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# The faith 'n' fun combo

**TOURISM** Retain your divine sense of balance with improvised and innovative faith-based travel packages, writes SOMA BASU

An invitation from the newly launched Daiwik Hotel in Rameswaram may not trigger much excitement in a frequent visitor to the Ramanathaswamy Temple. But a comfortable stay and visits to some less obvious spots actually outweighed the boredom that stems from familiarity.

Visits to small temple towns can be quite disheartening, with their narrow and dusty roads congested with shops and eateries, milling pilgrims and tourist buses, heaps of plastic litter and stray animals. Add to it the priests and autowallahs who force themselves on you doling out information on everything from accommodation to ticket and timing of darshan, where to eat and what to visit. Even if your bhakti is still intact after a darshan accomplished at the end of long and winding queues, you often feel like fleeing the place sooner than you planned.

Debashish Ghoshal, the MD and CEO of Kolkata-based Daiwik Hotel, feels a pilgrim town is no longer just about the shrine but rather about the whole experience. It is surprising that the demand for quality hotels and better facilities in pilgrimage centres has remained unmet for so long. But clearly, pilgrimages are the core driver for travel today and Ghoshal wanted to do away with the neglect of the modern-day pilgrim.

Six months ago he launched the first Daiwik Hotel in Rameswaram, as he found the town to be grossly under-provided. "In strong pilgrim destinations, which lack in world-class hospitality and knowledge-based services, it is easy to gain faster visibility," he says. "We want to establish our brand positioning and become the first choice of discerning pilgrims. We are here to recapture Rameswaram's prominence."

Tracing a 5,000-year-old legend to its location and identifying elements that you have read about, according to Ghoshal, gives a true feel to what you see. "A pilgrimage is a journey of faith," he feels. "Authentic information that gives a sense of security about religious views is of immense value as it helps to connect with the holy site. Travellers now are de-

manding more authentic spiritual and cultural experience."

His company has built full back-up data and verified every piece of information after extensive interactions with the priests, temple authorities, local guides, senior citizens and residents in the town. With Delhi-based historian Subhadra Sengupta heading its research team for creating a knowledge base on the pilgrimage history of the country and the holy cities, the group has fleshed out quite a few unexplored locations as well. The guest can pick and choose from different itineraries. This includes an early morning visit to the famous temple or to other religious sites and some less familiar locations. The Rameswaram packages are called "In the footsteps of Lord Rama" and are all well-planned tours packed with facts and figures, stories and information as described in Valmiki's epic.

Fifty per cent of the tourism industry's revenue is generated by pilgrimage tourism. "If we manage to tap even a small portion of this, it means big business for us," says Ghoshal, who is now going full swing to start his business in 20 temple towns including the chardhams, Varanasi, Tirupati, Madurai, Kanyakumari, Varanasi, and Thiruvananthapuram in the coming years. Targeting upscale pilgrims with specialised services and superior infrastructure seems to be working. With the tourist season on, the property has been going houseful as high-end religious travellers are now coming to these places for relaxation, meditation and well-being. We met a group of 30 NRI women from Trinidad and Tobago at the hotel on a spirituality-oriented vacation. "Spirituality is one element of the religious experience and travellers like us look forward to a vacation that combines faith with fun," said one of them. Beaches and hill stations may not have quite fallen off the traveller's map despite the suffocating number of tourists crowding these places round the year. But religion tourism, redefined to attract both pilgrims and tourists, is certainly gaining ground.



STAY AND TELL



## Pilgrimage redefined

### Hotel Daiwik, Rameswaram

When you go to a destination with the least of expectations and get pampered to the hilt, you feel ecstatic. That's what it was when I hit the holy town of Rameswaram. For the first time, I was not just a pilgrim in this small dusty town. I felt like a tourist spoilt for choices in the town's first star hotel.

