

'Centre's thrust on tourism will propel sunshine state'

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Goa can benefit from the 50-year, interest-free loans offered, said TTAG Panaji: Major announcements for the tourism industry in the Union Budget have given Goa's sector a spring in its step. Stakeholders say the Centre's thrust on tourism has come when the sunshine state is on the cusp of moving towards hinterland tourism.

"The timing cannot get any better than this. Goa can avail of funds from the Centre for tourism infrastructure projects, provided it plans properly. The Centre's focus on infrastructure projects in terms of last-mile connectivity and plans to promote coastal shipping should work well for Goa," chairman of the Goa Chamber of Commerce and Industry (GCCCI), Ralph de Sousa, told TOI. Union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman spoke on tourism during the first five minutes of her Budget speech, which indicated the importance the Centre has attached to the tourism industry, Travel and Tourism Association of Goa (TTAG) president Nilesh Shah, said. Pointing out that Goa could also benefit from the scheme offering interest-free loans for a 50-year period, he said, "There must be several incomplete projects or those that could not be initiated due to a funds crunch. The state should identify these and see if loans from the Centre can be availed of."

Shah, however, said that raising the tax collected at source on overseas tour packages from five per cent to 20 per cent will negatively impact the industry. Co-founder and group chief executive officer of MakeMyTrip, Rajesh Magow, echoed this view when he said that the move would give an unfair advantage to foreign-based online travel booking platforms over India-based travel agents and tour operators.

Magow, however, welcomed the other initiatives entailed in the Budget, such as revival of 50 airports, building 50 new destinations, and allocating high budgetary outlays to railways, roads, and highways, which he said would aid the long-term growth of domestic tourism.

The GCCCI chairman, on his part, said Goa will have to plan how to expedite mobility and reduce congestion in certain parts by increasing infrastructure under the Centre's funding schemes. He said that with the Centre's emphasis on eco and green tourism, Goa is at an advantage as it has drawn up a plan to develop and promote hinterland tourism. The state can also benefit in a big way from the unity mall concept, he said.

