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TTG Asia Daily

Pick of the biggest news from last week's bulletin

February 21 • Calderwood PATA interim CEO

Bill Calderwood has been appointed interim CEO of PATA, as the search continues for a permanent incumbent. Calderwood will step in when Gregory Duffell vacates the position in end-February.

February 21 • Shangri-La debuts new brand

Shangri-La Hotels and Resorts has launched its new Kerry Hotels brand targeting business travellers, with the opening on February 18 of Kerry Hotel Pudong, Shanghai. The second Kerry Hotel will open in Beijing by early 2012.

February 17 • MBS seeks Arasi replacement

George Tanasijevich, Las Vegas Sands managing director of global development, is in the running to replace Tom Arasi, who has quit as president and CEO of Marina Bay Sands Singapore.

Better than nothing

Myanmar reinstates VoA but only for passengers of MAI Siem Reap-Yangon flight

By Sirima Eamtako

BANGKOK Myanmar's re-introduction of a visa-on-arrival (VoA) facility, albeit limited to foreign visitors arriving in Yangon on Myanmar Airways International's (MAI) direct flight from Siem Reap, is expected to further grow demand to the destination, whose popularity has been burgeoning among long-haul travellers.

Tour operators report growing interest in Myanmar and are hoping for a complete return of the earlier system from May 1 to August 31 last year that granted VoAs to all foreigners arriving at Yangon and Mandalay International Airports. During that short period, visitor arrivals to the country grew by 30 per cent.

For now though, they have to content themselves with the special VoA concession that is tied to MAI's twice-weekly Yangon-Siem Reap service, which was launched on February 23.

Opened floodgates

30

The increase, in per cent, in visitor arrivals in the three months last year that Myanmar offered visas-on-arrival

The new government policy was announced to the Ministry of Hotels and Tourism in a February 16 letter, according to Myanmar Marketing Committee vice chairman Phyo Wai Zai.

At press time, MAI officials could not be reached for comment but, hazarding a guess, Phyo said: "The VoA is probably

offered to MAI passengers on the Yangon-Siem Reap service because MAI is a national carrier."

Asian Trails group managing director Laurent Kuenzle doubted that the VoA would immediately generate volumes from longhaul markets, but believed the MAI service would spur traffic from regional markets for stays of four to five days.

Kuenzle said: "At least, this is positive news for people in countries, such as Spain and Austria, where Myanmar does not have an embassy. But (the Myanmar government) should implement the VoA facility for all flights, as they did last year, as that really brought in more passengers."

Richard Brouwer, COO of Diethelm Travel Group, also hoped the limited VoA would eventually bring about the full restoration of the old system.

"But what is important is that the policy (of offering VoA to passengers of MAI's service)

has to continue," Brouwer said. "Consistency is vital in order for the service to have its benefits."

According to Brouwer, Diethelm Travel Group recorded "a dramatic growth" in business to Myanmar last year. This uptrend is expected to continue this year, said Brouwer.

"Tour operators in Europe, particularly in France and Germany, are seeing new opportunities in Myanmar, especially for repeat visitors to Thailand who want to do an Indochina tour before returning to Thai beaches," Brouwer explained.

Phyo, who is also the managing director of Yangon-based All Asia Exclusive Travel, said his company would leverage on the VoA to push tour programmes that combine Myanmar and Cambodia to existing customers and potential clients.

"I'm convinced the new (MAI service) will help drive up arrival numbers once the market is aware of the flight," Phyo said.

Regional DMCs acquire yen for Japanese market

By Sirima Eamtako

BANGKOK Japan has caught the eye of Asian tour operators, with a couple entering the market this year.

Destination Asia Japan will open on April 3, around a month after Exotissimo Travel Group's scheduled launch of its Japan operations on March 1 (TTG Asia, January 14).

Japan is Destination Asia's 11th market. Unlike Exotissimo Travel Japan, which is wholly-owned by Exotissimo Travel Group, Destination Asia Japan is a shareholding structure with local tour operator SMI Travel.

James Reed, CEO and group managing director of Destination Asia, said the company opt-

ed against a wholly-owned venture as it "wanted a local partner who knows the market".

According to Reed, the group decided to finally enter the Japanese market after pondering over it "for years" because enquiries for the destination kept pouring in over the last six months.

Even at start-up, Destination Asia Japan already has FIT bookings from Australia, Europe and the US from July, and a 70-pax European incentive arriving in October.

Exotissimo Travel Japan has also received bookings ahead of its official opening. Exotissimo Travel Group COO, Hamish Keith, said the new office had received several MICE requests,



James Reed with Destination Asia Japan general manager Nami Nigo

with "three groups with a total of 120 pax confirmed or close to confirming" for the year.

