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# Art of Travel



## Neeralaya

# Stay At

Neeralaya which means 'an abode by the water' was the first stop for our volunteers whilst on their way from Delhi to the Project Site in Spiti. Located in Raison, a small village along the banks of the river Beas and just 25 kms before the crowds of tourist centric Manali, Neeralaya is a perfect place to unwind and rejuvenate. Our volunteers tell us that the peace and quiet of Neeralaya was just about what they needed, after the long bus journey from Delhi. Muneer Suri, a native of this area and the owner of Neeralaya, had invited our volunteers for breakfast and to relax a while, before they continued with their journey. Neeralaya has only 3 villas with 7 bedrooms of varying sizes. Muneer was kind enough to open up one of the villas for our volunteers to wash and change before they had breakfast. The guest rooms, most of which have stunning views of the river with a personal terrace or a balcony, have been tastefully designed. The rooms feature en suite bathrooms with hot and cold running water, a writing desk in the room, tea & coffee stations, in-house phone facilities and limited room service.

This lovely retreat has been conceptualised, designed and built over 10 years. Neeralaya has used local material while incorporating local architecture of the region. The timber and slate used for constructing the villas have been reclaimed from old rural homes which were in the process of being demolished, to be replaced by the standard, modern cement homes. The retreat is quite literally set in nature's lap and has been enhanced a notch further by its rich landscaping; the peach, walnut, apple, nectarine and plum trees in addition to many flowering plants and of course the wild apricot trees. In fact, each cottage in Neeralaya has been named after locally-grown fruit trees. Our volunteers tell us that breakfast at the gazebo, right beside the Beas River was fantastic. A mix of Indian and continental fare was served; including fresh peaches and plum juice from the property itself. Neeralaya's kitchen procures its supplies including milk and fish locally and most of the vegetables and fruits are grown in the kitchen farm itself.

Neeralaya is perfect for your FITs/Small Groups while on their way back to Delhi after roughing it out in the cold deserts of Leh-Ladakh and Spiti. We highly recommend 2 relaxing nights here, before boarding the train/flight from Chandigarh to Delhi.





## Neeralaya



1. Perfect place to unwind after roughing it out in the Himalayas: The quietly sophisticated Neeralaya is a perfect place to unwind for your FIT clients and families on their way back to Delhi after roughing it out in the cold deserts of Leh-Ladakh or Lahaul-Spiti in the Himalayas. It is located 45 minutes away from the overcrowded and touristy Manali where our clients have been otherwise breaking their journey. “The peace and quietness of Neeralaya is just about what your clients need and will love and appreciate after their Himalayan adventure,” says Manpreet Kohli, a volunteer of our CSR initiative in Spiti. We recommend 2 relaxing nights at this lovely property by the Beas River, before the flight/train from Chandigarh to Delhi.

2. The Location: Neeralaya is quietly tucked away in Raison, a small village and is a mere 1 km from the road head ferrying tourists to Manali. One can even walk it down to the property from the road head, while the luggage arrives in a 4WD Jeep. But what makes the property very special is the river Beas flowing right next to it. “The Beas River makes you feel totally relaxed. The landscaping, the trees and the many flowering plants and the wild apricot trees all makes you feel at home almost immediately,” says Rana Sagar, another volunteer.

3. Use of Space and Local Architecture: “During my travels I have seen many properties in stunning locations not getting it right and making a total mess out of it. The reason mostly is the lack of intelligent use of space and architecture which jars with the surroundings. Thankfully Neeralaya is an exception,” says Kuntal Baruwa, Team Leader of our Spiti CSR initiative. Despite being located on an area of over 3 acres, Neeralaya has only 3 villas, with 7 bedrooms built with old recycled timber, stone and slates sourced locally. Our volunteers tell us that they really liked the subtle fusion of contemporary and the local and that everything is built and positioned in a manner ensuring ample privacy.

4. The Riverside Gazebo: The Riverside Gazebo at Neeralaya is a really special place. Perfect for lazy meals by the Beas River. “It is a place where you feel happy and cherish the simple joys of life over delicious meals. I haven’t experienced anything like this before, during my travels,” says Sujeet Kumar, from the Spiti CSR Team

# 6 Things We Liked About



Kala: our Volunteers can't seem to stop talking about her.

