commence operations, he added.

'The staff has smiling faces (at the airport), but physically the building is old and not sufficient for the growing number of tourists,' said Abdullah Cankaya, deputy general director of the Moscow-based Pegas Touristik.

Goa's TTAG tourism lobby has pushed for visas-on-arrival, especially for British, Russian and Scandinavian tourists who form the bulk of the foreign market here.

Garbage is growing all round in Goa, a destination whose earlier USP used to be cleanliness. The tourism boom is itself probably contributing to the garbage woes.

Even the tourism trade is keen to replace plastic bottles with glass ones, and this - which requires some extra investment - could reduce 30 percent of Goa's plastic load, de Souza argued.

'Nobody takes garbage seriously as a problem of their own,' said Majorda Beach Resort vice president Chandrakant S. Sangawar, also vice-president, TTAG (South Goa).

Tourism sector stakeholders blame the 'exorbitant taxes', the devalued dollar and Indian inflation for the hotels here being uncompetitive against destinations in Southeast Asia, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Egypt, the West Indies, or even African destinations like Gambia.

'TUI Nordic, which brought 500 Scandinavian tourists a week into Goa, has closed down operations. Three Russian flights are operating into Sri Lanka from 2008-2009 and most tourists will be ex-Goa,' said TTAG in a statement here.

Cankaya said allegations about the 'Russian mafia' among tourists were untrue sensationalism.

He said some 25,000 Russians visit Goa each year and, if infrastructure is available, there are intentions to increase this by 20,000 more. But he warned against Goa turning costlier as a destination.

TTAG urged the government to improve Goa's infrastructure - public sewage, better electricity, roads and water supply which were insufficient for Goa's needs.

Hoteliers argued for laxity on a late-night noise ban, saying 'tourists can't be told to go to bed at 10 p.m., and yet locals can't be kept awake at night either'.

They raised the issue of checking guest identities, saying police had told hoteliers to seek the identification of all guests, in the context of 'terrorism'.

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