

CELEBRATING  
50 YEARS OF EXCELLENCE  
.....  
1963-2013

STAY AT

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF

LIFESTYLE

SPOTTED BY SITA

TOP CHEF RECOMMENDS

DESTINATION INSIDER

6 THINGS WE LIKED ABOUT

FESTIVALS

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# Art of Travel



## Rajakkad, Lakeside and Villa Shanti

### Rajakkad Estate, Palani Hills

It came to me as quite a surprise that such a beautiful place existed so close to the hustle and bustle of city life in the plains. And it is literally off the map. There are no signboards to indicate the location of [Rajakkad Estate](#) in Dindigul district. About an hour and a half before you reach Rajakkad, the landscape becomes dotted with little hills on the horizon. It is a little later that you realise your adobe is hidden high up on one of the hills. From the time you start your ascent you can feel the climate change, the rays of the sun becoming diffused being filtered through canopies of tall tree. Be sure to pass on the drivers number, so that Robesh or Nisha who look after the property can coordinate once you have started the ascent of Palani hills.

Rajakkad sits in the heart of the plantation country, surrounded by forest, amidst undulating fields of pepper, coffee, lime and avocado. The house is a reminder of traditional Kerala architecture - wooden panels and carved beams, which has been dismantled, transported and placed on this hill top. Rajakkad has seven rooms and each room has a sliding panel (instead of a wall) with an unobstructed view of the surrounding garden and landscaping. The rooms are luxurious and the bed is perfect to doze off with a book in hand. None of the rooms have air-conditioning but the climate is pleasant enough at this altitude. Just to add, they don't have a pool. The food is garden fresh and organic. There is a main dining area but more cosy intimate tables can be arranged if you desire. WiFi is available in the public places and not in the rooms.

Rajakkad is a place that offers the chance to sit still and take in all that the place has to offer. Don't go, if you expect an activity filled stay. The most you can do and should be doing, is walking and trekking in the forest. But don't worry, I will not tell anyone if you just decide to pick up a book ( they have an excellent library) and relax in a hammock!

[Click here](#) to read more.

# Stay At







Veena Maker

# A Day in The Life of Narayanan

Tanjore has always been synonymous with Veena. So after finishing my sightseeing of Tanjore, I wanted to see how and where the Veenas are made. My guide Munshi tells me that he knows a place near the Big Temple, where for generations the family had been making Veenas.

We stop at a house crossing an ambling cow and enter through a narrow passageway. The workshop at the end of the corridor resembles a covered veranda, allowing light to flood in during the day. We are met by Narayanan's wife and she apologetically tells my guide that her husband has gone for a bath. But there are assistants working away in the room crammed with things- pieces of chipped wood, carving tools and Veenas in different stages of completion. The tools used seem to be old and crude, a sharp contrast to a beautiful carved Veena I see in front of me.

For people not familiar with the instrument, a Veena is about five feet in length consisting of a large resonator (kudam), a wooden bridge (kudurai) and a tapering hollow neck (dandi). It is unique to Tanjore because the instrument is made from a particular strain of matured jack fruit tree found only here. Although string instruments of almost all types were called "Veena" in ancient Indian texts, the Veena with its long neck and rounded resonators is considered to have ancient origins.

By now Mr Narayanan has come and eagerly shows me around the workshop. My big, bulky camera mistaken for a press photographer most probably. I ask him whether this is his family business. "As far as I remember we have always made Veenas. My father, his father and our forefathers all made Veenas. I started learning how to make Veena from my father when I was 25 years old after completing college. I don't know what would happen in the future because my son doesn't want to pursue this business. He wants to be a software engineer," says Narayanan.

I ask Narayanan; who buys the Veena nowadays? "There are many musician families and in most schools of Tamil Nadu it is compulsory to learn classical music. They are the main people who buy the Veena from us," says Narayanan.

