The Indian Hotels Company Limited (IHCL), one of Asia’s largest and finest groups of hotels, opened its first property, the Taj Mahal Palace, in Bombay (now Mumbai) in 1903. The Taj Mahal Palace is located next to the famous Gateway of India in Mumbai Harbour. Over the years, the hotel has been the preferred residence of choice of visiting royalty, dignitaries and countless famous personalities.

Today, IHCL – across its brands – has a portfolio of 170 hotels globally (including a further 30 under development) and employs over 32,000 staff. As well India, IHCL has hotels in the USA, UK, South Africa, Zambia, UAE, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bhutan, Nepal and will shortly be opening its first in Saudi Arabia.

“India’s tourism has grown hand-in-hand with the development and growth of IHCL,” stated Puneet Chhatwal, Managing Director and CEO of IHCL. “1.6 million guests stayed at our hotels and resorts last year and there has been a year-on-year increase in this number.”

Overseeing the continued internationalisation of IHCL, Mr Chhatwal joined the company in November 2017. The CEO has over three decades of leadership experience at highly-acclaimed hotel groups in Europe and North America.

“We stand out for being a custodian of Indian hospitality,” he said. "Guests have a strong emotional engagement as all IHCL hotels have the ability to weave Indian heritage and culture into the services and offerings. We have summed this up as 'Tajness'.

Embracing ‘Tajness’

"'Tajness' is this unique feeling and experience, which sets the group apart from its competitors,” expanded Mr Chhatwal. “Whether it be in a city, resort or living palace, guests experience genuinely warm hospitality, synonymous with Indian culture, a refined luxury rooted in the subcontinent’s heritage and authentic culinary fare, in addition to a world-class level of service and accommodation.”

The Taj Mahal Palace is arguably IHCL’s most famous hotel. The iconic building, with its Indo-Saracenic arches and a distinctive red-tiled Florentine gothic dome, was granted an image trademark in 2017 – the first instance of such rights being granted in India. In so doing, the Taj Mahal Palace Hotel joins an elite club of landmarks, such as the Empire State Building and the Sydney Opera House, in securing such trademark rights.

Obtaining industry – and country – firsts has been an ongoing tenet throughout IHCL’s history.

One of India’s – and the world's – leading hotel brands, Taj, is spreading the ‘Tajness’ word across the globe, one guest at a time. Puneet Chhatwal, Managing Director and CEO of Indian Hotels Company Limited (IHCL), spoke to Daniel Barnes about what it takes for this group of luxurious hotels to be considered the custodians of Indian hospitality.
“IHCL has pioneered new tourism circuits and put them on the global map,” affirmed Mr Chhatwal. “In 1974, IHCL put Goa on the map as a luxury destination by launching Taj Fort Aguada Resort & Spa. In 1982, IHCL was the only Indian hotel group to have a flagship property in the UK by acquiring St James’ Court. In 2005, IHCL spread its wings into North America with the opening of The Pierre in New York and later in 2007, Taj Boston.”

In 2015, IHCL expanded into the UAE with the opening of Taj Dubai, and in 2017, Taj Swarna in Amritsar, north west India, was opened. Taj Swarna is strategically located approximately 50 minutes from both the international airport and the Golden Temple (Harmandir Sahib) – one of the holiest shrines of the Sikh religion.

Bringing the story bang up to date, in 2018 IHCL opened an idyllic beach destination in the Andamans Islands in the Bay of Bengal. Situated on Radhanagar Beach – a pristine beach said to be one of the best in Asia, Taj Exotica Resort & Spa, Andamans comprises of 72 villas and is the islands’ first five-star hotel.

“Opened on Havelock Island in April 2018, Taj Exotica Resort & Spa, Andamans, is the latest example of Taj pioneering new destinations,” declared Mr Chhatwal. “In line with Taj’s commitment to sustainability and conservation, not one tree was felled during the construction of the hotel to ensure that the fragile eco-system of the island was preserved. Taj Exotica Resort & Spa, Andamans is also the group’s first zero single-use plastic hotel.”

Promoting the Taj brands
With such a global footprint, IHCL’s target demographic is as varied as its destinations. Whilst the Taj brand has been synonymous with luxury hospitality ever since its formation in 1903, over the years, the company has introduced other brands for other target markets. In response to the change in guest expectations and budgets, IHCL has introduced other brands for other target markets. In response to the change in guest expectations and budgets, IHCL has introduced Vivanta in the upscale and midscale market, whilst in the lean luxury segment, Ginger was launched to address the needs of price sensitive guests.