Reed agreed with Exotissimo Travel Group CEO, Olivier Colomes, that operations in Japan entailed high rentals and labour costs. But returns were high, said Reed. "Japan has a high conversion rate of enquiries turning into bookings. When customers ask for Japan, they seriously want to go to Japan."

Diethelm Travel Group, however, does not share the enthusiasm over Japan. COO, Richard Brouwer, said while the group was always looking to expand, "at this moment, we have no announcement to make on starting operations in Japan".

Unimondo grows

Indian wholesaler sets up shop in Asia

By S Puvaneswary

KUALA LUMPUR Indian wholesaler Unimondo Travel and Leisure has opened an office in Kuala Lumpur and plans to set up three more branches – in Singapore, Dubai and Colombo – by the end of the year.

Unimondo Travel managing director Jose Joseph said: “These offices will allow us to control quality and exceed clients’ expectations. They also build confidence in agents who buy from us as they know someone on the ground understands the Indian travel psyche.”

Last year, the company generated RM900,000 (US\$295,615) in sales into South-east Asia, mainly to Malaysia, Singapore, Bali and Thailand.

“Malaysia formed the biggest share of business at around RM300,000,” said Suraj Khan, director of business development.

Unimondo Travel is projecting a three-fold growth in business into South-east Asia and into Malaysia this year, the latter thanks in part to the set-

ting up of Unimondo Malaysia in January.

To grow business to the region, Unimondo Travel will work with Indian TV travelogues to raise awareness of South-east Asian destinations.

Khan said the decision to choose Malaysia as venue for Unimondo Travel’s first overseas office stemmed from the destination’s popularity and improved connectivity, due to AirAsia’s flights to seven points in India.

“Most of our clients use AirAsia to get to Malaysia and other destinations in South-east Asia,” said Joseph.

For its part, Unimondo Travel’s Singapore office would make it easier for the company to contract with hotels on the island. “Many hotels in Singapore (do not like) contracting with overseas operators. Having an office will make them (more comfortable with us),” said Khan.

Meanwhile, the Dubai office will handle Unimondo Travel’s leisure and MICE business to the United Arab Emirates.



Joseph: quality control

PATA unveils 60th line-up

SINGAPORE PATA’s 60th Anniversary and Conference in Beijing from April 9 to 12 will feature a strong line-up of speakers.

The first plenary session on Building Tourism – Past, Present, Progressive will feature Air China general manager marketing Zhou Enyong, Dusit International CEO Chanin Donavanik, Hotelplan Holding vice chairman and CEO Hans Lerch, WTTC president and CEO David Scowsill and Business Events Sydney CEO Jon Hutchison.

The Tomorrow’s Tourism session will see pitches by students from the top three PATA member schools. The winning school will take part in a dialogue with PATA Life Members and industry leaders in the fourth session on Growing With Tourism.

The third session on the New Realities of Travel will touch on distribution, aviation, responsible tourism, changing demographics, and technology innovations. Speakers include Makemytrip founder Deep Kalra, Ctrip CEO Min Fan and Boeing executive director Michael Maple. Ray Hammond will close proceedings by looking at The Future of Tourism: The Next 60 Years.

Asian incentives back in the saddle

By Karen Yue

MELBOURNE Incentives out of Asia are on the rise, even as corporates keep purse-strings tight.

Indonesia’s Panorama Tours scored its biggest incentive yet – 2,000 Prudential employees heading to Paris this April. Malaysia’s MEP Meeting & Exhibition Planners has also snagged a high-end incentive group to Paris this year.

Meetings and incentives planners, however, note that corporates have become wiser in their spending.

Singapore’s The Event Company vice president business development and consulting Sanjay Seth said: “Clients are more critical now about who makes it on the incentive list. Programmes are shorter and very quality- and results-driven.”

Panorama vice president operations MICE Rery Sankyo added that clients now examine returns on spend and combine activities. “More clients are combining their appreciation and awards dinners, meetings and incentives in one trip.”

But despite the closer scrutiny

of spend, demand for expensive destinations remains strong.

MEP owner Karen Soo said the financial crisis had “brought the industry back down to earth”, leading suppliers to be more realistic in their pricing.

Australia continues to be popular, even if it is now more expensive than Europe. Malaysia’s Trans-World Travel & Tours is sending a 40-pax incentive group to Perth this month, while The Event Company has a 500-pax incentive to Melbourne in May.

Richard Lee, marketing director convention & incentive travel of Malaysia’s Trans-World Travel & Tours, said an eight-day incentive in Europe at RM6,000 (US\$1,965) per person could now only buy a five-day programme in Australia.

