

Lifestyle | Features

Vacation from the virus: **Maldives** still welcoming rich Indians

The Maldives is still welcoming Bollywood stars and other rich Indians to its secluded beaches and crystal-clear lagoons even as countries ban flights because of a brutal COVID surge. The Indian Ocean archipelago of more than a thousand islands reopened its international borders in mid-July after being shut for three months, and Indians have accounted for the most visitors. This week, as a string of other countries banned visitors from India, the Maldives government made only slight changes to its rules for passengers from its giant neighbor.

Holidaymakers arriving from India now can only stay at a resort or a safari boat and are not allowed to check into guest houses in inhabited islands where locals also live. "The geographical location of our islets help us to minimize the (virus) risk," Thoyyib Mohamed, the head of the country's tourism authority, Visit Maldives, told AFP. "Each islet is a self-contained single resort. Even if we have a few cases popping up here and

there, we can contain it within the resorts without exposing the local population."

Tourism workers vaccinated

Thoyyib said that they have also launched a campaign to vaccinate the entire workforce of 50,000 in the tourism sector and many others providing services relating to the hospitality trade. "We want to be the first fully vaccinated tourism sector in the world," Thoyyib told AFP by telephone. He said about 90 percent of workers were already vaccinated. Media reports have suggested that the Maldives might even offer COVID vaccines to foreign visitors.

But officials said they had no such immediate plans until all Maldivians and resident non-nationals had received both doses of the AstraZeneca or the Sinopharm vaccine. More than two-thirds of its 330,000 population has already received their first dose, according to health ministry figures. It has reported just over 29,000 virus infections



with 73 deaths, although case numbers have been rising sharply in recent weeks.

Yoga on Insta

Thoyyib said there was a decline in the number of Indians visiting in the past week but they remained the largest single group of visitors to the archipelago this year. Bollywood stars escaping India

in recent weeks include Alia Bhatt, her partner Ranbir Kapoor and Shradha Kapoor, who posted Instagram photos of herself doing yoga at sunset at a Maldives resort. Press reports suggest that private jet firms have seen a surge in demand to Europe, the Middle East and the Maldives, including from people clubbing together to hire an aircraft. "It's not only the ultra rich," Rajan Mehra,

head New Delhi-based private plane firm Club One Air told The Print. "Whoever can afford to take a private jet are taking private jets."

India on Friday reported 385,000 new cases in the past 24 hours-a new global record-and almost 3,500 deaths, according to official data that many experts suspect falls short of the true toll. With the surge blamed on new virus variants and huge religious and political gatherings in recent months, India's hospitals are struggling to cope, particularly but not only in the capital New Delhi. The Maldives attracted a record 1.7 million foreign tourists last year, a 15-percent increase from 2018, according to the government, with China the biggest source of visitors. The numbers fell to 555,494 last year because of the pandemic, but was showing signs of a recovery. Some 381,000 tourists have visited so far this year. China has now dropped below the top 10.— AFP



Actors Catherine Russell and Charles Geyer perform in the longest running play 'Perfect Crime' Off-Broadway at The Anne Bernstein Theater in The Theater Center in New York City. — AFP photos



An employee (left) scans tickets at the longest running play 'Perfect Crime' Off-Broadway at The Anne Bernstein Theater in The Theater Center.



Actors Catherine Russell and Charles Geyer perform onstage in the longest running play 'Perfect Crime' Off-Broadway at The Anne Bernstein Theater in The Theater Center.



The audience watches the longest running play 'Perfect Crime' Off-Broadway at The Anne Bernstein Theater in The Theater Center.

NEW YORK'S OLDEST PLAY BLAZES TRAIL AS BROADWAY WAITS

Broadway is not due to return until September but New York's longest-running play is already back thanks to its indomitable lead who has played the same role over 13,500 times. Catherine Russell, 65, is the driving force behind "Perfect Crime," a rollicking whodunit that has been on Big Apple billboards since 1987. "I'm very determined. And whenever people tell me, you can't do something, I'm like, 'Screw you. Watch me do it,'" she tells AFP. Not only is Russell the show's main actor, she is also the manager of the Theater Center that puts on the play and a "dynamo" according to co-star Charles Geyer. "I can do 180 push-ups in a row. Marine push-ups, not girl push-ups," insists Russell, as if anyone would dare dispute the fact.