[Click Here](#) to read more







## A Story of an Expat Couple Settled in India

Lakeside is hidden away in a remote valley just a two hour drive from Madurai. It is unexpected to find a guest-house here. But even more surprising in this rural location is the fact that it is run by an English couple, Peter and Dorinda Balchin. Dorinda laughed when I asked her about this. "We're just as surprised as anyone else!" she told me. "When we stayed at Lakeside during our first visit to India in 2007, we both had good jobs in the UK and had no intentions of running our own business, certainly not in India! But when the owner told us that the property was for sale, Peter asked me if I'd like to wake up here every morning or back in the UK? It was no contest, really. We returned to England and set the wheels in motion so that, by the end of 2008 and after spending less than twenty days in India, we left our old lives behind us and found ourselves the proud owners of what has now become this beautiful resort."

The couple have enjoyed their first five years at Lakeside, finding the experience interesting and exciting, although they readily admit that moving to India has involved a steep learning curve for them both. Everything from finding the right staff to coping with bureaucracy has involved new ways of thinking and doing things - and endless patience!

They certainly seem to have adapted well to their new life, although some things have been more difficult to adjust to than others. Take shopping, for instance. "Visiting a whole range of shops when buying groceries, instead of one supermarket, took me back to my childhood days," says Dorinda. "Although having one person scan the goods, paying another and then a third checking and packaging my purchases was a whole new experience." Peter agreed. He has a background in the building trade in the UK and is responsible for renovations and maintenance. "The choices available for the task of upgrading Lakeside were limited when we first arrived. I suppose I had been spoilt by the range of items available in England. But it's surprising how things have changed over the last five years. Many western items, from bathroom appliances to tools, are more readily available now and more affordable. There are supermarkets and malls opening in Madurai as well, so that the shopping experience for both of us is much closer to that in the west. And the differences are getting smaller all the time."



Life in many western countries, including the UK, can be very stressful. The opportunity to live a more relaxed lifestyle closer to nature was one of the things which helped Peter and Dorinda to make their decision to move to Tamil Nadu. Dorinda loves the early mornings, watching the sun rise and nature come to life. It is especially enjoyable if she is riding her horse down by the lakeside, with the chance of seeing deer or wild-boar and with the ever present birdlife for company. For Peter, the best part of the day is sitting on the veranda in the early evening, watching the sun go down over the mountains. Sipping a cold beer as he watches the goats and water buffalo make their slow way homewards is something he would never have been able to do in his previous life.

[Click Here](#) to read more





## Murals and more

### Turn Down service at Visalam

During my stay in [Visalam](#), Chettinad, I found the turn down service very beautiful. Normally, confectionery such as a chocolate or a mint is left on top of a pillow on the bed that has been turned down. But at Visalam, each night the house keeping staff made floral patterns from leaves and flowers collected from trees around the property. A picture perfect end to the day.

### Mucukunda Murals

The magnificent 17C [Mucukunda Paintings](#) tells the story of Mucukunda, the monkey faced Chola King who brought the god, Lord Tyagraja, down to earth and established him in the Tiruvarur temple. The paintings are among the best surviving examples of late-Nayaka or early Maratha-period murals and offer tantalising glimpses of daily life, material culture, flora and fauna, temple architecture and ritual performance from this period. The murals have been painted in natural dyes and run along the edges of a long hall which is kept under lock and key. There is a caretaker who has to be told in advance if you wish to see the paintings. The paintings can be seen on the way to Tanjore or Kumbakonam from [Mangala Heritage Homestay](#), Nagapattinam.

### Palace ruins of a Chola King

Has it ever struck you that you see a lot of temples built by the Chola rulers, but never see any of their palaces? The Chola's believed that stone was a symbol of permanency and could be only used for building temples. The palaces were made with bricks, wood and other perishable materials. Therefore, even though the temples have survived the ravages of time, their palaces have not. Near the famous Gangaikondacholapuram temple is an archaeological site which is believed to be the ruins of the palace of the Chola King Rajendra.

# Spotted By Sita





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Chef's Special

When at Villa Shanti, don't forget to try the signature prawn dishes of Chef Saravanan. Start with a prawn and pomello salad. Perfectly stemmed prawn with pomello, roasted peanuts, juliennes of ginger, coconut, shallots, cilantro based with three types of lettuce with dressing of palm sugar and tamarind dressing. For the main course try the delightful prawn wrapped fish. Dijon mustard marinated prawn with balsamic and basil marinated wrapped fish fillet grilled, served with green peas mashed potatoes, tomato and zucchini pipette and orange capers sauce. And it's only fitting to end a perfect evening with flambéed dessert crepe suzette.

