

## Increase in tourists to 'God's own country'

The number of tourists flocking to 'God's own country' is increasing by the year. While Kerala saw an 18.41 percent increase in foreign tourist arrivals last fiscal, the growth was 7.70 percent for domestic holidaymakers.

'At the end of the last fiscal, a total of 554,921 foreign tourists and 6,879,885 (6.8 million) domestic tourists visited Kerala,' Tourism Minister Kodyeri Balakrishnan told the state assembly Tuesday.

Eco-tourism projects in the state had 1.4 million tourists as their guests, Balakrishnan said in a written reply to questions raised by opposition legislators.

The state has been successfully promoted as a tourism destination through the projection of the catch-phrase 'Kerala - God's own country'.

The tourism industry in Kerala has not only brought in increased revenues for investors over the years, but has also created a large number of jobs. The tourism revenue at the end of the last fiscal went up by 25.28 percent, touching approximately Rs.110 billion.

Balakrishnan said the biggest problem the industry faces is a shortage of rooms. While there are 8,800 rooms in the four- and five-star category, there are 6,500 rooms in the one- to three-star category. In addition, there are 300 rooms in the heritage section.

'The central government has now sanctioned 65 new three-star hotels. The state government is also offering 10 percent subsidy on investments in the tourism sector and also offers special rates for electricity for the tourism industry,' the minister said.

To boost the industry, the state government has also decided to appoint organisations of non-resident Keralites (NRKs) working outside India as tourism brand ambassadors to promote the state as a tourist destination.

Around two million Malayalis are settled outside India.

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