5. Kala and the Staff Members: Staff members of Neeralaya are mostly from the local village and our volunteers tell us that they all exude the warmth of Neeralaya. They also felt that the women staff looked really smart in the traditional attire of the region. But they somehow can't stop talking about Kala who served them the most delicious meal at the Riverside Gazebo. “It was not just the lovely attire, but her equally lovely smile that made her so special,” says Rekha Nair, another volunteer. Kala, in an unobtrusive manner, interacted with our volunteers and wanted to know where they are from, where they are headed and how they like Neeralaya and the food. “She came across as someone who was genuinely concerned about us. People like Kala are unfortunately fast disappearing from the hospitality business in India,” says Kuntal.

6. Pan Seared Trout with Plum Sauce: “It was delicious”....there seems to be a complete agreement between our volunteers about this signature dish of Neeralaya. Food at Neeralaya is a delicious and healthy treat of wholesome and freshly cooked home-style cuisine by Chef Rajan Hamal who has trained at the residence of the owners of Neeralaya for years. Read more about it in our 'Top Chef Recommends' section.



## Pan Seared Trout with Plum Sauce

Chef Rajan Hamal of Neeralaya recommends the Pan Seared Trout with Plum Sauce as a must try during your stay here. A delicacy served only at Neeralaya, it's a recipe nurtured for decades by its owners using freshly caught Trout from the Beas River (preferably) flowing right next or from the farm (depending upon the breeding season), tree ripe plums and other condiments; all freshly ground and picked. "The Pan Seared Trout with Plum Sauce is uniquely home-style with flavours from the family kitchen. The fact that a lot of the vegetables and herbs used are home grown organically at the estate itself, adds to the freshness," he adds. Chef Hamal is from Nepal and has been trained at the residence of the owners of Neeralaya for years, to ensure a delicious and healthy treat of wholesome and freshly cooked home-style cuisine. Served with no frills attached at the river-side Gazebo of Neeralaya, it's a dining experience difficult to replicate anywhere else.

Recipe available on request - [click here](#)

# Top Chef Recommends





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## In Rhythm

Before leaving for the Project Site in Spiti, our volunteers talked about maintaining a diary at the Project Site on a daily basis. But while they tell us that they couldn't, they easily got into a great rhythm and despite none of them being used to the hard physical labour that they did everyday and the difficult conditions (more in the Volunteers' Speak section), they totally enjoyed building the Solar Bath at the Pangmo Nunnery. "As a Team Leader it was easy for me. Probably because we found the rhythm amongst us without much effort. No one was asked but the moment work started, everybody knew what they were best at and what they could do. They chose their own roles and did a great job. A fantastic team which stayed motivated till the end. We didn't have to carry anyone on our shoulders nor did I have to conduct a one-on-ones which we had planned to do, if any volunteer found the going tough to handle," says Kuntal, Team Leader of our CSR initiative.

When our volunteers landed at the Project Site, the foundation of the Solar Bath was already constructed and ready. Building a Solar Bath from scratch and travel time to and fro the Project Site in Spiti would have taken nearly 3 weeks; but since our volunteers had only 2, Ecosphere, our local partner in the CSR initiative, had already kept the foundation ready. Our volunteers started with making the mud walls around the 16 x 14 feet structure. "There was a local architect to help us build the mud walls with two wooden planks, him with his minimal tools, wanted us to bring soil," says Sagar, a volunteer. As archaic it may sound, our volunteers tell us that it was a very efficient technique and they finished the first layer of the mud wall around the complete foundation in the first 45 minutes. They were looking at an 8 feet tall mud wall around the structure. So every morning after a very cold wash in the brook, our volunteers would have breakfast and be at the Project Site by 9. "We had to work together with 2 nuns who volunteered on the behalf of the Nunnery. They changed each day," says Rekha, another volunteer. Our volunteers said that it was in this task that they found their rhythm of working with each other. "We didn't have to tell each other and everybody fitted into their roles naturally. While Manpreet and Rekha would work with the nuns to fill up the many cement bags with soil, I would carry the bags and pile it up in one place. Sujeet and Sagar who are physically stronger would then haul them up to wherever required," says Kuntal.

