

CORPORATE TRAVEL UPDATES

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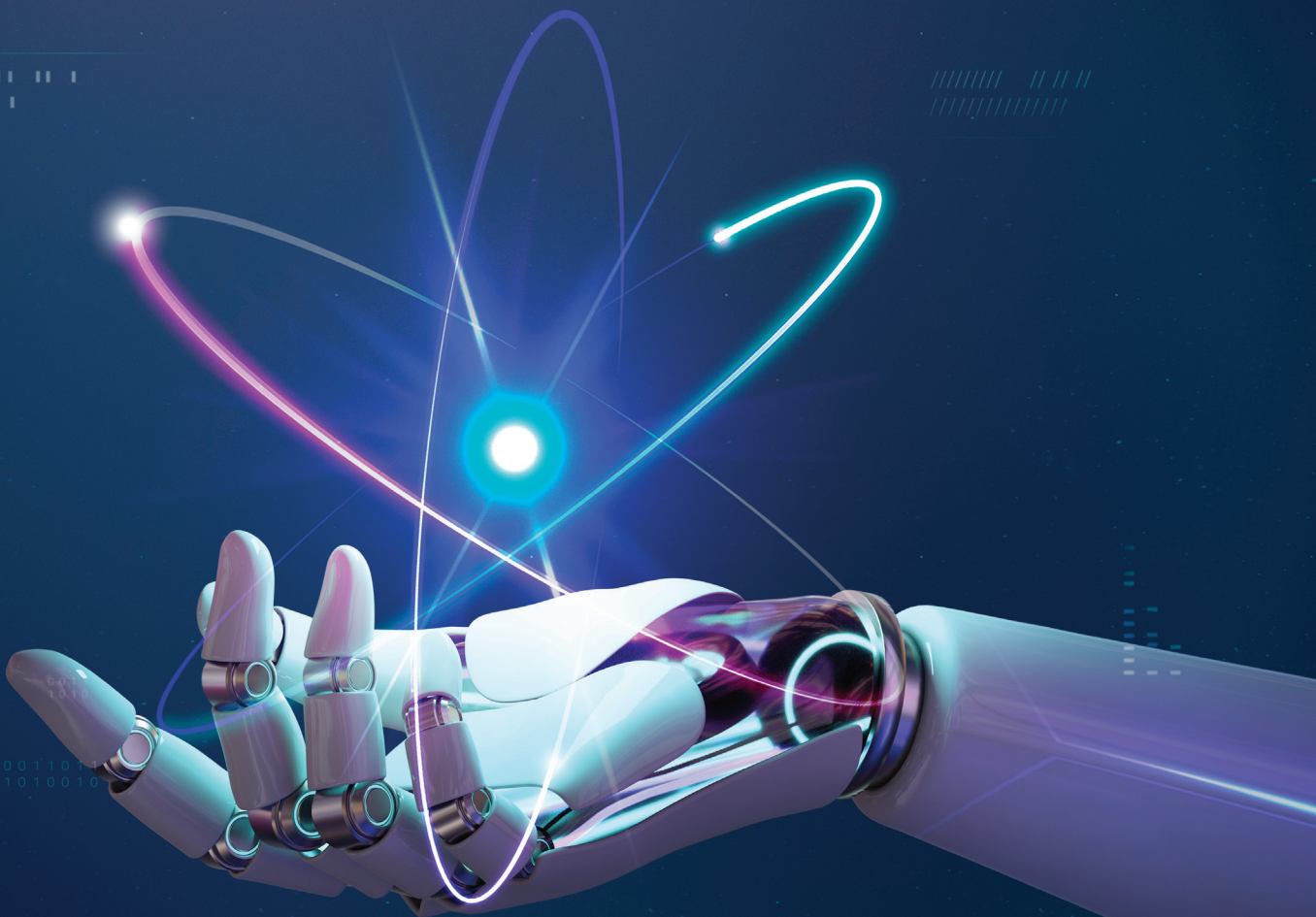
Automation & Digital Health are the Keys to Industry Recovery

Despite airport and airline IT budgets being slashed by the Covid-19 crisis, spending on automation of passenger processing is seeing a rise. The industry continues to battle new challenges with Covid-19 variants, and while there are many hurdles that must be overcome to stimulate global travel, the need for low-touch and efficient operations grows stronger.