Recipe available on [request](#)

# Top Chef Recommends







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## The 2 Day Chola Tour, Pondicherry and more

On my recent trip to Tamil Nadu, I wanted to do a classical tour but at the same time I wanted to cover places like Mangala Heritage, Nagapattinam and Dindigul which could easily be included to make the itinerary more relaxed.

My first stop was Chennai. Though it had rained continuously the week before, I was fortunate enough to get clear weather. After checking into my hotel, I proceeded for lunch at Sabita Radhakrishna's house. Sabita is a freelance writer, food columnist and broadcaster. Nowadays she also entertains clients at her house over lunch, where she cooks authentic Tamil Cuisine. The more adventurous can do a cooking class with her. She has a beautiful house, filled with knick-knacks which the husband and wife duo have collected from their travels. Sabita is also a textile activist and on request shows you her extensive and rare collection. A stop at her place for lunch or dinner makes for a good introduction to the Tamil cuisine and way of life.

To add a twist to the ordinary, imagine learning about the history of San Thome Church, its architecture and the history of the locality from the Father of the Church himself. Sounds interesting doesn't it? So the next time you are in Chennai get in touch with us to make it happen. Before proceeding to your next destination, whether it is Mahabalipuram or Pondicherry, I would recommend that you make an early morning stop at Koyembedu Flower and the Vegetable market. The sheer size of the market and the riot of colours make it a sight not to be missed.

Going back to Pondicherry after 2009, I was dreading that the juggernaut of modernisation would have changed this quaint little town. I am happy to say that the French Quarter (White Town) hasn't changed much. Pondicherry is a one of the few cities in India where walking is such a delight. I will not talk much about Villa Shanti here again, since I have already covered its excellent food and the hotel in other sections of this newsletter. Instead I will talk about Palais de Mahe. As usual CGH Earth does not disappoint. The service was excellent and the rooms are very spacious. Palais de Mahe boasts of a pool too, which is rare amongst the smaller properties in the French Quarter. The inclement weather meant, I didn't have an opportunity to swim. Over the years there have been a few Bed & Breakfast, which have mushroomed all over. Two of these which are worth mentioning;

# Destination Insider



Gratitude and La Closierie Bay of Bengal. Gratitude is a lovely heritage home restored by INTACH, from a French colonial home. The owners of this chic, eight-room B&B are passionate about textiles and pottery. The property's highlight is its central courtyard and the giant mango tree which dominates it. When you enter the property a sense of calm and peace envelopes you. La Closierie on the other hand is much more contemporary. A water body in the center of the property draws your attention and (like Gratitude ) has only six rooms, each having a different character and price. Both options can be looked at for the value conscious traveller. I came upon both these properties on my walk with INTACH, who not only tell you interesting stories about the town and buildings but you also step inside a few of the buildings to see the restoration project. For me the only way to enjoy Pondicherry is to stay inside the French Quarter and discover the place on foot. Get in touch with us to know more about an exclusive product that we have created - A French Day in Pondicherry; where we try to create the feel of how a French local would spend time in the city.

[Click Here](#) to read more



## Lakeside Guesthouse Athoor

1. **Amazing View:** Visit Lakeside and you realise what made Dorinda and Pete leave behind their old lives, to become the proud owners of this beautiful guesthouse. It is surprising to find a guest-house here, yet even more unexpected is the fact that it is run by an English couple. As soon as you check into the property, bougainvillea's in full bloom greet you and beyond the periphery is a beautiful lake surrounded by coconut plantations.

2. **Wonderful hosts:** The hands-on approach of Dorinda and Pete makes your stay memorable. Lakeside guarantees a warm welcome and comfortable stay with the couple working hard to provide unique experiences and opportunities, particularly for foreign guests to experience, real life in rural Tamil Nadu, which is something they don't find on the average tour. Kennedy, the caretaker and the other locals who have been trained to look after the guests, always have a smile on their face and are helpful without being obtrusive.