# The Project Site



From 9 to 5 our volunteers would fill up the cement bags. Each one weighing about 10-15 kilos, carry them and pile it up in various spots around the structure. Those bags were then hauled up with hands to the local architect. "He would fit the planks to create space in between, which we had to fill with soil. He would then keep on stomping on it to flatten the soil," says Manpreet, another volunteer. Our volunteers tell us that whenever they got tired, they would reduce the amount of soil in each bag but compensated with the last few ones by filling it up a bit extra. "It took about 10-15 bags of soil to fill up the space within the planks at one go," says Sujeet. And it went on for the next 2 days. "It was quite challenging physically. But it worked because everybody stuck to their roles," says Kuntal. [Click here to continue reading](#)



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At the Project Site

1. Rainbow in Spiti.....spotted from our Project Site. An extremely rare sight in the cold desert of the Himalayas and considered auspicious by the locals. We knew we were blessed.

2. Sita spotted these Nuns of the Pangmo Nunnery, the Project Site of our CSR initiative in Spiti, debating in traditional Tibetan style. The physicality in such debates is striking, embellished with hand clapping and emphatic gestures. The nun asking questions typically stands, while answers are provided by the ones seated. At the start of the debate, the nuns asking the questions will stomp their left foot while simultaneously clapping their hands—symbolizing a coming together of method and wisdom. Immediately following this action, the left hand is held out with the palm facing the seated individual. This signifies an attempt to close the door of all rebirths so that enlightenment may be found in the current life, which will liberate the soul.

# Spotted By Sita





# Festivals



## Namkhan, Demul 15th August

Our volunteers took a break from the Project Site and work in Spiti to witness the Namkhan festival in the highland village of Demul. It is held every year on August 15. The Namkhan festival is wrapped around the agricultural practices of Demul, where the locals appease and pray to the Gods for a good harvest. Our volunteers tell us, the festival is a fascinating insight into the relationship and significance of the village deity in the day to day life of the village. Elaborate ceremonies are conducted to appease the village deity after which the villagers ride on horseback to an auspicious spot near the village. This auspicious place is believed by the locals to house all the 5 monasteries of Spiti in a world which can be seen only by enlightened beings.

Located at an altitude of 4350 mts (14, 272 feet) Demul is one of the highest and remotest villages in the region. Demul, interestingly, also happens to be the village where Ecosphere, our local partner in this CSR initiative, have launched their “Off the Grid” project to convert the entire Spiti valley and subsequently the Trans-Himalayas into an off grid renewable power region. In fact the village has its own Solar Power Plant which ensures uninterrupted supply of power to the households in the evening. From lighting to water heating to room heating using solar energy to cultivation of vegetables round the year using greenhouses, Demul is being developed as a model sustainable village.

“We reached Demul at around 14:00 hrs from the Project Site and were taken to the house of the Oracle where everybody had gathered. The mood was festive and there was music and dance,” says Sujeet, one of our volunteers. “The Namkhan Festival begins with an elaborate ceremony where the Yak, the Sheep and the Horse are worshipped,” he tells us. These 3 animals are considered Godly and vital to the existence of the village. Interestingly it is mandatory for each landed household of Demul to own a horse and bring it to the festival. And every Demul resident; no matter wherever that person maybe, has to make it to the village on the day of the Namkhan festival. Failing which a fine is imposed. Namkhan is also the time when the Hereps; a community of traditional musicians, perform for the first time. “Spiti is cut off from rest of the world for more than 6 months in a year during winters and life would be unthinkable without the Hereps,” says Rekha, another volunteer. During the harsh winters the locals



here get married and organise social functions. The Hereps and their music form an integral part of Spitian merrymaking. Our volunteers got a sample of that during the Namkhan Festival whilst the village elders swayed slowly, yet rhythmically, swords in hand, to the music of the Hereps accompanied by songs of nature, mountains, rivers and animals in the courtyard of the Oracle's house.

“It was really funny to see all the bottles of the Barley wine right in the middle of the road and the Amchi (Traditional Healer) sitting next to it. I, for a moment thought he is going to drink all of it” says Manpreet, another volunteer.... [click here to continue reading](#)



## Traditional Healer, Spiti

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“I wish I could visit Tibet before I die,” says Amchi Chundui. Chundui is an Amchi (traditional healer) from Spiti and tells us about a medical conference which was held in Tibet sometime in the 8th century, where traditional healers were invited from India, Nepal, China, Turkey, Iran and other parts of Central Asia to brainstorm and share their knowledge. The Amchi system is an off-shoot of Ayurveda and the knowledge is passed on to the eldest son by the father. Amchi means ‘the mother of all living beings.’ It comes as no surprise then that Amchis of Spiti never charge money from their patients. It is a compelling story of communal living.

