

TODAY'S traveller

CORPORATE, BUSINESS, AVIATION, LUXURY & LEISURE TRAVEL MAGAZINE

APRIL 2026 - ₹100

WINE ROADS
OF TUSCANY

GLOBAL
DESTINATIONS
HOTLIST 2026

BIRDING
THROUGH
THE HIMALAYAS



Reinventing Sterling:
A Transformation Built to Last

STERLING: A TRANSFORMATION BUILT TO LAST FOR THE NEW INDIAN TRAVELLER



After a decisive transformation, Sterling is emerging as one of India's most dynamic hospitality brands; reimagining stays through immersive experiences, destination-led design and a sharply defined growth ambition

TT BUREAU

As Indian travel becomes more intent-led and experience-first, hospitality brands are rethinking growth and engagement. Sterling's evolution reflects that shift, from business-model reinvention and portfolio expansion to destination-led experiences, contextual design and a technology ecosystem designed to make hospitality more seamless, responsive and human.

HOSPITALITY BEGINS WITH INTENT

A quiet but decisive shift is reshaping hospitality: travellers are choosing destinations with clearer intent. That intent may be rest, family bonding, wellness, spiritual connection, discovery, or simply the desire to step away from routine. Increasingly, purpose shapes the journey as much as the place itself.

That shift has widened the role of hospitality. A hotel has become a gateway to experiences, a facilitator of journeys and a curator of memories.

For Sterling, this has meant redefining its role in the travel ecosystem. The brand has moved from being a stay-led company to an experience-led platform built around how Indians travel. Its strategy reflects structural shifts in behaviour: the rise of multi-generational holidays, the blending of leisure with wellness and spirituality, the growth of short breaks, and the increasing preference for more localised, immersive journeys.

"The guest journey now begins well before arrival. In that moment of inspiration, execution and excellence matters," Vikram Lalvani, MD & CEO, Sterling Holiday Resorts points out.

REINVENTING STERLING: A TURNAROUND WITH PURPOSE

Sterling today occupies a distinctive place in Indian hospitality, combining long-standing brand trust with contemporary agility.

"I genuinely think it is worthwhile to understand how we transformed the whole business. It is a role model case study, and it has been done by the entire team. Where we were five or six years ago, versus where we are today, and the pace at which we have moved, makes it a case study in its own right", says Vikram Lalvani.

Today, Sterling operates across 77 resorts in 64 destinations, with over 3,800 operational keys across hills, beaches, wildlife reserves, pilgrimage centres, heritage towns and waterfront destinations. The company crossed ₹5 billion in revenue in FY25, maintains EBITDA margins above 32%, and continues with a debt-free balance sheet.

"At Sterling, operating leverage is engineered into the business model. As the portfolio expands, shared capabilities across brand, technology, distribution and central operations create rising efficiency across the network. That allows scale to translate into stronger margins, greater predictability and higher quality growth", says Krishna Kumar, CFO at Sterling whose trusted role is to keep the business processes predictable and yet scalable.

In Vikram Lalvani's view, "scale matters when it is matched by relevance, coherence and alignment with different travel occasions."



Sterling's expansion is powered by research-led market selection and an asset-right model. The brand has expanded across Rajasthan, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh and key wildlife belts, while also building presence in spiritual and cultural destinations such as Ayodhya, Guruvayur and Rudraprayag.

BEYOND THE ROOM: PERSONALISING THE JOURNEY

Today's traveller is looking for connection. Sterling's response has been Discoveries & Experiences (D&E), a structured platform that makes experiences central to the stay and anchors guests more deeply in place.

In Wayanad, this may mean rainforest trails, plantation walks and ziplining. In wildlife destinations such as Corbett, Kanha, Pench, Tipheshwar, Thekkady and Sariska, the experience extends to safaris, guided nature encounters and community engagement. In places such as Athirappilly, Anaikatti, Sakleshpur and Godavari, the emphasis shifts to birding, river trails, forest bathing and slower nature-led exploration.