The country’s quality venues and varied activities, however, still keep it on Asian corporates’ lists, Lee explained.

“Many Asian groups have still not been to Australia, so demand is there. But repeat clients would not go there now because the current exchange rate does not favour them,” said Lee.



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Luxury players to converge in China for ILTM Asia 2011

SINGAPORE The ranks of China’s outbound market continue to swell, with the UN World Tourism Organization predicting that mainland Chinese travellers will take 100 million trips overseas by 2015.

It is against this backdrop that the International Luxury Travel Market (ILTM) Asia will hold its fifth outing in Shanghai from June 13 to 16.

“There is huge growth to come,” said Frank Zheng of Luxe China Club and VIP buyer at ILTM Asia 2011 on the Chinese luxury market. “Chinese consumers are finding it a lot more interesting to travel and are increasingly interested in luxury and variety at the top end of the scale. The yuan is expected to rise in value, and visa restrictions are diminishing everyday.”

Asia-Pacific luxury travel planners are therefore readying to attend the exclusive “invitation-only” annual event. And new exhibitors are using this year’s show to showcase their latest offerings.

Orion Expedition Cruises will introduce its Orion II vessel, which sets sail in May. Also making its debut at ILTM Asia is XO Private, which represents luxury properties and high-end service companies. XO Private will profile The Morocco Family in South Africa, Fregate Island in the Seychelles and luxury resorts Shanti Maurice and Sankhara Villas in Mauritius.

Other first-time exhibitors at the show include Lodges of New Zealand, Tourism Fiji, and Song Saa Private Island, which opens in Cambodia this November.

Six Senses Resorts & Spas will unveil a number of new properties, including Six Senses Laamu in the Maldives, opening in April, and Six Senses Meerlaluua and Six Senses Before Galle, both scheduled to open next year in Sri Lanka.

ILTM Asia 2011 also counts Orient-Express, India’s The Maharajas Express, InterContinental Hotels Group and The Ritz-Carlton Company as exhibitors.

South Korea returns to Indonesia

North Asian country unveils a slew of trade initiatives and incentives to signal its commitment

By Mimi Hudoyo

JAKARTA The Korea Tourism Organization (KTO) is heralding the reopening of its office in Jakarta by mid-year (*TTG Asia e-Daily*, February 11), with advertising incentive schemes for agents who promote certain events and thematic tours.

Adeline Goh, the NTO's marketing manager for Singapore and Indonesia, said: "If agents promote specific programmes, the KTO will shoulder one-third of their advertising costs."

The programmes include five key Visit Korea Year 2010-2012 events, including the F1 Grand Prix in Yeongam, and thematic itineraries such as the Busan/Gyeongju programme, with either a night in Busan and one in Gyeongju, or two nights in Jeollabukdo and Jeollanamdo province.

Goh cited the Grand Korean Sale and the Korean Wave (Hallyu) itineraries as possible favourites for Indonesians.

Arirang Tour Service branch manager Agus Tiono said that this was not the first time the KTO had offered agent support, but this time, the requirements were easier to meet. "They only set a minimum number of nights in a destination but no limitations on passenger numbers."

Lily Tours business development manager Ati Chandrasari said: "A support scheme would help us promote South Korea more, and the KTO having an office here will help us with arrangements, especially when handling MICE groups."

The incentive scheme is just one of the initiatives the KTO has unveiled to mark its return to Indonesia. The NTO will also launch new promotions and establish a dedicated Facebook page for the market, with an administrator tasked with responding to queries in Bahasa Indonesia.

KTO Singapore and Indonesia director

Steve Yong said: "The opening of our office in Jakarta will give us a bigger budget (for the market), and we will work closely with travel agents to promote South Korea. Last year, we saw a record number of

Indonesian arrivals, at 95,239, a 17.6 per cent increase over 2009. This year, we are aiming for 110,000."

At press time, a consortium of Indonesian agents was being formed to work

with Garuda Indonesia and Korean Airlines on South Korean packages. Arirang Tour Service's Tiono said: "We are creating programmes with new itineraries, in accordance with the KTO promotions."



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Tracker

An update on major issues and events from the past

Single Indonesian VoA

THEN On January 26, 2010, the Indonesian directorate general of Immigration merged the country's visa-on-arrival (VoA) facility into a US\$25 single visa for 30 days with an option to extend for another 30 days. The seven-day VoA, costing US\$10, was dropped. Following protests from areas frequented by expatriates and foreign tourists from neighbouring countries, the government gave Batam and Bintan a year-long transition period to adjust to the new policy.