Going by the past experience of mostly staying in budget hotels and dharamshalas, I never thought a foot massage or spa was even available in the pilgrim centre. The moment I arrived at the six-month-old Daiwik Hotel, I was whisked away from the hustle-bustle of the national highway to a silent room called Vyom with a predominant smell of herbal oils. The welcome foot massage turned out to be comforting for the tired feet.

Food was the next surprising delight as much as the ambience in the dining zone and I pinched myself to believe that I was in Rameswaram, where all previous trips have been in grime, dust, hurry and worry even though people land here for peace of mind. The multi-cuisine vegetarian dishes laid out in Ahaan offered an interesting and surprising melange of dal-chawal to naan-paneer preparations, Jain specials and ayurvedic food to pasta and noodles. The

guests too made an interesting combination. They were from France, Africa and across India who filled up the 90 neat rooms the hotel has including three suites.

"People are travelling more for spiritual experience these days. The religious traveller is no longer a typical pilgrim of before. He is a modern tourist who demands comfort and credible information while seeking divine blessings in places of worship," says general manager Gowri Shankar.R.

To assist its guests to convert smoothly into modern pilgrims, the hotel offers non-intrusive neatly packaged guided tours of either the main Ramanathaswamy temple or the lesser known places of worship or even few unexplored locations. The best part is they provide enough well-researched facts and information about the spots you choose to visit. The property does not stand amidst nature. But what makes the environment soothing is its activity room where hymn rendition and sat-sangs take place. The hum of soft religious prayers elevates the atmosphere to a spiritual level. The hotel offers three types of rooms - superior, deluxe and the suites. All the rooms are provided with the comforts of a luxury hotel. Since guests mostly come for a short stay, there is

no scope of getting bored even though there are no activities.

But Daiwik gives ample opportunity to relax, unwind and meditate, if you are so inclined. You can happily avoid the tensions of temple visit and instead explore some lesser known spots in peril.

### Likes

The food  
The planned packages for touring the temple and the town  
Clutter-free rooms and courteous staff

### Diss

What is missing at daiwik is perhaps a store selling religious books and CDs

If you scan 360 from your room, you find empty plots littered with plastic, a baneful sight

### How to get there

Name: Daiwik Hotels  
Contact: NH-49, Madurai Rameswaram Highway, near Rameswaram bus stand, Rameswaram - 623526, Tamil Nadu; Ph: +91 9840336162/04573-223222; www.daiwikhotels.com

Tariff: Rs. 3,500+ (62 superior rooms); Rs. 4,500+ (25 deluxe, including one specially designed for physically challenged); Rs.7,000+ (3 suites)

(The writer was at the resort on invitation)

## In the Foot steps of Lord Rama



**Vilundi Theertham Thangachidam:** The spot where Rama created a sweet water spring aiming with an arrow when Sita was thirsty. The well is located in the sea and still contains sweet water

**Teerthandadhanam:** Legend says that this is the place where Rama turned into a Shiva devotee and Lord Shiva assured Lord Rama that he will emerge victorious in the battle against Ravana. Rama bathed in the water and the place got its name teerthandadhanam. It is said any devotee bathing in the holy water here will obtain the effect equivalent to holy dips taken in 66,000 teerthams across the world.



**Kodandarama Temple:** Here Vibhishana joined Rama and was crowned the King of Lanka. The original temple is believed to be underground. The new one is situated in the southernmost tip of India on the Bay of Bengal.

**Sethu Karai:** A place of puranic importance, this is where the first foundation of a sea bridge to Lanka was laid and the remains of Rama sethu can still be seen here at a distance.

**Gandhamadan Parvatam:** The hill from where Hanuman leapt to Lanka and Lord Rama watched the sea from here

**Jata Teertham:** The sacred tank where Lord Rama washed his long mass of hair

**Panchamukhi Hanuman:** The only place where you find Hanuman with five heads like Ravana's ten. Floating stones with which Rama built the bridge to Lanka are also seen here.

