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I Taking the Road Less Clicked

As millennials equate travel with Instagram, luxury hotels are dishing up never-heard-of edgy and experimental services

By PANKTI MEHTA KADAKIA

CONRAD MALDIVES RANGALI ISLAND: ANNA MIDDAY

IT WAS A TELLING SIGN when, last year, the Conrad Maldives Rangali Island made a special announcement: Guests at the sprawling luxury resort could sign up for the services of an exclusive 'Instagram butler'—a trained staff member to take them to spots along the pearly island that are most conducive for garnering 'likes'. The media flurry this announcement

created sent a loud and clear message: Travel, now, is as much for an audience as it is for the traveller.

A December 2017 report from travel technology firm Skyscanner India says 40 percent of millennial travellers are inspired to go "wherever people

aren't going". According to the survey, 53 percent of millennials preferred to spend money on activities and experiences, as opposed to accommodation, shopping, food and drink.

In a world where everyone is, by default, a content creator on their

social media platforms, there's a growing need to be unique; this, coupled with a generation that is travelling more, and more passionately, than any previous generation, is prompting a new dimension in travel marketing.

"Travellers no longer



An Instagram butler teaches guests how to take the most aesthetic photos at the Conrad Maldives Rangali Island

rather book a trip than purchase a nicer car or a luxury home product,” says Rezdy’s report. “Millennials may love to take selfies, but they want their vacations to be more than just an endless string of photo opportunities. Millennials are more likely to book a trip that allows them to be outdoors, and experience something new, such as an informative tour or an immersive activity. Nearly 83 percent report that it is important to them to book a travel experience that allows them to cross an item off on their bucket list.”

Travel confederation

Jaisalmer, a luxury hotel that largely targets young couples with “double income, no kids”.

One of the most popular experiences at Suryagarh Jaisalmer, a haveli-style resort set in the Thar Desert, is not, in fact, located on the property. At 5 am, guests are driven out to an old serai fort—a resting place for desert travellers—outside of Jaisalmer, where travellers and traders along the ancient Silk Route would seek permission to enter the kingdom. Here, a traditional halwai cooks up a fresh, steaming breakfast just as day breaks, the

women who committed sati are buried, a lake and the abandoned, ghost town of Kuldhara.

“We chose Suryagarh mainly for its offbeat experiences,” says Sapna Melwani, 31, who recently travelled to Jaisalmer with her husband. “While we got a taste of the ‘chudail’ trail on our way to the peacock breakfast, we were too squeamish to take the midnight tour. The peacock breakfast, however, remains one of our most special travel memories, ever, and the hotel also arranged a private dinner on the sand dunes for us, along with a camel safari.”

“Travellers no longer care about the size of the room, large TVs or iPads. They want to connect with the place, in a way that’s interesting and not intrusive.”

SIDDHARTH YADAV, VICE PRESIDENT, MRS HOTELS

care about the size of the room, or whether it has a large TV or an iPad in it,” says Siddharth Yadav, vice president, MRS Hotels, which runs boutique luxury properties in Rajasthan. “Instead, they want to connect with the place, in a way that’s interesting and not intrusive.”

According to March 2018 data by Rezdy, a technology provider for the travel industry, given that many millennials are delaying marriage and having children, they often have more discretionary income to spend than previous generations—and travel is typically a top priority. “They would

WYSE, and United Nations World Travel Organisation, predict there will be 370 million youth travellers by 2020, spending over \$400 billion. About three-fifths of the world’s millennials are from Asia, with a third of them coming from India and China. Luxury hotels, then, are rallying their forces to offer creative, out-of-the-box and out-of-the-hotel experiences to cater to this new breed of brand-agnostic travellers.

