

Selling 'Bharat' to India

Manisha Pande / New Delhi July 23, 2010, 0:09 IST

A travel company is building a business model based on rural India as a tourist destination.

How about a bullock-cart ride as part of your itinerary next vacation? Or a visit to banana and areca nut plantations? Or a lesson in toy-making from rural artisans?

Travel plans that include such activities are emerging as viable tourist attractions for India's increasingly prosperous middle class. Many not-for-profit organisations are only just beginning to explore the possibilities of village tourism in the interests of promoting the development of rural India. One of the earliest entrants is Travel Another India (TAI), a one-year-old private limited company that has shown that the model can profitably bridge the gap between India and Bharat.

Set up in August 2009 by Gouthami, 41, a former consultant with United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the company's agenda is to promote responsible tourism. "We interpret responsible tourism as an attempt to create a symbiotic relationship between those curious to explore — the guests — and those who want to provide a memorable experience of the diversity that the destination has to offer," says Gouthami (who only uses her first name).

TAI, she explains, was started on a hunch born from 18 years of travel in rural India, "Villages across India offer a different way of life, which can be refreshing to explore for frazzled city-dwellers," she says. And like all new ideas, this one also met with a lot of scepticism. "I was initially told only foreigners would be interested in exploring such an option. But now a majority of our visitors are Indians from Delhi, Bangalore and Chennai," she adds.

Currently, TAI offers three destinations: Banavasi and Channapatna in Karnataka, and Leh. Banavasi was the first initiative. It was set up in August 2009 with support from the tourism ministry and UNDP as part of their Explore Rural India Project.

At Banavasi, tourists can stay at the newly-built Village Tourism Complex. Two home-stays are also operational, one of them set in a large plantation.

Channapatna, famous for wooden toys, is the second destination set up in April this year. "We have organised a home-stay there with an artisan family," says Gouthami. The family has a toy-making unit, so travellers

can even try their hand at making toys.

The cost per night at both the destinations ranges between Rs 450 and Rs 900.

So far, TAI has generated employment for over 10 people in the two villages, which attracted about 150 tourists. The strength of the initiative lies in drawing from the uniqueness of local sights, historical monuments and culture each destination has to offer. "When I started off, the villagers themselves were not convinced with my idea. They wondered why someone would visit their godforsaken village and pay for a bullock-cart ride," says Gouthami.

She then prepared a guide of all the places of interest around the two villages and came up with a 50-page booklet on the local attractions. "It's just a question about being receptive and I explained to the villagers that cleanliness and safety, not luxury, is the key to attracting tourists," she says.

TAI has generated a modest revenue of Rs 5 lakh, most of which came from consultancy and marketing for other responsible tourism ventures. It works with the village panchayat in each village and sets up village tourism committees to facilitate the programmes. "We locate an appropriate village on the basis of its accessibility and safety. One important factor is the availability of a host in the village to provide accommodation and take responsibility for the tourists," she says.

After the selection TAI provides training, support and marketing to the community for the first three years to get the venture up and running. After which it hands the management and control over to the village and is responsible for just the marketing. TAI takes 30 per cent of the share from the host body at the villages for the first three years.

In Leh, TAI initiated a travel circuit, Himalaya on Wheels, in collaboration with People's Action Group on Inclusion and Rights (PAGIR) for wheelchair-bound travellers this June. "We conducted an axis audit of seven places and identified destinations that could be accessed by people in wheelchairs," she explains.

Looking ahead, Gouthami hopes to reach 50 villages in the next three years. She is also excited about being one of the finalists from Asia for the Cartier Women's Initiative Awards, an international business plan competition that recognises five female entrepreneurs every year from each continent. Each laureate receives coaching support for a full year, \$20,000 in funding and a trophy designed by Cartier. "The money generated from such competitions is indeed welcome and solves a lot of our funding problems," she says.