

# Swine Flu increases worries for tourism sector

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NEW DELHI, May 2: Swine Flu has added to the gloom in India's travel and tourism sector already reeling under the effect of global recession and heightened security threat post the 26/11 Mumbai terror attack.

Though it is "off season" for the domestic tourism industry, tour operators are keeping their fingers crossed as most western countries affected by the flu are major tourism generating countries for India.

"All the Swine Flu affected countries like USA, UK, France, Germany, Australia and New Zealand are the main traffic generating markets for India providing tourists round the year. So this is another blow to the tourism industry," said the executive director, Indian Association of Tour Operators (IATO), Mr Gour Kanjilal.

Industry insiders said it is outbound tourism which would see immediate impact as the number of outbound tourists would decrease significantly due to spread of the virus in more countries. "It being the summer season, affluent Indian families prefer holidaying abroad. But with the number of swine flu cases going up, the number of outbound tourists would decrease significantly this season," said a tour operator.

"Indian tourists would now think twice before travelling abroad. So many of them are opting for domestic travel," the IATO president, Mr Vijay Thakur said. "This sudden development has created a gloomy environment for Indian tourism," he added.

Some tour operators are, however, still hopeful that Swine Flu would not affect outbound tourism much. "Our bookings for countries like Australia and New Zealand have not been affect-

ed much as tourists feel these smaller countries will easily be able to control swine flu," said a manager with Spring Travels. "We already have sent tourists to these countries recently. Those who have booked their tickets and chosen their packages much in advance would not change their travel plans so easily," he added.

"Most Indian tourists prefer short-haul destinations like Singapore. So as long as such destinations are free from the flu, I don't see much drop in number of outbound tourists," said the manager, D'Paul, Mr Sidharth.

Domestic airlines fear that as the list of areas affected by this potential pandemic spreads, air travel even in its current low level could hit rock bottom. "If the flu is not contained soon, we might have to face mass requests for refunds. It will be another blow to the industry," said an airline official.