

India - made solar powered cruise boat adds sails to the cruise-tourism industry



- India's first solar cruise vessel to be rolled out shortly
- Pilgrimage cruises to be launched
- Indian passenger liner ready to sail to international destinations like Abu Dhabi, Colombo, Dubai, Muscat, Penang, and Singapore.
- Italian cruise operator plans to operate cruises in the Bay of Bengal region

When India's first solar-powered cruise boat sets sail in Kerala's backwaters, India's cruise tourism industry will gain another feather in its cap. The Made in India cruise boat, currently under construction at a boatyard in Aroor will be rolled out in Kerala's Alappuzha district in December. The hybrid vessel will be powered by a motor that can source energy from solar panels, batteries, and generators.

Cruise tourism is one of the fastest-growing wings of the global leisure industry today. In India, its potential is immense.

Coupled with a coastline that is 7516.6 km, and rich cultural and geographic attractions that appeal to tourists, India is gearing itself to offer several cruise options to those who want a floating holiday. In addition to coastal cruises, India offers inland and backwater cruises as well, and tourists are often spoilt for choice by the sheer variety of options that are on India's cruise tourism platter.

Coral reefs, blue lagoons, mangroves and mountains

Operational at present are a few spellbinding coastal cruises

- The Lakshadweep cruise that sails by secluded atolls, islets and spectacular coral reefs that are rich in exotic marine life
- The cruise to the Andaman archipelago with its sugar-white beaches, turquoise waters, sylvan landscapes and unparalleled tranquillity
- A short time-warp Okha –Mandvi ferry service to the holy city Dwarkadish, built by Lord Krishna, in Gujarat
- The Mumbai- Goa luxury cruise service on India's first domestic cruise liner, Angriya along the pristine Konkan Coast
- Mumbai – Kochi cruise on the Arabian Sea hugging India's breathtaking western coastline
- The Malpe- St Mary's ferry service to visit the island's distinctive geological formation of columnar basaltic lava with pillar-shaped rocks
- The cruise from Mumbai / Kochi to the blue lagoons of the Maldives
- The liner that sails from Chennai to Colombo, Penang and Singapore
- The Kolkata- Guwahati-Dhaka cruise that sails across Ganga, Padma and Brahmaputra rivers.

The lure of India's inland waterways

Dotted with rivers, lakes, backwaters and mangroves, India's internal water bodies also attract travellers who want to experience the country's idyllic countryside and quaint riverside cultures, while sailing on a luxury boat.

Notable among India's inland cruises are the Shikara cruise on Dal Lake in Srinagar. Shikaras are houseboats – often referred to as India's answer to the gondolas of Venice. The boatmen sing songs of love, beauty and nature to the countless honeymooners who come here for a memorable start to their life together.

Equally famous are Kerala's famous house-boats or 'kettuvallams' which meander lazily through the lush green backwaters of Kerala and serve up the state's delicious coastal cuisine, while organisers put up performances such as Kathakali and Mohiniattam onboard.

Further north, in Andhra, a 100 km awe-inspiring trip down the river Godavari offers stunning views of hills jutting onto the river. The route is lined with sacred pilgrimage points and ancient temples that abound in legend and lore.

Odisha's Chikila lake cruise is a favourite with bird watchers and dolphin watchers while the Brahmaputra river cruise takes travellers through dense thickets, remote villages and spectacular sunsets. The package throws in extras such as mainland treks, elephant rides in the forest, temple visits, village visits and visits to tea estates. The Sunderbans cruise,

another favourite among wildlife and nature enthusiasts, takes travellers through the largest mangrove ecosystem in the world. The area is home to the magnificent Royal Bengal tigers. Travellers visit in the hope that they might sight a tiger through the tangle of mangroves along the Sunderban Tiger Reserve.

No India-cruise list would be complete without the Ganga cruise. The banks of the mighty Ganges are lined with places of religious and cultural interest. From Rishikesh to Prayagraj to Varanasi and beyond, the river enthral its visitors and shows them glimpses of an India where time has stood still.

Among the pocket-friendly cruises are the ferries that ply across the river Hoogly in Kolkata, Mandovi in Goa, Cauvery in Karnataka, Udaipur lake in Rajasthan, and Narmada in Madhya Pradesh. Most popular among domestic tourists, these ferry rides are a mode of conveyance as well as entertainment.

Huge potential

As reflected in different studies, the cruise industry is growing worldwide. Millennials, with high disposable incomes, are showing much interest in getting away from regular touristy activities and taking cruise rides instead.

India's elite are also choosing cruises as the perfect party destinations, celebrating birthdays, weddings and reunions onboard. Chartering cruise liners by high net-worth individuals and by corporates for their off-sites is also gaining popularity.

Initiatives in the right direction

Envisioning an inevitable growth in this industry, India's Ministry of Shipping is creating an environment that will draw in both tourists and foreign investment. Five major ports of the country namely Mumbai Port Trust (MbPT), Mormugao Port Trust (MoPT), New Mangalore Port Trust (NMPT), Cochin Port Trust (CoPT) and Chennai Port Trust (ChPT) have been developed to attract cruise ships with dedicated terminals and other related infrastructure for berthing of cruise vessels and embarking and disembarking of cruise passengers.

The government has revised standard operating procedures to facilitate cruise tourism, with e-visa facilities at five sea ports of Mumbai, Goa, Mangalore, Cochin and Chennai, exemption of e-visa tourists from the requirement of biometric enrolments for three years, reduction of port charges and construction of new cruise terminals at these five major ports.

The Ministry of Shipping is also planning to start inland waterways navigation and passenger transportation systems in the rivers of the north-eastern states. WAPCOS, a public sector company is preparing a detailed project report on running low-cost ferry services in these regions.

With many pilgrimage spots such as Somnath and Dwaraka in Gujarat, Rameshwaram in Tamil Nadu located on the coast, the government is also looking at creating pilgrimage cruises for senior citizens. State governments have been given directives to encourage cruise tourism and reduce the burden on the roads.

A lot happening in India's cruise tourism industry

To set the ball rolling, India's first domestic luxury cruise liner, Angriya was launched as a joint venture by Mumbai Port Trust and Angriya Sea Eagle Pvt Ltd. The 131-metre passenger operates on the Mumbai-Goa route and can host up to 400 passengers.

Anchoring the international cruise liner, Sliver Discoverer, at the Visakhapatnam Port, with about 100 international tourists onboard, was a shot in the arm to promote tourism potential in the state.

In 2018, India and Bangladesh finalised and accepted the standard operating procedure for the movement of passenger cruise vessels. Private players will be encouraged to operate river cruises between the two countries covering a distance of around 1,539 kms. In the later half on 2019, an air-conditioned passenger ferry service, with 20 rooms and with a capacity of 300 passengers, will operate between Hazira port in Surat and Bandra in Mumbai once a week.

Costa Cruises, an Italian cruise operator with an established presence in India wants to open the Bay of Bengal for operations and is keen to conduct international sailings from India's eastern coast.

In 2017-18, 1,62,660 cruise passengers and 139 cruise ships visited India at -Mumbai Port, Chennai Port, Cochin Port, Kolkata Port, New Mangalore Port and Mormugao Port. The Ministry of Tourism hopes to attract five million cruise tourists to India by 2040. The government's efforts to achieve this objective is in line with the plan to promote cruise tourism under the Sagarmala programme.