For Anupam Dutta, CMO at Sterling, this begins with clarity of intent. Entrusted by Vikram Lalvani with the responsibility of building the brand and keeping it relevant for guests, partners and internal teams, he sees direction as essential.

"So, for example, we don't pick up a destination and then try to squeeze into it a story", says Anupam Dutta.

Anupam Dutta further added, "We already know, over the next two to three years, broadly where we want to go, driven by consumer demand and what we believe the market can realistically absorb."

One of his ideas is What-A-Trip, Sterling's journey-led format that connects destinations into circuits and lets guests explore a region through curated itineraries.

"Travel today is rarely single-purpose. Guests are looking for layered journeys, not isolated stays," Vikram Lalvani notes.

SPACES WITH SOUL: THE ART OF CONTEXTUAL DESIGN

Sterling's design philosophy is rooted in context and shaped by place. Each property is conceived as an extension of its surroundings, whether that means a mountain resort opening to expansive views, a waterfront property dissolving into the landscape, or a heritage-inspired space drawing from local architecture.

Its design language often begins with something observed or lived in the destination itself. In Kodaikanal, the culture of cycling through winding mountain roads inspired cycle-themed suites at Sterling Kodai Valley. In Puri, the storytelling tradition of Pattachitra art shapes the tone in the suites. In Uttarakhand, the geometry and symbolism of Aipan art appear in the living spaces and rooms at Sterling Nainital, creating rootedness.



Vikram Lalvani Flanked by His Leadership Team

“Design should do more than look attractive. It should help the destination reveal itself gradually to the guest”, says Balasubramaniam J, EVP Projects at Sterling, reflecting on his team’s constant engagement with each region and its nuances.

FLAVOURS OF PLACE: WHEN DINING BECOMES STORYTELLING

Food remains one of the most powerful ways to connect with a destination, and Sterling has brought cuisine closer to the centre of its hospitality narrative. Across its network, the brand has developed destination-inspired dining concepts that reflect local culinary identity. Restaurants such as The Malabar in Wayanad, Amo Odisha in Puri, Slate & Pearl in Kodaikanal and Katha at Sterling Jaisinghgarh Udaipur are conceived as expressions of local culture.

Menus are shaped by regional ingredients, traditional recipes and evolving guest preferences, creating a balance between authenticity and accessibility.

“Food is often the most immediate bridge between a guest and the spirit of a place. It is a strong indigenous pull factor, which is why I personally look into the development of our speciality dining venues”, says Vikram Lalvani, working closely with his F&B production team, which studies every aspect of the guest experience before the final menu reaches the table.

Sterling’s food strategy has become increasingly data-informed. Guest reviews and feedback are analysed closely to refine offerings and sharpen relevance. Today, food and beverage contributes approximately 26% of total resort revenue, supported by curated dining experiences, celebration-led formats, breakfast-in-the-pool concepts and farm-to-table initiatives such as Soil to Soul.

TECHNOLOGY WITH PURPOSE

For Sterling, technology supports relevance, responsiveness and sharper decision-making across the hospitality journey. The company combines guest insight research with large-scale Net Promoter Score tracking to identify emerging preferences, decode sentiment and refine decisions.

Vikram Lalvani frames the role of technology with clarity: “Technology is most valuable when it sharpens human capability and frees teams to focus on reassurance, service and relationships.”