“IHCL appeals to all demographics,” acknowledged Mr Chhatwal. “In India u
and beyond, our new brand-scape showcases a very unique portfolio of hotels, palaces, resorts and safaris covering both business and leisure travel for domestic and international travellers. The company has a brand called Taj Holidays which develops unique itineraries and several curated offers to suit different purposes of travel – be it spa vacations, staycations in various city hotels, family getaways, adventure travel and pilgrimage travel.

“Furthermore, IHCL’s award winning loyalty programme, Taj Inner Circle, offers guests a wide variety of destinations and hotels to choose from for their holidays.”

Mr Chhatwal said IHCL has managed to adapt to the digital age through enhancing the company’s focus on building and expanding its own robust digital infrastructure.

“The Taj experience begins with the company’s digital touch points – tajhotels.com, now available in four additional languages (German, French, Simplified Chinese and Spanish) and the new mobile app,” he said. “Web bookings and digital channels form the crux of our growth strategy because of their high yield and a great guest booking experience.”

A crucial part of the digitalisation of the hospitality industry over the past decade is the emergence and rise of social media. “IHCL realises the importance of social media,” affirmed the CEO. “The company has an active presence on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram as guests are looking to their social media circle to research, book, stay in and communicate with hotels. Through Taj Live, the company’s new social media command centre, identification of opportunities to organically engage with a wider audience through omni-channel trend tracking and analysis is now possible.”

Proud culinary history
One aspect of social media prevalent today, not only with Millennials, is snapping and posting photos of meals. With over 310 restaurants in the IHCL portfolio – contributing a significant proportion of the company’s revenue – keen food photographers are spoilt for choice.

“IHCL’s brands pride themselves on their culinary history and in constantly leading and pioneering innovative dining options,” said Mr Chhatwal. “We are renowned for pioneering global and regional cuisines and concepts in India.”

In fact, IHCL has many signature restaurants that are destinations in their own right, such as Quilon in London, Bombay Brasserie in London, Cape Town and Dubai, Vary in New Delhi; Thai Pavilion in Mumbai, Delhi and Hyderabad; Golden Dragon in Mumbai, Chennai, and Colombo; Wasabi in Mumbai and Delhi; and Karavalli in Bangalore.

“For over a century, the group has introduced many culinary firsts to our guests,” added Mr Chhatwal. “Notable amongst which were Sichuan, contemporary Japanese, Mediterranean, Thai and Vietnamese cuisine.”

And whilst the hotel chain’s global network of highly skilled and acclaimed chefs constantly push culinary boundaries to the delight of their diners, Mr Chhatwal said they also pay close attention to current trends, chief amongst which at the

Positive market outlook
The Indian hotel sector, when combined with the hospitality sector, is worth more than $218 billion, accounting for 9.6% of India’s GDP, and is responsible for 8% of the total employment in India per annum – which is over 41.6 million people.

In 2017, according to figures from India Brand Equity Foundation, 10.1 million tourists visited India, reflecting a CAGR of 7.1% since 2005. Such is the growth potential of tourism, the Government of India has set a target of welcoming 20 million foreign tourists by 2020.

“I am extremely optimistic about the hospitality industry in both India as well as the global economy,” stated Mr Chhatwal. “There is a huge opportunity in unlocking the value and full potential of IHCL. As such, we have begun the journey by first articulating Aspiration 2022, the company’s five year business strategy.

“We will have a continued focus in executing Aspiration 2022 where we are looking at increasing our EBITDA margins by 8%. We are strongly committed to growing the company whilst creating value for all our stakeholders. We have reimagined and refreshed our brand-scape which will enable IHCL to expand its portfolio.”

He continued “There will be a strong focus on growth going forward domestically. We have a huge opportunity with Ginger, the company’s brand in the lean luxury segment.

We want to reposition and reinvent the ‘Tajness’ ethos.

Moving forward, Mr Chhatwal said the company is continually looking at working with appropriate partners who will make the necessary investments and buy into the ‘Tajness’ ethos.

“The future is very exciting for IHCL, given the rise in domestic travel and increasing disposable income,” he said. “The potential to tap the leisure traveller is immense. We have successfully pioneered holiday destinations and some of our recent openings and signings have proved this correct. This momentum will continue.”