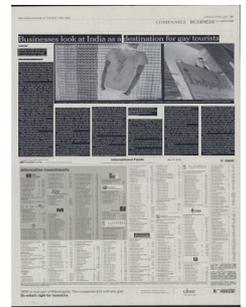


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# Businesses look at India as a destination for gay tourists

NEW DELHI

## Ruling could pave way for new and perhaps lucrative niche market

BY MRIDU KHULLAR RELPH

When Bryan Herb steps into stores on his trips to India, he says, shopkeepers almost always ask whether he is looking for a souvenir for the woman in his life. A ring for his girlfriend, perhaps? What about a beautiful pink scarf for his wife? "Every single time this happens, I toy with the idea of saying, 'I have a boyfriend, not a girlfriend,'" said Mr. Herb, co-owner of Chicago-based Zoom Vacations, which caters to gay tourists. "But I don't."

Homosexuality has long been a hidden facet of Indian life and, until recently, an illegal one. But change is afoot. A Delhi High Court ruling last year decriminalized same-sex intercourse, and sensitivity toward gay people and bisexuals is growing in major cities like Mumbai and New Delhi. The Hindustan Times, one of the country's largest English-language newspapers, recently began a campaign called, "It is time to open our minds," encouraging Indians to rethink social issues, including equal rights for gay people.

Now, businesses are beginning to recognize a new and possibly lucrative niche market. Stores aimed at a gay clientele are opening, and same-sex parties and clubs that had been required to stay underground are increasingly making their presence felt.

The customer base is potentially huge: surveys by Forbes India in conjunction with Out Now Consulting, a marketing firm, estimate that 4 percent of Indian adults, or about 30 million people, identify themselves as gay, bisexual or transgender.

Vijay Thakur, president of the Indian Association of Tour Operators, said 12 or 13 new businesses had sprung up in the past year to cater to gay vacationers both from India and abroad. "The general feeling in the industry is that this development can only lead to increased profitability," he said. "India could well be the next big destination for gay tourism."

Mr. Herb, 37, said that he had clients who refused to vacation in countries with strong anti-gay laws, and that the court ruling sent a message that India was now more welcoming. "More businesses

in India that have long wanted to court the gay market see this as a green light to start going after it proactively," he said.

India's neighbor to the north, Nepal, has started to sell itself as an international gay tourist destination after that country's Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage in December 2007 and directed its government to formulate laws accordingly. This year, India's only openly gay person of royal lineage, Manvendra Singh Gohil, 44, plans to wed at a Hindu temple in Kathmandu, the Nepalese capital.

While legalizing same-sex nuptials in India may be a long way off, some tour operators say places like Goa and Kerala could easily be marketed as honeymoon spots for gay couples, as the states are already known for their beach party towns.

"Gay men have long been bypassing India for countries like Thailand and even Indonesia," said Sanjay Malhotra, a fashion designer who started his company, IndjaPink, in November 2008. It was the first travel agency in India to focus exclusively on gay men.

Mr. Malhotra said he felt it was a shame that gay Indian couples could not explore and enjoy their own country as openly as they could in other parts of the globe. He decided to form IndjaPink to give gay men a safe way to travel in India without having to hide who they were.

One of the biggest challenges in designing itineraries for gay travelers, Mr. Malhotra said, has been heightening the sensitivity of the hospitality industry. For example, despite being informed that a group of tourists is gay, the front desk staff at some hotels often seems determined to put same-sex couples in rooms with separate single beds.

A big part of IndjaPink's business, Mr. Malhotra said, involves speaking to drivers, housekeepers, doormen and bartenders to ensure hassle-free holidays for his clients.

"It's important that the staff not speak in hushed tones behind a guest's back if he's sharing a private moment with his partner or not stare at the couple in the rearview mirror if they're holding hands in a taxi," Mr. Malhotra said.

**"Gay men have long been bypassing India for countries like Thailand and even Indonesia."**

Sometimes, though, getting the message across can be difficult. "When I've had meetings with drivers and asked them if they're comfortable being around gay people, I've had them turn around and tell me, 'Yes, yes, sir, we're all gay here too. Very happy and gay!'"

Outright harassment has never been a major problem for gay foreigners. As Mr. Herb said, "A lot of people in smaller villages have no idea that we are a gay group."

But until the decriminalization, Mr. Malhotra said, gay Indians were the targets of corrupt policemen who used the threat of arrest to harass them or extort money.

"The gay issue doesn't come up as long as you maintain your straight face," he said. "But as soon as you show a bit of your gay side, you get a lot of unwanted

attention, especially in smaller towns and off-beat tourist destinations."

Gay travelers, both Indian and foreign, still find it hard to interact with the local gay community or learn more about being gay in India, because many people and events remain underground. But guides like IndjaPink are making it possible for tourists to go to same-sex parties and clubs to which they could not gain access otherwise.

The challenge to the gay sex law was brought by the Naz Foundation, which works to raise awareness of H.I.V. and AIDS. The statute, which defined homosexual acts as "carnal intercourse against the order of nature," called for a 10-year prison sentence for violations.

In overturning the 148-year-old colonial law, the Delhi High Court said the measure was an "antithesis of the right to equality."

The Supreme Court started to review the ruling in April, and observers are divided on whether it will be upheld. If it is, that could open new lines of business aimed at same-sex couples, like home loans and insurance.

Azaad Bazaar, a gift shop for gay people in Mumbai, opened last year, carrying items like mugs with rainbow motifs and shirts that say "Ban 377" — a reference to the penal code section on gay sex. Azaad means "free" in Hindi.

The two women behind the shop began their business in 2006, but for several years only sold small items at parties, and masks and flags at gay pride marches. New Delhi and several other cities in India have held gay pride parades for several years, though many participants hide their identities by wearing elaborate masks and costumes.

Before the ruling, Mr. Malhotra said, it felt as if there were a sword hanging over his head, and he never knew when it might strike. Few people were interested in knowing more about his business model or his clientele. But now, hotels and travel desks are much more open to hearing about their needs, he said, and he is less worried about being the target of the police or of being maligned in public.

"It has brought a sense of legitimacy," he said.

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A young Indian man, left, wearing a T-shirt with Hindi text that says, "Yes I am, so what?" Sanjay Malhotra, right, a designer, at his shop, IndjaPink, which was the first travel agency in India to focus exclusively on gay men.