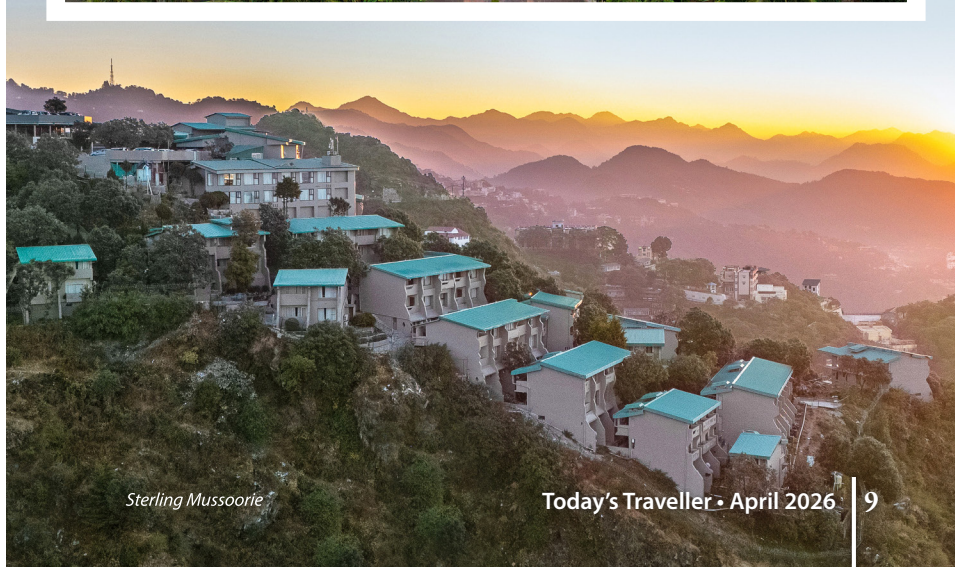
On the guest side, Merlin, Sterling’s AI-enabled chatbot, helps travellers with resort and destination information, making discovery easier. Its AI voice layer operates 24x7, supporting the reservation journey from enquiry to follow-up. WhatsApp extends that flow by bringing reminders and payment prompts into one connected interaction.



Sterling Lake Palace Alleppey



Sterling Puri



Sterling Mussoorie



Team Sterling at Sterling Kodai Valley

Behind these touchpoints sits a growing intelligence backbone: a data lake architecture supported by prompt-led AI workflows. This gives teams a unified view across guest queries, reservation inputs and service signals, enabling faster, sharper and more consistent responses.

Technology also strengthens Sterling's commercial reach. Through Sterling ONE, an industry-first partner platform developed entirely in-house, travel agents, corporates, and TMCs gain faster, more transparent access to inventory, contracted rates and confirmations.

Surej Hassan, SVP & Head of Revenue at Sterling, says, "Revenue grows when you build a network of properties that can be linked through a simple click. If you ask most B2B customers what they want, the answer is simple: ease of doing business."

Surej Hassan adds, "Today, we have about 8,000 partners online, and around 400 corporates directly connected to Sterling."

GROWTH WITH A LARGER PURPOSE

As travel expands, so does the responsibility to ensure growth remains sustainable and inclusive. Through Sterling SANKALP, the company has built a framework around environmental responsibility, community engagement and long-term sustainability. Its initiatives include solar and energy-efficient systems, rainwater harvesting, reduction of single-use plastics through in-house bottling, EV charging infrastructure and more effective waste management.

Sterling's approach also supports local value creation through employment, sourcing and regional craftsmanship. Programmes such as Soil to Soul deepen that connection by enabling guests to engage with local agriculture and ecosystems in ways that build awareness while supporting livelihoods.

On responsible growth, Vikram Lalvani is clear, "Growth has to leave something positive behind, for the destination, for the community and for the people who experience it."

HUMAN AT HEART

At the heart of Sterling's journey is a people-first culture, rooted in the belief that service grows stronger when people feel empowered. Sterling has built an organisation that is open, informal and collaborative. A first-name culture reduces hierarchy and encourages interaction, while inclusivity and shared ownership foster belonging.

That culture is reflected in the guest experience as much as in the workplace. Local hiring enables properties to reflect the culture and character of their destinations while contributing to regional development. Employees are encouraged to grow through leadership programmes, skill-based training and cross-functional exposure.

At the heart of it all is one simple principle Vikram Lalvani returns to most often: "We treat others the way we would want to be treated." This belief shapes how Sterling engages with both guests and its people.

In hospitality, the brand is ultimately delivered at the front-line. Recognising and empowering those who serve defines how guests feel. Sterling's signature warmth flows from this philosophy when people feel valued, they create experiences that make others feel the same. That is what defines Sterling today and will shape its journey ahead.

