

# Lure of the homestay

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**T**ODAY's younger generation wants to explore the wild and exotic, experience adventure and pump up the adrenalin. The outcome is that a new trend in tourism is emerging in India.

Advertisements inadvertently sell or portray this youthful lifestyle. 'Alive is Awesome' is the tagline for one such ad selling soap. An elephant showers a lissome model perched on its back with a spray of water from its trunk. You can see male models enjoy a rain of waterfalls. Another is on a boat and upturns a bucket of seawater over himself for a wash.

The implications of these images are many. The inference is that tourism will boost local economies with more jobs and improved infrastructure. However, the worrying implications are for the destinations themselves. Most spots that attract adventure tourism are in fragile ecosystems – once degraded they might never recover.

So the crucial question is what kind of tourism is going to be promoted in such zones? The recent Supreme Court case and the subsequent debate on tourism in tiger reserves have thrown up a very similar question. A new model for tourism, which is of low impact, is indeed called for.

In recent years a growing number of small initiatives are following some of these principles. Community-based home-stays are gaining immense popularity mostly in the Himalayan region. With technical and financial support from relevant organizations, communities in several locations let out rooms in their own homes. This is a wonderful way for visitors to share local culture and tradition.

These homestays, located in the ecologically fragile Himalayas, present a wonderful model of best practices. Homestays in Ladakh adhere strict-

ly to use of the traditional Ladakhi toilet, perhaps one of the most eco-friendly toilets in practice.

Homestays in the Coorg region of Karnataka present a different model. Coorg or Kodagu in the Western Ghats of southern India is one of the most popular weekend getaways for people from Bangalore. Known for its coffee, the plantation owners decided to use part of their spacious homes as homestays around the middle of the year 2000 when coffee prices hit an all-time low. The concept has since gained immense populari-



Four eco-friendly huts for tourists in Wakro, a town in Arunachal Pradesh

ty. Visitors enjoy local culture and cuisine and experience the Kodava lifestyle. The personal touch is what makes these places different. The lady of the house is involved in cooking and housekeeping while the men help organize outdoor activities such as treks, bird watching and walks through the coffee plantations.

The northeastern states too are becoming popular travel destinations thanks to better connectivity. This region, considered one of India's biodi-

versity 'hotspots' is rich in culture and tradition. It is crucial that tourism has a light carbon footprint here and is sensitive to the region's natural and cultural heritage. The northeast can take a lead in promoting responsible and sustainable tourism.

Some initiatives are already in place. Wakro, a small town in the Lohit district of Arunachal Pradesh, is one example. Surrounded by the Mishmi Hills, the main inhabitants of Wakro are the Mishmis. A very enterprising Idu Mishmi,

Rohingso, has built a set of four huts on his land for tourists. Built in typical Mishmi style, each hut is on stilts and made entirely of bamboo and cane. Tastefully furnished with clean sheets and mosquito nets, the huts are very comfortable. They do have functional concrete toilets located a little distance from the huts. A tie-up with a local travel company called Purvi Discovery brings tourists here for a night or two en route to other places in the district.

Initiatives like these are growing across the country and more tourism of this kind needs to be promoted and publicized. Such enterprises can't come up overnight. Considerable investment is needed in building the capacity of local communities and helping them maintain certain standards.

Such tourism is perhaps not for the mainstream tourist seeking luxury in the form of swimming pools and cable television. But it is certainly appropriate for those ready for novel experiences. It is indeed time to look at tourism differently. Tourism development needs to be site specific and appropriate for the location. One shoe cannot fit all. Low impact tourism has to be responsible and adhere to certain guidelines. The recent Supreme Court case is perhaps the right wake-up call. ■

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