3. **Village Tour:** One of the highlights of my Tamil Nadu trip was the Village Tour I did at the Lakeside Guesthouse. I have done a lot of tours like this before. But the tour with Dorinda was excellent. I could see that a lot of time had gone into planning the tour and identifying the experiences that would interest clients. While on the tour, you visit a local brick making factory, a village school, a weaver's family, a potter, a coconut de-husking unit and few other interesting people. Since the local community also benefits from these tours, everyone is very happy to see us. It is an unhurried experience where you decide how much you want to spend interacting at the various places. At the school the children recited poems for us that they had been learning which was wonderful. Dorinda and Kennedy, both accompany the guests on the tour and are excellent at explaining all that we see. The tour starts around nine o'clock in the morning and it is almost lunch time by the time we come back.

4. **Accessibility:** Lakeside is hidden away in a remote valley, just a two hour drive from Madurai and around a three hour drive from Chettinad. Its excellent location makes it an ideal way to end a hectic Tamil Nadu itinerary or rest for a few days before entering Kerala.

5. **Peace and Relaxation:** To mirror Dorinda's words, Lakeside provides you the opportunity to unwind close

# 6 Things We Liked About



to nature. You will love the early mornings, watching the sunrise and nature come to life. It is especially enjoyable to do a morning walk down by the lakeside, with the chance of seeing deer or wild-boar and with the ever present birdlife for company. Or sitting on the veranda in the early evening, watching the sun go down over the mountains, sipping a cold beer as you watch the goats and water buffalo make their slow way homewards. The well-stocked library entices you to pick up a book that you have been meaning to read, but never got around to because of all the distraction of everyday life.

6. **The Room and Pool:** Lakeside does not provide ultra-luxurious accommodation, but you can be sure of a very comfortable stay. The main bungalow has four rooms (2 air-conditioned) with magnificent views of the lake. The rooms are ample in size although smaller than those of the individual cottages. The six individual cottages are spread around the property and are very spacious with an extra bed for the third person (2 air-conditioned). You also have the option to choose air-conditioning just for the night ( 8pm to 8am)- Ideal if you are a budget traveller but still want your comfort. The buildings are spread out in the landscaped gardens in a way that offers space for people to 'do their own thing' whilst enjoying the fantastic views. I don't know why, but I was not accepting to find a pool here. But the presence of a beautiful clean pool was like the icing on the cake.





# Festivals

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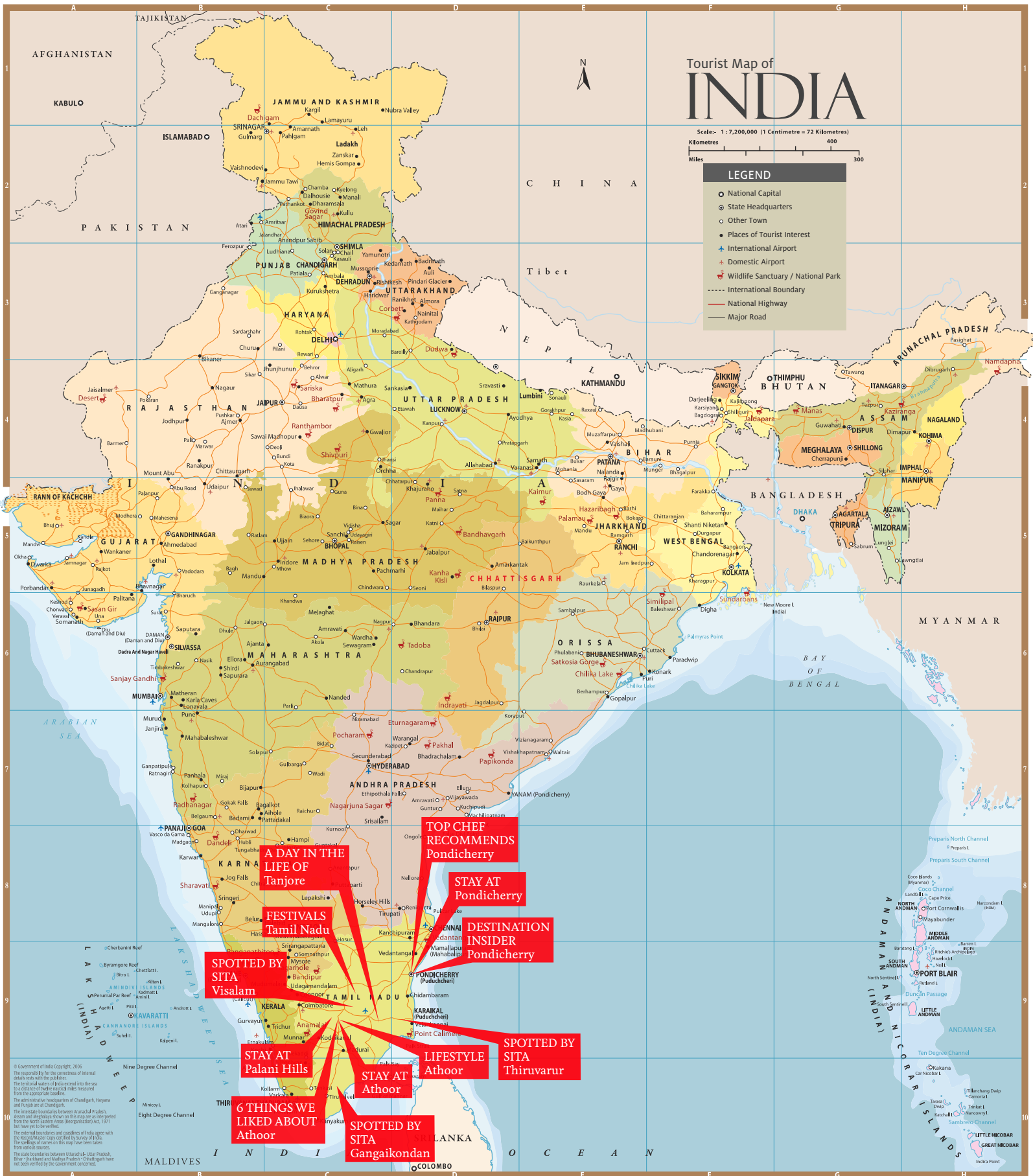
## Pongal 14-17 January, 2014