Automation and digitisation are crucial to give passengers the confidence and control back to travel efficiently and reduce processing times to acceptable levels. Biometric technology offers an essential solution to address this issue with airports around the world investing in future-proofing operations.

In addition to automated passenger processing, we need to standardise and digitalise health verification to ensure easier, safer, and more seamless travel in the face of ongoing health concerns.

In November 2021, SITA announced that to support the recovery of the travel industry, it will make its Digital Travel Declaration solution, which allows passengers to share required travel and health documentation with governments ahead of travel, available to governments free of charge globally. This is aimed at addressing the global challenge of submitting and verifying health documentation which remains a major impediment to the recovery of the global travel industry.



US Embassy in India Closes In-Person Appointments for Student Visas

After record interviews for the winter season

More than 55,000 Indian students and exchange visitors to the United States were given student visas, an all-time high number in the last season despite the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Department of State has authorised consular officers to waive the in-person interview requirement for certain categories of visa applicants through 31 December 2022. This new authorisation applies to travellers applying for F, H-1, H-3, H-4, non-blanket L, M, O, P, Q, and academic J visas who were previously issued any type of visa, if they are applying for a visa in their country of nationality or residence. This authorisation does not apply to applicants who have a previous refusal that was not subsequently waived or overcome. Adjudicating consular officers may request an in-person interview if additional information is required from applicants.

Applicants renewing any visa within 48 months of expiration also continue to be eligible for interview waiver.

In the coming days, the U.S. Embassy and Consulates in India will release more than 20,000 additional interview waiver appointments for Spring 2022 to allow qualified applicants to make use of the new interview waiver authority. Due to reduced staffing and numerous pandemic-related disruptions to our operations since March 2020, appointment demand is high across all visa categories and wait times may be lengthy for most routine non-immigrant visa appointments at the U.S. Embassy New Delhi and the consulates in Chennai, Hyderabad, Kolkata, and Mumbai.



Domestic Passenger Traffic Sees Growth of 5-6% at 1.1 Crore in December 2021: ICRA

Domestic air passenger traffic grew by 5-6% at 111 lakh in December 2021, compared to 105 lakh in November 2021. The same reflects a Y-o-Y growth of 52%, wherein passenger traffic stood at 73 lakh in December 2020. The airlines' capacity deployment for December 2021 was around 35% higher than December 2020 (86,465 departures in December 2021 against 64,002 departures in December 2020). On a sequential basis, the number of departures in December 2021 was higher by 7%, as Covid-19 infections demonstrated a downward trajectory.

Commenting further, Suprio Banerjee, Vice President & Sector Head, ICRA Limited said, "For December 2021, the average daily departures were at 2,800, notably higher than the average daily departures of 2,065 in December 2020, and somewhat higher than 2,700 in November 2021. The average number of passengers per flight during December 2021 was close to 129, which was largely flat compared to November 2021. Though sequential recovery continued in December 2021, largely driven by leisure travel, boosted by calendar year-end festive and holiday travel, demand continues to remain subdued from the corporate traveller segment, as reflected by the passenger traffic for 9M FY2022 remaining 44% lower than 9M FY2020. Moreover, with the emergence of the new Covid variant and the recent trend of rising infections, few states have already started announcing certain curbs on domestic air travel, posing a serious threat to domestic passenger traffic recovery in the near term."

With effect from October 18, 2021, the Ministry of Civil Aviation (MoCA) has allowed the restoration of permitted capacity to 100% for the domestic operations. It may be recalled that the MoCA had reduced the permissible capacity deployment to 50% of pre-Covid levels, with effect from June 01, 2021 due to the resurgence of the

second wave of the pandemic. It had subsequently increased the permitted capacity to 72.5%, with effect from August 12, 2021, increasing the capacity further to 85%, with effect from September 18, 2021.

As for the scheduled international operations, which remains suspended since the start of the pandemic, as per the last directive dated December 9, 2021 of the Director General of Civil Aviation (DGCA), the suspension is extended till January 31, 2022, given the threat of the recent emergence of a new variant of Covid-19. While the scheduled international operations are yet to start, the MoCA has permitted international operations under the Vande Bharat Mission (VBM) and the Air Transport Bubbles (ATB).

Under the VBM for evacuation of Indian citizens from foreign countries, which started from May 7, 2020, international passenger traffic (inbound and outbound) for Indian carriers stood at 64 lakh for the period May 07, 2020 to December 31, 2021. For December 2021, international passenger traffic for Indian carriers under the VBM was estimated at 6.85 lakh, a sequential growth of 13%.