Amchi Chundui’s day starts early at 05:30 hrs with a customary prayer to the Medicine Buddha, his family deity followed by a study of Buddhist religious texts dedicated to healing. The Amchi system is focused around Pulse Reading, Herbal Healing, Medicine Making and Tantrik Healing. “Pulse Reading is the easiest. But what’s really tough is the Medicine Making bit. It takes years to master it.” There are 471 medicinal plants in the Amchi system and each plant has its own time of year to be picked up, dried and stored. “June, July, August is the time for collecting and one has to be extremely careful that the bio-diversity is not harmed in any way what so ever,” says Chundui.

His patients start trickling in from about 07:30 hrs. “Early morning is the best time for Pulse Reading as both the Amchi and the patient is relaxed. This is crucial.” Cough and Cold is the most common problem, followed by stomach problems, headaches and kidney stones. “Sweet is Poison, Sour is Medicine,” says Chundui. Though he is quick to admit with a toothless grin that he is struggling to get rid of his “bad habit” of having many cups of milk tea with sugar during the day. Breakfast is around 09:30 hrs. But he continues attending to patients till about 12:30 hrs. When there are no patients to attend to, he works in the family’s agricultural fields or sets off to collect medicinal plants.

Amchi Chundui waits for his children to return from school and they all have lunch together at 13:30 hrs. He then spends his time making medicines till about 16:30 hrs. Sometimes family members of his patients join him. Always in a powdery form, as many as 16 ingredients go into making the cure for cough & cold and about 8 for stomach problems. We were shown two

# A Day in The Life Of Amchi Chundui



very interesting variety of rocks used to cure stomach problems - a “male” and a “female” variety. “The male variety of the rock is used for female patients and the female variety for male patients.” At about 18:00 hrs, Chundui receives his family’s livestock, who would have returned after grazing in the pastures and goes on a round in the village to check if any of his patients need his urgent attention. Amchi Chundui does not charge his patients any fee and in return his patients offer help by working in his fields, contributing to his household chores or donating medicinal plants which may be expensive and not available locally. He calls it a day at around 21:00 hrs. “For me it’s the respect that counts. But for today’s generation money is more important,” says Chundui over dinner, when asked about his plans of passing on the family gift to the next generation.



## Communal Living

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This summer I got a promotion and was sent for two training programmes by HR. It was great. I got to know myself a little bit more. There were great exercises thrown in which touched upon team work, having a plan, having a plan -B, delegation of work, having fun at work, communication, hiring, bonding, trust, creativity, deadlines, doing more with less, transparency, timelines and more. It has been a good start to 2012.

When we reached our Project Site in Spiti, Sujeet, one of our volunteers had a question for me. “What do the locals do here for entertainment?” We volunteers took a break from work and went for the Namkhan Festival at Demul (more in the Festival section)....hopefully Sujeet got his answer. We stayed with local families in homestays in Demul. The conversations of the experience carried on to the Project Site. “I was surprised to know that 5 people in a family can do with 50 litres of water a day. Our toilet flushes in the city use 20 litres of water in one flush,” says Manpreet, a volunteer. Since each one of us stayed with different families, the conversations used to be very interesting while we were working, or having a wash by the little brook behind the nunnery, while waiting for lunch at the kitchen of the nunnery, which the chomos (nuns) very kindly vacated so that our team can use it, or when having a post-dinner chat near our tents. I realised that team work, timelines, deadlines and whatever we touched upon in the training programs is a way of life in Spiti.