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Pongal is the harvest festival of Tamil Nadu. It is celebrated with much enthusiasm, quite like Thanksgiving in America. As most of the people rely on agriculture for their livelihood, it is a time when they thank God, Earth and their cattle for the wonderful harvest and celebrate the occasion with joyous festivities and rituals. Apart from the main Pongal day (the second day, called Surya Pongal) where the Sun God is worshiped, one of the popular attractions of the four day festival is the bull fight or Jallikattu held near Madurai. Jallikattu is the bull taming sport played as a part of Pongal celebrations. This is one of the oldest traditional sports of India, the Indian equivalent of the San Fermin running of the Bulls, Pamplona.



Photo credit : Rahul Sadagopan <http://www.photoscape.co.in/home/>







## Meet us at the Upcoming Trade Shows

If you wish to schedule a meeting, do e-mail us at [info@sita.in](mailto:info@sita.in)

Trade Shows	Booth No.	Whom to Meet
<b>ETC</b> Orlando 5th -8th February	Sita Desk	Neeraj Bhatt
<b>BIT</b> Milan 13th -15th February	Awaited	Matteo Pennacchi & Philip Thomas
<b>Vivattur</b> Vilnius 22nd -24th February	Trade Visitor	Deepak Sharma
<b>ITB</b> Berlin 5th -9th March	Booth No 209 Hall No 5.2b	Philip Thomas
<b>MITT</b> Moscow 19th -22nd March	Awaited	Deepak Sharma
<b>TUR</b> Gothenburg 20th-23rd March	Trade Visitor	Vikram Trivedi
<b>UITT</b> Kiev 26th -28th March	Trade Visitor	Deepak Sharma
<b>AITF</b> Azerbaijan 3rd -5th April	Trade Visitor	Deepak Sharma
<b>Mundo Libao with Abreu</b> Lisbon 5th -7th December	Awaited	Ganesh Shankar, Sunil Dangwal & Nelson Cortez
<b>Indian Travel Bazaar</b> New Delhi 8th -9th April	Booth No. 38, 39, 46 & 47	Neeraj Bhatt & Philip Thomas
<b>KITF</b> Almaty 23rd -25th April	Trade Visitor	Deepak Sharma

# Trade Shows