NOW The single visa policy is now implemented throughout the country. Only groups of at least four people to Bintan or Batam handled by travel agents pay US\$10 per person. The visa policy, however, has negatively impacted markets such as Japan and South Korea, whose nationals visit other parts of Indonesia and stay for a maximum of seven days. These tourists balk at paying more than double for a visa, especially when their economies are suffering.

FUTURE The 30-day visa does not hurt traffic from longhaul or ASEAN markets, but agents say some clients have been diverting to countries that offer visa-free or easier VoA entry. – Mimi Hudoyo

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Sound bites

“(That’s) a margin for a charity association, not a business!”

Giovanni Bisignani, IATA director-general and CEO, who is counting on Asia to take the lead in changing 65-year-old restrictive policies of the West that see airlines today making an average of 0.1 per cent margin (see *TTG Asia e-Daily*, February 14)



“If architecture is treated purely as a spectacular sculpture, we’re in for trouble, no question about it.”

Moshe Safdie, design architect of Marina Bay Sands Singapore, cautioning Asian destinations against using eye-popping architecture to attract attention (full interview next issue)

“When it was first done, I thought it looked like a bunch of bananas...I told Moshe: ‘Singapore is not a banana republic.’”

Sheldon Adelson, chairman and CEO of Las Vegas Sands, taking a jibe at his own ArtScience Museum which opened last week, adding that he had then told the design architect Moshe Safdie to “chop off the tips, get rid of the yellow” in the design and it became what he called “the welcoming hand of Singapore”

“We love opening parties!”

Adelson, laughing at his own grand opening of the Marina Bay Sands Singapore last week, jibing it must be “the 94th grand opening” after an April soft opening and a June opening last year

A restructure is inevitable

Here’s a tourism performance that would be the envy of tourism chiefs in the region: Arrivals growing year-on-year by 20 per cent, but tourism receipts soaring way, way above at 49 per cent.

It is the dream of NTOs, expressed in two words: quality tourism.

The city in question, Singapore, which ended 2010 with a 20 per cent increase in arrivals to 11.6 million, and 49 per cent rise in tourism receipts to S\$18.8 billion (US\$14.7 billion), allows itself a quick pat on the back, then gets back to business. Its tourism chief Aw Kah Peng – a marathon runner – is already warming up for next season’s finish line.

“2010 was in many ways an exceptional year, with broad-based growth (ie, not just IR-based growth). Going into 2011, the momentum will still be there, but don’t expect that kind of pace to continue; we can’t expect each year to be exceptional.

“As we introduce new services and products, there will be challenges,” she warned during a media briefing, repeating several times the words “restructuring”, “quality issue”, “innovation”,



ArtScience Museum, the city’s latest pride, with more on the way

A move towards quality tourism entails a shake-up of the existing structure

“productivity issue” and “the whole area of customer satisfaction” as among the challenges.

An eye-popping 1,834 per cent increase in sightseeing/entertainment revenue might mislead the industry into dismissing the city’s fattened tourism coffers as largely due to gambling, thereby concluding there is no real shift towards quality tourism. This is fatal.

While gambling spend con-

tributes hugely to the spike, the fact is, all the other major components of the tourism spend also show healthy increases. Shopping is up 17 per cent, accommodation 25 per cent, F&B 23 per cent and medical 19 per cent, reflecting a willingness by visitors to splurge in Singapore.

As with any purchase, a buyer will only part with more dollars if the product is more aspirational, which Singapore has become.

But, just as a richer fruit cake is loaded with lots more calories, higher spending comes with greater expectations. This is why issues such as delivering value, innovation and productivity are becoming increasingly important across all industry sectors.

Those players who recognise this will keep their place in the industry; those that don’t will be forced out.

New tourism products and services have a way of taking up space, firmly and quickly. Cruises-to-nowhere, for example, have gone, well, nowhere, as these gambling-related journeys have been made irrelevant by the IRs.

Eighty-five travel agents ceased operation last year – and the 120 that opened shop are younger entrepreneurs with “new ways”. Just as new design-led hotels have become a segment in Singapore, travel agents have got to reinvent their offerings if they want to continue to be in the picture.

The upshot is, a move towards quality tourism entails a shake-up of the existing structure.

This is why Aw’s warning should be heeded.

Letters

Unbridled Samui

Regarding the *TTG Asia e-Daily* February 10 story, “airlift hits hotel performance”.

Sorry, but I totally disagree with Bill Barnett’s comments on Koh Samui.

More flights will kill the destination totally. What the island needs now is to limit/cap the number of tourists on the island. There are far too many people on this island.