For these hardworking mountain folks who prepare for the long winter ahead, timelines and deadlines are a must as they stock up not only for themselves, but their livestock as well. They grow peas and use the money for any spending during winters; barley which they also grow is their staple; including Barley wine which we boys liked. “Ghaas Katai (cutting of grass to be stocked up) for the livestock during winters is a crucial activity I realised,” says Sagar, another volunteer. Each family is given a particular duration and amount to stock up grass for their livestock. And they cannot afford to miss the time that they have in hand for this. The same applies for stocking up enough food for the family which they need to balance with a daily routine. Be at work elsewhere or at the fields of Demul with the Barley and the Peas which they also have to harvest. Sagar stayed with Tsering, the accountant of Ecosphere; our local partner in the CSR initiative, who was in

# Destination Insider



Demul for the Namkhan festival and to take time off for the winter preparations including ghaas katai. He had these relatives from his wife's village who were in his house to help him out. [Click here to continue reading](#)



# Lifestyle



## The Himalayan Nomads

Spiti remains cut off from rest of the world starting from the month of October. After a long winter when the roads open in June, once the Border Road Organisation clears the snow-covered passes, many arrive in Spiti like they do every year. For some this journey to the cold desert is all about livelihood and money, for some it's a tradition in the footsteps of their ancestors from time immemorial, for some its pure fun and for some it's the love of the land and its people. They blend beautifully into Spiti's culture scape and landscape during the summer months and move away when winters set in only to return next year. They are the Himalayan Nomads and here are a few interesting nomads our volunteers encountered during their time in Spiti.

Our volunteers tell us that they began their journey to the Project site in Spiti very early in the morning. "It was raining incessantly. It was very cold and the dread of the mud and slush of Rohtang Pass; the proverbial pain in the back side of anyone who is Spiti bound loomed large," says Kuntal, our Team Leader. But thanks to Sonu; aka Mad Max; the driver, our volunteers not only overtook all the vehicles that left much earlier but crossed Rohtang with all its mud and slush in 2 hours flat. He was a speed demon; our volunteers tell us, scary behind the wheel, but never rash and always in control. "At first we were concerned that we would have to spend the next 12 hours with this crazy fellow on these crazy roads. But we later realised that he is a fun person with a great sense of humour," says Sujeet, a volunteer. Mad Max is a Himalayan Nomad who spends the summer ferrying tourists to Spiti and Ladakh and the winters on the beaches of Goa with his girlfriend from the UK. "These roads are dangerous. I try to be in control. But who knows. Someday I may not return to Goa to meet her. Life is short. So I try to have as much fun as possible and make my passengers happy," says Mad Max. Arambol is his favourite beach in Goa, by the way. "I met my girlfriend there," he adds with a smile.

"When we stopped at this place called Batal for lunch; which was half way the journey to the Project Site, it was freezing. I was desperately praying for the sun," says Sagar, another volunteer. "And nothing could have been better than the freshly made hot Aloo Paranthas (unleavened flat-breads stuffed with potato) and Mint Tea of Chandra Dhaba," says Rekha, another volunteer. This roadside eatery is run by the amiable Bodh Dorjee



and his wife Chandra. Fondly known as "Chacha and Chachi" (Uncle and Aunt) to travellers, this Himalayan Nomad couple arrives in Batal every year after the roads open to set up their little eatery. They also provide basic neat and clean accommodation. Given the hostile terrain and unpredictable weather, it is quite normal for travellers to get stranded in Spiti and in a place like Batal, where there is no permanent human habitation within 100 kms; this Himalayan Nomad couple comes as a blessing. They have given shelter to many stranded travellers until the rescue team arrives. "The longest was three weeks," says Chacha. In a worst case scenario, Chandra Dhaba can accommodate and feed 10 people for a couple of months. Bus and taxi drivers, who stop at Chandra Dhaba for lunch, carry consignments for the couple willingly from the plains. "Chacha has an amazing sense of humour," says Sujeet....

"I made a couple of quick calls from the satellite phone of Chandra Dhaba; the only one within 100 kms, and asked Chacha how much I owe him. With a deadpan look he said Rs 1800. And later roared out laughing looking at my crestfallen face. The bill was actually Rs 50." "Laughter is the best medicine which keeps us going here. I hope you didn't mind me pulling your leg," says Chacha.

At the Project Site in the Pangmo Nunnery, our volunteers worked side by side with the in-house mason Damra Bahadur. This Himalayan Nomad from Nepal has been traveling to Spiti every summer since the past 30 years. "It takes me 9 days to reach Spiti from my village in Pokhara," he tells our volunteers. Damra has a very interesting story. He came to Spiti looking for his elder brother who had disappeared from Nepal.

