

Budding French Connection



■ Laurent-Charles Samandari with his sister Caroline at their bakery L'Opera in Noida. A French national, Samandari set up the bakery in 2008. RAJ K RAJ/HT PHOTO

GLOBAL CITY Though small in number, the French community is thriving in the NCR

sundayspecial

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Laurent-Charles Samandari, 26, came to India three years ago to work as a marketing and strategy consultant with an Indian company in Gurgaon. His parents and 97-year-old grandmother joined him six months later. His sister and brother-in-law have been living in India since 2005. Two years ago, Samandari set up a French bakery under the brand name L'Opera in Noida with a state-of-the-art manufacturing facility.

"When I was working in Gurgaon, I desperately looked for a place where I could find authentic French pastries and breads, but found none. So, finally, I decided to fill the gap. Ours is an authentic French bakery. We source most ingredients from France. Except for frequent power-cuts that affects

the baking process, it has been great experience living and doing business in India. Even my grandmother loves life in Delhi. We hardly miss Paris as there is now a lot of Paris in Delhi," says Samandari, sitting with his sister Caroline, 32, who looks after the branding and marketing of the company.

Samandari is not alone. Today, there are about 1,800 French expats in the national capital region — many of them entrepreneurs running diverse businesses such as web designing and e-learning companies, travel firms and garment factories. About 40 companies in Delhi and NCR are owned by French people. "In the past couple of years, there has been a lot of positive reporting about

CURRENTLY, ABOUT 1,800 FRENCH EXPATS LIVE IN THE NCR. MANY OF THEM RUN THEIR OWN BUSINESSES

India and its booming economy on TV and radio in France, where people view India as a dynamic country to live and work," says Keven Muller, 29, who founded E-nova, a Delhi-based web development and e-learning company.

Muller came to India in 2004 on an internship with Alliance Francaise. He started the company in Chennai and, in 2007, shifted base to Delhi. Today, the company employs about 30 people, most of them Indians.

"The best thing about India is that there is a lot of freedom here. I feel that the essential difference between France and India lies in the way people look at you and judge you. Unlike France where people look at strangers with suspicion, here people are pretty warm and welcoming even if they know nothing about you," says Muller.

Not far away from E-nova's office in Okhla, is the office of Inducia, a company that distributes 500 different kinds of food and beverages from France, Italy and many other countries in India. The founder and CEO of the company, Adrien de Montalembert, was based in Singapore before he came to India in 2005.

"I was looking for more adventure in both in life and in business. India

fitted the bill perfectly. Today, we supply food beverages and food products to most of the five stars hotels across the country and will soon we launching an online supermarket," says Adrien.

The capital also boasts of a travel company Shanti Travel, which specialises in organising travel for French tourists. "French tourists to India form our largest chunk of clients," says Alex Le Beuan, who set up the company in 2005. He first came to India as a traveller and then visited the country several times as a tour leader for French tour operators.

The French community in Delhi is a close-knit one. French expats meet up regularly and even have an association of French expats called 'Delhi Accueil' which has about 500 members.

"When French people arrive in India, they have all kinds of questions about how to find a home, schools, etc. We help French expats settle down in Delhi. These days we get lots of calls from the community about how to guard against Dengue," says Nathalie Mountassir, 43, who founded Delhi Accueil last year with Severine Viellard, another French woman.