When performance venues shut in March 2020 as the pandemic spread like wildfire through New York, Russell kept busy so as not to get too depressed. She

repainted the theater, repaired a few of its armchairs and bought a ventilation system to help keep the air clean. When Russell heard that bowling alleys were going to be allowed to reopen at the end of August last year, while theaters remained shut, she thought: "This is crazy!" "Bowling alleys are great. But if you can bowl, you should be able to go to a theatre and sit with a mask and watch a show," Russell says. So she sued the city government and the state's governor to try to force them to reopen small performance venues like hers.

In early March Governor Andrew Cuomo ruled that theaters could reopen at 25 percent capacity, later updated to 33 percent, which is still not financially viable for most venues. Russell is continuing her lawsuit to try to obtain at least 50 percent seating. On April 9, she reopened the Theater Center with performances of "The Office: A Musical Parody." On April 17, Russell performed in "Perfect Crime," for the 13,524th time, world record. "Many people felt they were not ready, and that's fine. (But) I felt that we were ready," she recalls. "I don't think of (myself as) a torchbearer. Perhaps I'm a little less fearless than other people, and maybe I have less to lose because I'm a little off-Broadway show," Russell adds.

'Bringing New York back'

She admits that the theater is losing money and that even an increase to 50 percent capacity would not be enough to balance the books. "We're kind of scrap-

py, and I'm willing to do this for principle," Russell says. Her theater received the green light from the main performing arts union, the Actors' Equity Association, provided every actor is vaccinated and tested before each show. When AFP visited, the audience was at covid-era capacity, with 66 people in a room that would normally hold 200. Attendance has been steady since reopening, said producer Armand Hyatt.

Susan Jackowitz, 75, traveled from North Carolina to see the play with a friend from New York. "When she texted me to say I got theater tickets, I was so excited," said Jackowitz. "Perfect Crime," a classic murder mystery matured by a hint of psychology, usually gets drowned out by the countless Broadway shows on offer. But the current hiatus is allowing it to get a little more attention than usual. Theater fan Jessica Bloom had passed the Theater Center, off Times Square, dozens of times without stopping to go in.

"It's something new and anything that will get me inside a theater I will see it, even if I don't know what it's about," said the 35-year-old. Geyer, the actor, recalls a "terrific" reopening night. "We were the first players to be back on stage. They were the first audience to come and support the players, so we were like a team," he says. "There's a larger meaning than just a night at the theater. It's about being in the vanguard of bringing New York back, culturally." — AFP

Jennifer recently split from fiancé Alex Rodriguez, while Ben is single since his relationship with Ana de Armas ended earlier this year. Meanwhile, Ben, 48, recently praised Jennifer in an interview with InStyle. He gushed: "I thought I had a good work ethic, but I was completely humbled and blown away by what she was committed to doing day in and day out, the seriousness in which she took her work, the quiet and dedicated way she went about accomplishing her goals, and then how she would go back and redouble her efforts. "She remains, to this day, the hardest-working person I've come across in this business. She has great talent, but she has also worked very hard for her success, and I'm so happy for her that she seems, at long last, to be getting the credit she deserves." — Bang Showbiz



home. A source told the New York Post's Page Six: "Security picks him up at a nearby location and drops him off after spending a few hours at her house." However, insiders insist the relationship is platonic, explaining: "They are friends ... they've never not been."