[Click here to continue reading](#)



## What We Learnt

“For the first time in my professional career I have done something which will positively impact a community. I am fortunate to have had the opportunity to lead this CSR initiative and really proud of my team members who made it possible. It's an incredible feeling.”

(Kuntal Baruwa, Destination Knowledge Centre)

“The CSR Initiative in Spiti was not just a task but a responsibility which we accepted as a team of five. It was only Kuntal who knew about the ground conditions in Spiti from his previous visit. Rest of us had no clue. Yet we started work together in challenging conditions by understanding each other. We were the Hum Panch (Perfect Five) for the Project, where everybody contributed positively. Our challenges revolved around the weather conditions (rain, chilly winds, the scorching sun), high altitude and low oxygen levels, coordination with local workers and the sheer physical labour (worked at around 4000 meters above sea level) which none of us were accustomed to. We overcame all barriers and finished our project a day earlier. God blessed us with a Rainbow; an extremely rare sight in the cold desert of Spiti. Perhaps the Almighty knew that we were a part of a good cause which will help protect nature and contribute to the happiness of others. We volunteers have planted a tree in the form of a solar bath for which we will get tserings (blessings) and smiles forever, from the chomos (nuns) of Pangmo Nunnery.”

(Sagar Rana, Airline Contracting)

“The journey to Spiti was full of surprises. The “super bumpy roads” that we had been briefed about, lasted for 12 hours. God!!!!... the water was so cold that my fingers were “snowcapped” each time I touched it. However, the happy faces of the chomos (nuns) and the genuine smiles on their faces made us feel that we had made a difference.”

(Manpreet Kohli, Tour Operations)

“Everything was new and unknown. Though we were properly briefed about what to expect; experiencing the road conditions, the weather, the high altitude etc still was a great challenge. Everything was unpredictable, such as the landslide which happened

# Volunteers Speak



Kuntal Baruwa, Sagar Rana, Sujeet Kumar, Rekha Nair, and Manpreet Kohli (from left to right)

on our last day at the Project Site and we thought we might be forced to extend our stay in Spiti. Luckily the roads were cleared. Yet despite all this, we managed to complete the Solar Bath before time. It was the result of brilliant teamwork and a fantastic experience at the end.”

(Rekha Nair, Finance)

“The Spiti CSR initiative was a series of new experiences; starting from brushing our teeth in a brook, alongside the Project Site to bathing in an abandoned greenhouse, to staying in self pitched tents to, hard physical labour and understanding the local style of construction, to becoming a part of a village festival, dance, faces, food, horse riding, staying with local families to unique landscapes and much more. But the most precious moment was when the red ribbon was cut to inaugurate the Solar Bath.”

(Sujeet Kumar, Soft Adventure)





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| Trade Shows   | Booth No.   | Whom to Meet                        |
|---|---|-------------------------------------|
| <b>Pata Road Show</b><br>Melbourne<br>3rd October             | Sita Desk   | Vikram Trivedi                      |
| <b>Pata Road Show</b><br>Sydney<br>5th October                | Sita Desk   | Vikram Trivedi                      |
| <b>Luxe Travel Show Baku</b><br>Azerbaijan<br>16th October    | Sita Desk   | Deepak Sharma                       |
| <b>TTG</b><br>Rimini<br>18th -20th October                    | India Tourism<br>Pavilion,<br>Lane- 1/2,<br>Stand - 023-027/<br>042-046 | Matteo Pennacchi<br>& Philip Thomas |
| <b>ABAV</b><br>Rio de Janeiro<br>24th -26th October           | Trade Visitor   | Neeraj Bhatt                        |
| <b>TOUR Salon</b><br>Poland<br>24th -27th October             | Trade Visitor   | Deepak Sharma                       |
| <b>WTM</b><br>London<br>5th -8th November                     | Hall No S10,<br>Booth No IN300  | Neeraj Bhatt                        |
| <b>Kerala Tourism Road Show</b><br>Frankfurt<br>14th November | Sita Desk   | Gabrielle Heyne                     |
| <b>ILTM</b><br>Cannes<br>3rd -6th December                    | F 130   | Dipak Deva &<br>Philip Thomas       |
| <b>USTOA</b><br>Hawaii<br>6th -8th December                   | Sita Desk   | Neeraj Bhatt                        |

# Trade Shows

