

Normalcy effect

Five-star luxury returns to Kashmir

GULMARG: Kashmir has once again got a five-star luxury resort, two decades after the only such property in the Valley closed down due to militancy-related issues.

It's a sign of increasing normalcy in a state that has seen a bruising insurgency that only recently has shown signs of abating.

With the beginning of the separatist violence, the state's only 5-star heritage hotel, the Oberoi Hotel, functioning in the palace of the erstwhile Dogra maharajas in Srinagar was closed in early 1990s.

Other hotels in Srinagar were also either closed or converted into makeshift barracks of the security forces. Now,

two high-end properties – the Taj and the Lalit – have reopened in Srinagar but they are not of the five-star variety.

Spread over seven acres of land amid majestic pine trees over a terraced mountain slope in this

ski-lovers' paradise, 50 km from summer capital Srinagar, the best part about the 85-room Khyber Himalayan Resort and Spa is that 70 per cent of its staff are locals. Little wonder that its opening season occupancy is a whopping 95 per cent.

"It is a challenge to get quality staff, make them perform and retain them because my competitors at the moment are good resorts both in the

country and outside," Alex Koshy, the resort's general manager, said.

The resort, with some 180 staffers including managers, chefs, waiters, bell boys and security, is owned by Umar Trambo, who is also its CEO.

"I have been very particular that the majority of the staff must be from Jammu and Kashmir. You cannot claim Kashmiri hospitality unless the hosts are Kashmiris. Seventy per cent of our staff is from the state," Koshy said.

Asked whether the locals, with little exposure to international standards, are performing well, he said: "They have the drive and it is not true that they do not have the right ex-

posure. After the Khyber opened, many trained and talented locals are coming back. My chief engineer is a local who came back from the Middle East, my front office manager came back from Delhi and my HRD manager came back from Bangalore, they both are locals.

"Gulmarg has always been a high-end destination as a ski resort which is a very costly sport. We have the world's highest golf course here which has never been short of golfers from all over the world. The Khyber is in fact Kashmir's hospitality history-in-the-making and I am proud to be part of it," Raja said.

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