Jennifer Lopez and Ben Affleck 'hanging out'

Jennifer Lopez and Ben Affleck have been "hanging out". The former couple - who were engaged in 2002, postponed their wedding just days before the ceremony in 2003 and split in 2004 - have remained close friends and were recently seen together at Jennifer's home in Los Angeles. Ben has been seen leaving his own car at the Hotel Bel-Air before being picked up and brought to Jennifer's

Oscar-winning actress Olympia Dukakis dies at 89

Olympia Dukakis, a character actress who won an Oscar for her role as an overbearing mother in the romantic comedy "Moonstruck," died Saturday at the age of 89. The passing of the theater veteran, who made a name for herself in film late in her career, was confirmed on Facebook by her brother Apollo. "My beloved sister, Olympia Dukakis, passed away this morning in New York City," he wrote. "After many months of failing health she is finally at peace and with her [husband] Louis [Zorich]." The cause of death was not immediately given. Dukakis won the Oscar for best supporting actress for her work in "Moonstruck" (1987) as the scornful mother of a young widow played by Cher. It also earned Dukakis a Golden Globe and a BAFTA nomination.

"The fun part is that people pass me on the street and yell lines from my movies: For 'Moonstruck' they say, 'Your life is going down the toilet,'" Dukakis told the Los Angeles Times in 1991. "It's real funny." Dukakis also won acclaim for her role as a gossip hound at a small town



In this file photo Actress Olympia Dukakis is honored with the 2,498th Star on The Hollywood Walk Of Fame Hollywood, California. — AFP

Louisiana hair salon in "Steel Magnolias," (1989) which also featured Julia Roberts, Shirley MacLaine, Sally Field and Daryl Hannah. By 1988, with her Oscar, Dukakis was a household name in America because of the award and because her cousin Michael Dukakis had won the Democratic presidential nomination. She plugged him in her Oscars acceptance speech, shouting "OK, Michael, let's go" as she concluded her remarks and held up her statuette. Michael Dukakis ended up losing the election to George H.W. Bush, but both she and her cousin remained active in politics. Olympia Dukakis is survived by the daughter and two sons she had with Zorich, who died in 2018. — AFP

Anya Taylor-Joy felt 'exposed and vulnerable' on Queen's Gambit

Anya Taylor-Joy felt "exposed and vulnerable" during "The Queen's Gambit". The 25-year-old actress - who played chess prodigy Beth Harman in the hit Netflix drama - admitted she was nervous when she realized there were aspects of herself she would have to show on camera as part of the role. Speaking to America's OK! magazine she said: "Those feelings of loneliness - those quiet moments you have to yourself in your hotel room that nobody else witnesses. I was putting that on screen for everyone to see, and that was scary. You



feel exposed and vulnerable. "But I really felt I was the right person to tell Beth's story, and it ended up being a wonderful experience." Anya has experienced a new level of fame after the show hit the small screen, and she "never" thought it would hit this level of success. She added: "I never could have imagined this is where the show would go.

"I got to Los Angeles and took a walk and saw this giant poster and I was like, 'Oh my God, wow.'" And the model turned actress admitted she gets recognized a lot in public with fans shouting out questions about the plot. She said: "I've actually had people yell at me from across the street, 'Why didn't you pay Mr. Schaibel back?' And I'm like, 'I'm sorry. I don't know!'" "While fame will have its drawbacks, Anya is appreciative of the situation she's found herself in, even if it can be overwhelming. — Bang Showbiz



Lisa Scott-Lee

Steps' Lisa Scott-Lee is headteacher in Dubai

Lisa Scott-Lee is working as a headteacher in Dubai. The Steps singer and her husband Johnny Shentall run the Dubai Performing Arts Academy together, which has around 600 pupils aged between 3 and 18, and whilst she is very much part of the group, her primary role is currently being the principal at the performing arts school. She said: "Steps is my life. It has been my life for the last 24 years, but being principal of the school is my day job. I can never switch off. Even when I'm with Steps, rehearsing or shooting a video, I'll be working on my laptop. It's become a bit of a running joke. I have to flip between my Steps hat and principal hat, which can be really hard and stressful at times ... I focus on the day-to-day running of the school and the business side of things, while Johnny is the creative director and main teacher."

Because of COVID-19 restrictions, the 45-year-old singer has been unable to return to the UK to perform with her bandmates - Lee Latchford-Evans, Claire Richards, Faye Tozer and Ian 'H' Watkins. — Bang Showbiz