

The changing face of hospitality | India Today Insight

How hotels are gearing up to face the challenges thrown up by the pandemic

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At ITC Maurya, New Delhi, protection shields are now mandatory on front desks.



The Crowne Plaza in Greater Noida, Uttar Pradesh, re-opened its doors to guests on June 8 as lockdown restrictions eased across the sector, but not without stipulations. The Crowne Plaza's welcome note to guests highlighted the hotel's ramped-up

measures as per the safety protocols outlined by the World Health Organization and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, to protect its guests from the coronavirus.

The Cleanse

There was a time when hotels would lure guests with monsoon packages, Valentine's Day specials, new cocktail menus and visiting Michelin star chefs, but now a hotel's cleanliness will be the draw factor. Regular and sustained deep cleaning of hotels with hospital-grade disinfectants, among a host of other safety and hygiene measures, is every hospitality establishment's safest bet to entice the paranoid, reluctant guest back. What a difference a pandemic makes.

Out with the lavish buffets and cavernous banqueting facilities, and in with thermal cameras and disinfection protocols. As these properties prepare for a new operational reality—one that balances the Centre's guidelines with state laws and consumer anxiety—the country's largest hotel companies have all come forward in the past few weeks announcing their new cleaning and sanitising procedures.

From Marriott International's 'We Care', to ITC hotels' 'We Assure' programmes, cleaning, which was a behind-the-scenes operation at hotels till now, is taking centre stage. ITC Hotels' hygiene and sanitation protocols have been accredited by the National Accreditation Board for Hospitals and Healthcare Providers (NABH), an organisation dedicated to ensuring sanitation, hygiene, safety and infection control practices in India. Marriott's 'We Care' encompasses new SOPs for back of the house, front of the house and guest check in/ out operations. Every hotel has identified over 200 touch points where changes will be executed. For instance, each touch point will be equipped with a QR code, scanning which will lead to a safety and quality assurances message through an animated video, restaurants will reduce seating capacities and increase spaces between tables, guest elevators will ferry a maximum of four guests per elevator and front desks will sport protection shields. In addition, all guest stationary, like pens used at the front desk, will be sanitised after every use. There will be a mandatory mobile check-out and all employees will be mandated to download the Aarogya Setu App and wear masks and gloves at all times.

“Social distancing will be pivotal to how hotels cater to guests, maybe even offering catering facilities for off sites as video conferencing and working from home become the norm,” says Neeraj Govil, senior vice-president, South Asia, Marriott International. “Demand for digitally accessible, contactless interaction will outline the new normal, such as dial-up virtual concierges that allow you to order food through your television.”

Bringing the five-star home

As hotels move from aesthetically clean to clinically clean, they are adapting and adopting a host of innovative ideas to stay ahead of the curve. Home deliveries and takeaway dining experiences are one of many such initiatives. While the specially trained service professionals of the Oberoi Gurgaon are delivering food to your doorsteps, their limited transport means has resulted in guests to opt for self-pick-ups, with a 10 per cent discount on their bill. The Oberoi Mumbai, however, is only offering takeaways which include hampers and cold cuts among other delicatessen delights. Other hotel chains have partnered with on-demand delivery platforms to offer in-home dining experiences. ITC Hotels has partnered with Swiggy, while the ‘Marriott on Wheels’ food delivery initiative uses Zomato. IHCL, on the other hand, is extending its contactless takeaway services ‘Hospitality@Home’ to include a selection of essential oils and scrubs from its Jiva Spa to offer curated food as well as wellness hampers.

While food is undeniably hospitality’s greatest offering, hotels are going above and beyond to offer fresh services, such as the ITC Hotels’ recent launch, Lavanderia—a contact light laundry service with strict monitoring of safety and hygiene norms at each step. It allows customers to hand over the items at a designated point at the hotel, and then pick it up within 24 hours. Lavanderia is available at ITC Hotels in Delhi, Kolkata, Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Visakhapatnam and Chennai, and is open to all city residents. Apart from laundry, ITC has also launched a rental car company—The SAFE Car—anticipating a rise in road trips. International Travel House (ITH), an associate company of ITC, reinforces stringent safety and hygiene protocols among its team of experienced chauffeurs. Daily thermal temperature checks for the chauffeurs, mandatory use of medically-approved masks, gloves, and sanitisers and daily stringent deep-cleaning

protocols with accredited surface antimicrobials are now par for the course.

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Apart from innovative offshoots of core services, hotels are also offering a greater flexibility of cancellation and for amendments of booking dates. “We have adapted our cancellation policies in response to the changing conditions. Our Marriott Bonvoy Members form a large part of our customer base, well over 70 per cent in most hotels. For them, the status earned in 2019 will be extended to February 2022, to provide ample time to redeem points; the expiration of points will be paused till February 2021,” adds Govil.

Offers You Can't Refuse

Marriott, along with other hotels are also offering great deals and packages for travellers. A limited time offer curated specially for their hotels across South Asia, is available to its guests for a booking period up to June 30, which can be availed from now till June 30, 2021. It gives a minimum 30 per cent off on room rates across all its hotels, or one complimentary night's stay.

Not to be left out, ITC's offering includes a Welcombreak, an all-in-one luxury getaway (inclusive of accommodation, meals and more) where one can book now and pay later, along with a flexible cancellation policy. Starting at Rs 5,299 plus taxes, the offer is valid till October 31, and includes all meals—Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner—and additional savings on food and beverages, complimentary laundry, happy hours, late check-out and savings on other recreational services across 13 participating hotels across the country. ITC Hotels is also offering the perfect layover for work ventures with a 12-hour stay option—9am to 9pm.

As for the Oberoi group, that has reopened their Oberoi Sukhvils Spa Resort in New Chandigarh, The Oberoi Rajvils in Jaipur, The Oberoi Udaivils in Udaipur and The Oberoi Vanyavilas Wildlife Resort in Ranthambhore, is offering complimentary additional room for two children (up to 12 years of age) and a 50 per cent off on a third night's stay, plus an additional 20 per cent off if one books directly on [Oberoihotels.com](https://www.oberoihotels.com).

While the offers are generous and promise flexibility and convenience, it still remains to be seen if it'll provide adequate incentives for the reluctant traveller to return.

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