

Flying steady

It's been a turbulent time for the airline catering business, but TajSATS has adapted to the new normal in aviation

BY MANISH GUPTA



Taking on my new role as CEO of TajSATS Air Catering Ltd in August 2020 was an exciting and career-defining moment for me, after the successful 24-year-long stint in luxury hospitality. But coming as it did in the middle of a pandemic it was bound to be challenging.

The Covid-19 crisis has caused a major shift in a sector that had already been struggling. The aviation industry took off in India after 2006, with the arrival of multiple low-cost carriers (LCC), and this was further strengthened after 2012. Prior to that, the overall model of airlines in India was under huge financial stress, which resulted in several cost-cutting measures that became permanent over

time. Serving food on board was one such measure; it became a paid service rather than the free service that it used to be.

With the pandemic, the road to recovery seems long. Travel protocols and restrictions around the world will continue, but we have a strong domestic market that will keep our engines running, and as of September this year, serving food on board has been permitted again, spelling good news for airline catering businesses like ours.

A DIVERSIFIED BUSINESS

The airline catering industry in India is worth approximately ₹1,600 crore annually; it is expanding fairly rapidly due to the addition of new airports and a growing air network in the



Manish Gupta is chief executive officer of TajSATS Air Catering Limited. He has years of experience as a luxury hotelier, and has run some of the most iconic Taj Hotels

country. Though the number of full-service airlines are fairly limited, there has been a rapid increase in LCCs, ensuring demand for airline food remains steady.

TajSATS currently has six units across India that serve the major aviation hubs as well as nearby satellite towns. We also offer institutional catering for offices, hospitals, schools corporates, besides providing food for quick-service restaurant brands like Tata Starbucks.

Recently, the company diversified into non-aviation catering, and launched ANUKA, a multi-cuisine virtual restaurant available on the Qmin app in Mumbai and Delhi. ANUKA offers a variety of gourmet delights to its guests in the comfort of their homes. An extension of this is our brand ANUKA Comfort that fulfils the huge requirement of residential complexes for safe, hygienic and high-quality meals. Additionally, we've launched ASA, a brand of artisanal chocolates created by our accredited chefs, and ISHRI, our brand for high-end handcrafted Indian sweets.

THE OPPORTUNITY IN THE CHALLENGE

Our work during the toughest period of the pandemic has not only helped the community but also kept our kitchens running particularly in high-risk cities

like Mumbai and Delhi.

TajSATS is honoured to have served over 1.5 million meals during this crisis. We were glad to assist the Taj Public Service Welfare Trust in providing meals to doctors and other frontline workers in government hospitals in Mumbai and Delhi. We also partnered with the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation in Mumbai and with Bangalore Airport Authority Limited to cater to the migrant workforce stranded in Mumbai and Bengaluru. TajSATS also provided food packets to residential complexes cut off from the outside world due to a high number of positive Covid cases in those zones.

During this time, our employees also catered for the numerous repatriation flights launched by the governments of India, the US, Japan and Australia, to evacuate their citizens.

SERVICE IN THE NEW NORMAL

As of September, the Directorate General of Civil Aviation has permitted airlines to serve food on board — with restrictions. Understandably, the focus on food safety and hygiene has increased manifold, and international agencies such as the Quality & Safety Alliance for Inflight Services (QSAI) have established stringent guidelines for handling food, with the local

Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) also sharing similar guidelines.

TajSATS has already implemented a detailed list of measures ensuring employee health and facility sanitation that is being followed and monitored with strict diligence. Most importantly, food on-board is being served with minimum human contact. The guidelines have also made it mandatory for LCC airlines to ensure that all food is pre-ordered so that there are no on-board sales that would lead to needless one-on-one interactions. Even business class meals have been designed to secure minimum handling by serving staff.

THE FUTURE OF TRAVEL

International flights are unlikely to resume soon, as the second wave is being witnessed in many European countries and there has been an increase in cases in the US. It is up to the domestic sector to keep the engine of the entire aviation industry, including the ancillary streams, running.

The lockdown period made us rethink our overall cost models and rework our strategies to stay relevant in the post-Covid world. The move will now be towards technology, automation, digital, data, analytics and cost resilience. **TR**

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