

Kolkata's retail story

The eastern Indian city is fast becoming the hotspot for retail giants

SONALEE M

The retail industry in Kolkata is on the growth track. In the last five years, the eastern Indian city has been the silent witness to many malls and retail outlets. First there was the City Centre in Salt Lake. This 550,000 square feet mall changed the retail map of the city with big names like Reebok, Planet M, Arrow Lee, and Wrangler setting up shop here. Even the US fast food chain KFC made its first foray into the city in this sprawling mall. Harsh Neotia, the managing director of Bengal Ambuja Housing Development Limited, who set up City Centre, did not stop at this. He set up another City Centre, which is popularly known as City Centre-II in Rajarhat. The 450,000 square feet mall is also a popular haunt among shoppers. Soon there were others that followed suit like South City mall, Forum and Avani Heights. Planet M, too, has its retail holding in Kolkata.

It's obvious that Kolkata is turning out to be the favourite destination for retailers; the primary reason being it is a metro with a large population. Around 80 percent of the people are either landowners or pay small amount of rent under the old tenancy act. That means they do not have to make large payments as rent. Another interesting trend is the boom in IT companies in Kolkata. The executives of these multinational companies earn as much as their counterparts in the other parts of the country. How-



International brands such as KFC have become popular in Kolkata, which saw many new malls and retail outlets in the last five years.

ever, as the cost of living is cheap, they have a large amount of disposable income, which is usually spent on shopping. Also many families have double income -- that means more earnings that can be splurged on. If surveys are anything to go by, then an average Kolkatian spends more than Rs 2,000 during every visit to a shopping

mall. About 12 percent spend even higher -- Rs 5,000 per visit. Neotia says, "The retail industry has seen some healthy growth in the recent past. That's because most shopping malls have become the perfect destination for those who are looking for a dose of entertainment and shopping."

Quick to cash in on the craze

are the retail giants like Pantaloon, Marks & Spencer, The Body Shop, Planet Sports and others. Pantaloon started operations in Kolkata in 1997 with 13,000 square feet of retail space. Today, it has three giant stores over a sprawling 100,000 square feet space. In fact, one of the brand's largest stores is in Kolkata.

The Merlin Group has also promoted one of the eastern region's biggest malls -- South City. The Rs 700 crore project is a popular shopping destination for people in south Kolkata. There was a need for entertainment complexes in Kolkata, and so South City Mall that houses various retail giants like Marks & Spencer, Planet M, Biba will cater

to the shopping needs of the people. A specialised mall was set up for home furnishings and fittings in Rajarhat. Home Town is also emerging as a popular destination for shoppers. The specialised malls will be the future trend; another instance being that of Fort Knox. This has been set up by Vivek Kathotia of Fort Group. Entrepreneurs like Kakothia observe that Kolkata will see at least five big specialised malls of 300,000 square feet area.

The 30,000 square feet retail space of Avani Heights on the posh AJC Bose Road of Kolkata is a new landmark. Many global players like Marks & Spencer, Bodyshop and Planet Sports have set up shops here. Marks displays a complete range of lingerie, toiletry and fashion apparel in this outlet. Avani Heights has been targeting the high income customer segment. Even Guess has launched its first brand store in Avani Heights. "Each brand has its unique positioning and each of them caters to the needs of the well-heeled people of Kolkata," says Neotia. The entrepreneur also observes that the retail growth will continue in the years to come. "However, the format needs to be correct. There has to be parking spaces for cars; also the location is very important." In fact, Neotia plans to come up with two more City Centres, one each in Siliguri and another in Haldia. It is obvious that the retail growth will continue in the years to come.

The writer, based in Kolkata, is a freelance contributor.

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Intrepid travellers find Bangladesh a bargain

AFP, Dhaka

From Argentinian heavy metal fans to Scottish retirees, Joyanta Howlader's couch has hosted the full spectrum of backpackers who arrive -- sometimes with mixed feelings -- in impoverished Bangladesh.

The south Asian country seems an unlikely stop on a budget traveller's itinerary, but foreign visitor arrivals are rising and Bangladesh's lack of tourist infrastructure is, ironically, proving an attraction.

