

Speech by Commissioner for Tourism at gala dinner with Indian travel trade in New Delhi (English only) (with photo)

Following is a speech by the Commissioner for Tourism, Miss Au King-chi, at a gala dinner with the Indian travel trade in New Delhi, India, on September 15:

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to revisit New Delhi. I say "revisit" because I first came here as a tourist some 18 years ago. To use a cricket term, I was "bowled over" by the cultural heritage of the city and warm hospitality of its people.

Returning for the first time as Hong Kong's Commissioner for Tourism, I'm pleased to see that these aspects of New Delhi have not diminished over time. This city, and this magnificent country, remains a favourite destination for travellers from all over the world, including from Hong Kong.

India and Hong Kong have strong ties dating back to the 19th century, when Hong Kong was little more than a fishing village with big ideas.

Since the early days, Indian entrepreneurs have left an indelible mark on Hong Kong. In 1852, a merchant by the name of Dorabji Naorojee arrived in Hong Kong and went on to establish what is now called the Star Ferry Company.

I'm pleased to tell you that the Star Ferry Company celebrated its 110th anniversary this year. The ferry service between Kowloon and Hong Kong Island is one of the highlights for our visitors and remains popular with local Hong Kongers.

Today, Hong Kong's Indian community numbers about 35,000, making it one of the largest expatriate communities in the city. Indians have for generations contributed to the

diversity and pluralism of Hong Kong, and made significant contributions to our legislature, civil service, legal, business, tourism and other professional fields.

Last December saw a significant breakthrough in forging closer relations between our two places, with the signing of an air services agreement. Under the agreement, each side can operate 27 additional flights between Hong Kong and cities of India.

The tourism industry was among the first to benefit from the increase in flight capacity. In the first seven months of this year, we received some 220,000 visitors from India, an increase of about 17% over the same period last year.

I am confident this trend will continue as our two countries, India and China, continue to become established as the leading global economic powerhouses.

As the most open and cosmopolitan city in Asia, and an international financial and commercial centre, Hong Kong is well-placed to bridge the two massive markets.

Hong Kong is already the location of choice for more than 1,500 Indian firms establishing a base in East Asia. Union Bank of India opened its first full-fledged branch in Hong Kong last month.

We provide a safe and familiar environment for Indian entrepreneurs, especially for those testing the waters across the boundary in Mainland China.

English is one of the official languages and the language of business in Hong Kong.

We follow the common law legal system based on the English system. We maintain a level playing field for business and zero tolerance towards corruption.

Hong Kong's style of capitalism is tailor-made for fast, efficient and effective movement of capital, goods, information and know-how between Mainland China and India as well as the rest of the world.

Strong business ties between our two places open up new opportunities for the travel trade through MICE tourism - meetings, incentive travels, conventions and exhibitions.

Hong Kong has a well-earned reputation as an ideal destination for MICE, leisure and other business travellers. We have state-of-the-art venues to stage exhibitions, conferences and business meetings. And we have world-class services to make sure everything runs smoothly.

Our geographical location on the southeastern tip of China and within five hours flying time of half the world's population means we are well placed as a sourcing hub in Asia.

Every year, Hong Kong stages more than 300 international conventions and exhibitions, including some of the world's largest. Just two weeks ago, we successfully staged the world's largest watch and clock fair, attracting more than 760 exhibitors and 2,600 buyers from around the globe.

And this summer we added a new string to our bow as a co-host city for the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Staging the Olympic and Paralympic Equestrian Events for the games was a huge honour and responsibility for Hong Kong.

Allow me to take this opportunity to wish Delhi every success in its planned bid to host the Olympics in 2020.

Hong Kong's reputation as an events hub in Asia includes sports events. Each year we have the world famous rugby, golf, squash, badminton and of course cricket tournaments.

In fact, India won the International Hong Kong Cricket Sixes in 2005 and has a good chance of repeating that feat in November.

Our diversified tourist attractions and exciting shopping and dining facilities all contribute towards the success of events held in Hong Kong.

And don't forget our policy of low taxes, or no taxes. We have no VAT, no sales tax, no capital gains tax and only income sourced in Hong Kong is taxable in Hong Kong. Because we want our visitors to have a little extra spending money for shopping and entertainment, we recently removed the hotel accommodation tax.

In February, Hong Kong became the first duty-free wine port among major economies. In one day we slashed duties on wine from 40% to zero. The aim is to establish Hong Kong as a centre for wine trading and distribution in Asia. The industry has responded positively to zero duties with a series of wine auctions, growth in wine imports and the development of business opportunities in the wine sector.

Some people say - and I agree - that fine wine goes best with fine cuisine. The revered Michelin Guide has fixed its gaze on Asia and Hong Kong has been chosen as the next city to be covered by the Michelin Guide which is due to be published before the end of this year.

I'm confident the Michelin Guide will confirm what many Hong Kongers believe, that our city is a great destination for gastronomic delights. And that includes some very popular and exceedingly good Indian restaurants.

Ladies and gentlemen, I hope I have been able to give you - dare I say - a taste of the opportunities in Hong Kong for the Indian travel industry.

I shall leave it to other members of our delegation to fill you in on the details of what our tourism board and tourist attractions may offer to make an unforgettable MICE event or trip in Hong Kong.

It only remains for me to thank you for your unstinting support for Hong Kong and confidence in our city.

I hope you will come and visit us soon to see for yourselves the opportunities for greater co-operation in tourism between Hong Kong and India.

If you can't make it for the Cricket Sixes in November, come when you can, and don't forget to bring your families, friends or clients along. There is something for everyone in Hong Kong. I'm sure you won't be disappointed.

Thank you very much.

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