One major concern that continues to be a drag on the aviation sector is the aviation turbine fuel (ATF) prices, which have seen a sharp increase of 49% on a Y-o-Y basis till January 2022. It is mainly attributed to increase in crude oil prices. This, coupled with relatively low capacity utilisation of aircraft fleet, will continue to weigh on the financial performance of Indian carriers in FY2022. Furthermore, the credit profile of most Indian carriers continues to be characterised by a weak liquidity position.



Indian Passport gets Stronger; Climbs Up Seven Places from 2021 Rankings

There is good news for Indian passport holders even as the travel industry stays fragile with the ongoing pandemic. The passport ranks at 83rd position, seven positions up from its 90th ranking in 2021. A passport's strength is measured by the number of countries its holders can visit without requiring a prior visa. Those holding an Indian passport can now visit 60 countries across the world without the need for a prior visa. In 2021, the number of such countries was reported to be 58.

The rankings are as per the Henley Passport Index, based on data from the International Air Transport Association (IATA). The index also suggests that the average number of countries that any individual can visit without the need of a prior visa is 107. Holders of passports from a number of countries including the USA, Singapore and Japan can access as many as 180 countries on the said parameter!

World's strongest passports

The top spots in the index are grabbed by Japan and Singapore; passports from both the nations can let one visit a whopping 192 destination without a prior visa! This does not take into account the current COVID regulations and restrictions.



The disparity

It is believed that the disparity between the world's strongest and weakest passport (Afghanistan) has increased because of the pandemic as well as the widening economic differences. A popular view also suggests that vaccine distribution should be done in a more equal way to bridge the gap.

Pre-Budget Expectations from Hotel Association of India

The hospitality industry was slowly getting into a recovery mode on the strength of domestic tourism – leisure and events, only to be plunged back into uncertainty on account of the omicron threat. It is critical to protect the industry during such prolonged periods of flip-flop in business prospects. The support required from the government cannot be emphasised enough.

Policy interventions are imperative for the sector's survival and its early and quick re-bounce to normalcy. According to hotels the status of 'Infrastructure' will resolve a large number of the issues being faced by hotels and hospitality companies. It will also help survive operationally and encourage investments in the sector.

Access to softer funding, longer periods to repay loans, resultant shortening of the gestation period will make hotel investments more attractive and sustainable. More hotels would mean more jobs, more development. The sector's cascading effect on the economy has already been well established and documented. Infrastructure Status will also enable hotels to avail benefits of lower taxation, utility tariffs and simplified approval process for projects.

Additionally, the road to recovery can also be aided through measures like extended moratorium, rationalisation of taxes and facilitating ease of doing business.

HAI has submitted detailed suggestions to the Finance Ministry on some easily doable policy reforms which will greatly help in revival of the industry and will also enable it to flourish in the long run.

Hospitality industry contributes 9% to India's GDP employing nearly 4.5 crore people and providing livelihoods to around 16 crore people. Due to the pandemic, the potential shock to livelihood of millions working in the hospitality industry is enormous. The Indian hospitality sector has a critical role to play in the post pandemic economic revival and has been announced as the fourth pillar of the Indian economy.



Covid Booster Dose India: **Appointments for Third Vaccine Shot Now Open**

There is no need for new registration for those taking the precautionary dose of COVID-19 vaccine and they can directly take an appointment from Saturday or walk-in, the Union Health Ministry said.

From January 10, India has started administering the precautionary dose of the vaccine to health-care workers, frontline workers and those above 60 years of age with comorbidities.

In a statement, the ministry said there is no need for new registration and those who have taken two doses of the vaccine can directly take an appointment or walk-in to any COVID-19 Vaccination Centre.

"Schedules were published on January 8. Online appointment facility has started on 09th Jan'22.

Vaccination with onsite appointment started on 10th January.

Meanwhile, the Centre has already said that the precautionary COVID-19 vaccine dose will be the same vaccine as administered previously in the first two doses.

"Precautionary COVID-19 vaccine dose will be the same vaccine as has been given previously. Those who have received Covaxin will receive Covaxin, those who have received primary two doses of Covishield will receive Covishield," said Dr VK Paul, Member-Health, NITI Aayog during media briefing of Union Health Ministry.





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