"You have to be adventurous. There is no other way to travel in Bangladesh," said Howlader, a 38-year-old Dhaka-based television producer who has hosted dozens of tourists through Couch Surfing, a hospitality exchange network.

"One backpacker who stayed with me, just hated it here, said he'd never come back. He was a

real tourist, he just wanted an easy travel experience which Bangladesh is definitely not," Howlader told AFP.

With mod-cons now available in backpacker haunts in Thailand, Vietnam and India, where prices are shooting up, increasing numbers of budget tourists are seeking out alternative, low-cost travel experiences elsewhere in Asia.

From spending a night on a stranger's sofa for free, sampling Dhaka's best biryani for a dollar a plate, or checking into a midrange hotel for less than 10 dollars a night, Bangladesh is about as cheap and adventurous as it comes.

Even a four-day all-inclusive cruise through the world's largest mangrove forest on a traditional wooden boat will only cost around 150 dollars, far cheaper than a comparable trip in neighbouring India, experts say.

Bangladesh is one of only a few places left in

the region that still offer the original pioneering travel experience, according to Lonely Planet's Bangladesh author Stuart Butler.

"It is very easy to get well off the beaten track and is a place in which you can make your own discoveries and travel for weeks without meeting another western tourist -- or any tourist for that matter," Butler told AFP.

The problems of getting around and finding accommodation, particularly for women, in the conservative, Muslim-majority nation are, for some travellers, Bangladesh's unique selling point, he said.

"For many travellers this lack of knowledge of the country and the lack of a tourist industry is the prime reason for visiting. Travelling in Bangladesh is a genuine adventure," he said.

Tourists are still something of a rarity in Bangladesh with just 267,107 foreign visitor arrivals in

2009, according to government figures which do not distinguish between tourist arrivals and Bangladeshis with foreign passports.

This is up from 2000, when 199,211 foreign visitors arrived in the south Asian nation of 160 million people, and local tourism industry figures say they anticipate further growth.

"Inbound tourism is growing more than 10 percent a year -- a few years ago, no one had heard of Bangladesh, they thought it was part of India," said Taufiquddin Ahmed, president of the Bangladesh Tour Operators Association.

"The average spend for package tourists is now around 500 dollars, which is less than they would spend in India or Nepal," he said. "And we get a lot of backpackers coming here and just travelling on their own."

Travelling in Bangladesh, while not for the faint-hearted, is extremely cheap, with the 27-hour trip from Dhaka to Khulna on The Rocket, the country's most famous river ferry, costing just 15 dollars for a first-class cabin.

From Khulna it is easy to access the Sunderbans mangrove forest, which is the country's most popular attraction, although northern Srimongal district's tea gardens are also attracting interest, he said.

The biggest problem for the local tourism industry is the lack of any concerted government effort to promote the country, such as the successful "Incredible India" and "Malaysia Truly Asia" campaigns, he said.

"Bangladesh suffers from a negative image, but slowly things are changing for the better," he said. Bangladesh is one of travel bible Lonely Planet's "Best Value Destinations" for 2011.

And for Mickey Leung, author of the Bradt Guide book on Bangladesh, there is no point in trying to fight Bangladesh's international reputation -- instead, the industry should try to capitalise on it.

"We're not going to get away from that image. There is going to be another cyclone, people are going to keep talking about climate change damage... you can't just sit and hope it will go away," he told AFP.

"Everybody knows Bangladesh is a poor country, so let's take that image (and) make it like: your decision to travel to Bangladesh represents your decision to change the world," he said.

The government should focus on building up pro-poor, community based eco-friendly tourism, for example by providing loans for setting up guesthouses for backpackers, he said.

"I would like to see budget travellers come to Bangladesh with an open mind, and with a willingness to experience local hospitality. They have to leave luxury behind."

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In the picture taken on February 13, 2010, a Bangladeshi girl participates in a procession during the Boshonto Utshob festival in Dhaka. The spring festival or Boshonto Utshob, celebrated on the first day of the month of Falgun in the Bengali calendar, is marked with various cultural performances.

AFP