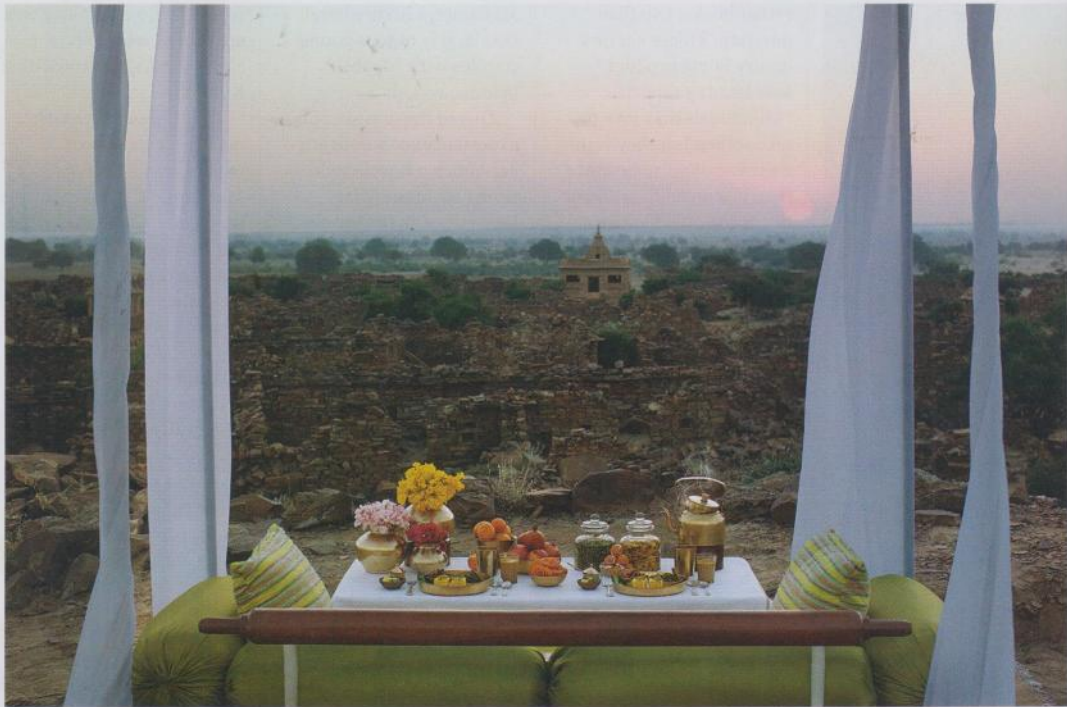
“The big change is, what you can offer outside of the room—and the hotel—is more important now than what is available inside it,” says Nakul Hada, general manager, Suryagarh

golden hour that ushers in hundreds of peacocks from a nearby village.

Another popular curated Suryagarh experience is also away from the hotel gates, and rather unconventional for a luxury hotel to have on its roster—the midnight ‘chudail’ (witch) trail. The thorny desert scrubs around Jaisalmer are still believed to be inhabited by spirits, and this nocturnal tour of sorts scours all the nooks and crannies where the persecuted spirit is said to circulate. The journey includes stops at cemeteries, ruins, off-road trails where cremated ashes of local chieftains and

At Suryagarh’s sister property, Narendra Bhawan in Bikaner, culinary experiences take on special colours. One is all-black: A ‘dans le noir’ or dining-in-the-dark style dinner that’s popular around the world, where guests eat their meal in complete darkness. Guests are blindfolded and served a surprise menu (after taking allergies and dislikes into account), such that their senses of taste and smell are heightened.

Bibliophile guests can opt, instead, for the literary lunch: A seven-course meal where each course is inspired by an extract from a classic, including tomes



(Top) Suryagarh Jaisalmer offers a traditional halwai breakfast at dawn among peacocks, at a serai fort away from the hotel; Narendra Bhawan in Bikaner hosts a seven-course literary lunch inspired by classic novels

such as *Moby Dick*, *Ulysses* and *To the Lighthouse*.

For instance, the extract taken from Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* reads: "My grandfather and I had a standing joke. He was the headwaiter at a country club near my hometown, and every Sunday my grandmother drove in to bring him home for his Monday off. My brother and I alternated going with her, and my grandfather always served Sunday supper to my grandmother and whichever of us was along as if we were regular club guests. He loved introducing me to special tidbits, and by the age of nine I had developed a

passionate taste for cold vichyssoise and caviar and anchovy paste."

The chef's interpretation of this passage is salt roasted beet, stock-braised leeks, goat's cheese and anchovy pâté; with balsamic caviar and pomegranate blood. The menu and extract are accompanied by a short description of the novel and its significance in literary history.

While most guests seek culinary experiences, a growing segment of travellers is also taken by exclusive in-hotel entertainment. For instance, Marriott Hotels has inked global



partnerships with the Universal Music Group to host special concerts with singers such as Gwen Stefani and Imagine Dragons; and with TED, the ideas exchange platform,

for salon events that their guests get access to.

Last month, the Bengaluru Marriott Hotel Whitefield hosted a TED salon showcasing Fellows that shared personal and

NARENDRA BHAWAN: KARAN TRIPATHI, BLOGGER, KARAN FOOD FANATIC