

DEALING WITH THE 'PANDEMIC' PHOBIA

Mr. Jaal Shah, Managing Director at Travel Designer Group discusses with Travel Heights about its recent launches and the challenges faced pre and post lockdown along with highlighting the future outcomes.



MR. JAAL SHAH
MANAGING DIRECTOR,
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Tell us something about your recent launches Affiliate.Travel and Rez2020. Are they interlined or different from one another and how are they beneficial for any Travel Agent?

JS We launched 'Affiliate.Travel', a forward distribution tool for corporate clients, at SATTE 2020 that allows travel agents to distribute their hotel booking platform, without any investment in technology, to their clients. Affiliate.Travel will help the Indian travel and tourism industry to create new success avenues with the rise of business travel in the country. The booking tool is packaged with the innovative features of RezLive.com, complete with a payment gateway for seamless payment collection from corporate clients. Recently, we have also

launched affiliate.travel in UAE and it is proving to be a success.

REZ2020, launched in March 2020, is a redesigned RezLive.com booking engine that is aligned to suit the booking approach of the new millennia. Along with the lively new design, several new features, many of which are the first time in the industry, are introduced to make the booking experience smooth and exciting. The primary objective was to reduce the overall time taken in booking and managing the reservations on our website. Innovative design is combined with the existing features to improve user experience and easy access to the account information.

What were the main issues you faced during the lockdown and what kind of impact has Travel Designer Group seen on its business?

JS The travel industry has been one of the heavily impacted industries during the COVID-19 pandemic and Travel Designer Group is not immune. As an organization, we went through one of the most challenging times throughout our existence since 1999. Fortunately for us, we started tracking the developments of COVID-19 as early as January. When some parts of the world started going into lockdown, we started preparing, in early March, for a similar scenario in

the countries where we operate. This ensured that we did not face any major issues in our operations and helped us to settle seamlessly to work from home.

The main characteristic of this pandemic is the steep fall in business starting mid-March. The drop was sudden, and no one could have done anything, considering that it was induced by government-led travel restrictions around the world. With leisure, business and MICE restricted, the only business left was from stranded travelers and quarantine requirements. It is all behind us now and we are seeing positive booking trends in some of our major markets and should see more recovery in the coming months.

What was your business strategy pre-lockdown and has it changed post lockdown? If yes, how and what is your action plan for the upcoming months?

JS Travel Designer Group was founded based on strong financial fundamentals and we had been profitable since inception. Further, over the last two years, we analyzed all risks associated with our business model and strategically worked on strengthening our organization on all the important aspects, which actually paid off during this pandemic. As I mentioned earlier, we tracked the pandemic right from its early stages and had plans for different scenarios. Hence, when the lockdown began, we never had a moment of indecisiveness.

Our first and foremost motto was to refund travel agents in their original mode of payment, and we were clear that we will not issue credit notes. Fortunately, many of our supplier partners stepped-up and announced force majeure. This helped in quick resolution of reservations affected by COVID-19 and we were able to refund all the affected reservations and our client's feedback is testimony to our efforts.

Looking at the modest rebound in some of the markets where the business is opened to near normal, I think that the recovery will be steady but slow and it will be at least a year before we can rebound to 2019 levels. With that assessment, we also had to restructure our organization set up to reduce our cost, align it to current business levels, and strengthen it for sustainable business.

In the last two months, our tech team worked on every little feedback that we received from our clients about our product to bring many new innovative features that made our platform more robust and user-friendly. Our sales teams across all the markets are working closely with travel partners, educating them about possible travel trends post-COVID and how we can together emerge with a sustainable business model.

Moving forward, we all know that the market size will not be like before and will be shrunk. The growth will be slow but steady. This market is only for those who are proactive in terms of their product, service levels and are adaptive to changing requirements of the industry.

What are the new Travel & Tourism trends predicted in the FY20-21? How do you think the traveling preferences of the audience are going to change after the pandemic?

JS The travel and tourism industry has seen many challenges in the past such as 9/11, the SARS outbreak and the 2008 financial crisis and it has always bounced back. This time will be no different.

This pandemic has placed a strong emphasis on safety and hygiene coupled with international travel restrictions. In short term, domestic vacations have taken center stage. Further, we have seen a high preference for room types that offers more privacy and reduced interaction with others such as villas with private pools. Travelers are also mindful of safety and hygiene measures taken by the properties. Recently, we reached out to a number of hotel chains,

standalone hotels and attractions to gather information about their safety and hygiene practices during this time and we are heartened to know that a lot of thought and effort has gone in to making guests feel safe and comfortable. Cleaning procedures, social distancing and contactless service have taken center stage. This might also prompt guests to choose well-known brands, where they can feel comfortable.

As you mentioned the preferences and trends in travel are changing in these times, what has Rezlive.com done to accommodate these preferences and empower travel agents?

JS I can give you some examples. In many of our internal analysis, we all agreed that flexibility will be the most important aspect. This led to a series of negotiations with our suppliers and hoteliers. Today, we can proudly claim that 90% of inventories listed on RezLive.com beyond a 7-day travel window is flexible to cancel within 72 hours. 10% of inventories in a similar travel window is flexible to cancel within 24 hours.

We also thought that looking into the current scenario, it is important to give as much safety information as possible to clients because it will give people the assurance to travel. With that in mind, our product team worked round the clock to build a comprehensive database of safety regulations followed by over 50,000 hotels and the data is available for our clients to study and give a trustworthy recommendation to their customers.

The early picking up of bookings from the Middle East showed that staycations have become an attractive option when international borders are closed. Further, we found many travelers preferred private pool villas and rooms with a kitchenette that will help in maintaining social distancing. Following this, we worked on comprehensive filters in our platform, which can help travel agents to narrow down properties that include all preferences by their clients.

These are some examples. Our product team is always on the lookout for emerging trends and accommodate them in our product.

How is the response of Designer Voyages in UAE?

JS Travel Designer Group launched its new endeavor - Designer Voyages last year, which is catering travel agents

THIS PANDEMIC HAS PLACED A STRONG EMPHASIS ON SAFETY AND HYGIENE COUPLED WITH INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL RESTRICTIONS. IN SHORT TERM, DOMESTIC VACATIONS HAVE TAKEN CENTER STAGE. FURTHER, WE HAVE SEEN A HIGH PREFERENCE FOR ROOM TYPES THAT OFFERS MORE PRIVACY AND REDUCED INTERACTION WITH OTHERS SUCH AS VILLAS WITH PRIVATE POOLS. TRAVELERS ARE ALSO MINDFUL OF SAFETY AND HYGIENE MEASURES TAKEN BY THE PROPERTIES. RECENTLY, WE REACHED OUT TO A NUMBER OF HOTEL CHAINS, STANDALONE HOTELS AND ATTRACTIONS TO GATHER INFORMATION ABOUT THEIR SAFETY AND HYGIENE PRACTICES DURING THIS TIME AND WE ARE HEARTENED TO KNOW THAT A LOT OF THOUGHT AND EFFORT HAS GONE IN TO MAKING GUESTS FEEL SAFE AND COMFORTABLE.

with inbound tours and packages to UAE. With a stronghold on the online B2B Global Reservation System, we were all set to expand to the offline business for UAE. With a large setup and international headquarters in Dubai, we will be able to provide customized and one on one services to the agents for them to book UAE with confidence.

UAE being one of the preferred destinations visited by global travelers, we have seen a very good response for Designer Voyages. UAE is one of the safest destinations for tourists at the moment and with the upcoming winter season, we are looking forward to welcoming guests to the UAE. ■