– **Emmanuel Marion**, vice president Finance & Administration, in charge of Legal & IT, China, Accor



Koh Samui

Revamped *TTG Asia* online gets early hits

WOW guys, that’s a huge improvement. Interactive, full of good content ... and the Lazarus-like return of Adam Tan! Job well done!

– **Michael Yates**, marketing director, Asia-Pacific, Travelport

I LIKE the electronic flip book on your website, very useful as I’m often too caught up to read the hard copy versions!

– **Camilla Chiam**, director of public relations, The Regent Singapore, A Four Seasons Hotel

A SHORT note to say that I like the new “E” format of *TTG Asia*.

With so much technology/electronic information reaching us on a daily basis, it is refreshing to see well-thought-out, easy-to-read news/happenings from a



leading publication covering the hospitality and tourism industry. Well done.

– **Giovanni Angelini**, former CEO, Shangri-La Hotels & Resorts

THE NEW revamped *ttgasia.com* looks very promising. Well done and congratulations!

I will be sharing this with our country managers across

Asia, and will encourage them to check out the revamped *TTG Asia* website on a regular basis for industry news and updates.

– **Colin Neubronner**, regional marketing manager, East Asia & South West Pacific, Qatar Airways

JUST to say – I’m loving this new look! I’ve even sent the link around to my team asking them to bookmark the page!

– **Jean Tan**, director, PR and Communications, InterContinental Hotels Group Asia Australasia

THE WEBSITE looks great. Well done!

– **Aliana Ho**, vice president for sales and distribution marketing, Hong Kong Disneyland Resort



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Travel Hall of Fame

The Travel Hall of Fame, displayed in the Raffles Hotel Museum on the third level of Raffles Hotel Singapore, showcases accolades, artefacts and memorabilia of the region’s most exceptional travel organisations.

Since 2002, luminaries who have won the prestigious TTG Travel Award at least 10 times have been conferred the title of Travel Hall of Fame Honorary.

Singapore Airlines and Singapore Changi Airport are the Travel Hall of Fame’s pioneering honorees, having been voted by Asia-Pacific’s travel trade as Best Airline of the Year and Best Airport of the Year respectively, for more than a decade. Hertz Asia-Pacific joined this elite family in 2005. Recently inducted were Star Cruises, Royal Cliff Beach Resort Pattaya, Abacus International and SilkAir.



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The next wave: mobile

Smartphones to eventually change travel booking patterns

SINGAPORE While travel transactions in Asia are tipped to see further growth this year, agents must play catch up in the area of technology as the region's leadership in mobile usage is fast changing the way trips are booked and handled, according to Abacus International.

The GDS cited reports that put Asia as the world's largest mobile phone market and a forerunner in mobile transactions, and added that mobile travel bookings would be one of the drivers of travel distribution in 2011.

VirtuallyThere and TripCase – mobile solutions created by Abacus that allow agents to push out itinerary information to travelers – are already widely adopted, said vice president for marketing Brett Henry.

He explained that while agents were already quite active in post-booking spaces like these, “only a handful” have harnessed mobile technology for actual transactions and client servicing through Abacus WebStart Mobile and Abacus Mobile respectively.

Henry said agents should focus on setting up mobile-specific



websites first, before diving into the world of apps.

“My suggestion is to take it one step at a time. Many agents have yet to even get onto a mobile platform at all, let alone start on apps...Our longterm view is that you should focus on having a great mobile-specific website before you go into apps,” he said.

And when agents were ready to develop apps, they should be mindful of target markets because iPhone, Android and BlackBerry devices had differing popularities across countries, added Henry.

Abacus International president and CEO, Robert Bailey, said the other trend that agents needed to embrace this year was social media.

He pointed out that there was currently a “mismatch between travel agents’ presence in the social media space and where consumers were”.

Bailey added that Abacus’ survey of the agent community showed that 70 per cent of them did not have a social media presence even though three-quarters of their customers were online. – **Gracia Chiang**

Is this your agency?

TTG Asia enlists the help of Princess Journey & Exhibition for a Japan holiday



TTG Your agency was listed in the 10-member consortium for the Japan Snow ad. I’m interested in the six-day/four-night Hokkaido Ice Breaker. What’s the tour about?

PJ The tour highlights a trip on a Hokkaido ice-breaker cruise in Monbetsu. The cruiser moves forward, breaking ice with a large drill set in the bow. The programme also includes visits to ski areas in Tomamu and Sapporo, as well as many tourist sites such as a chocolate factory. Shall I send you details?

TTG I’d like to get some basic information first. I noticed three shopping venues. Why these places? Are they very popular?

PJ Yes, these three shopping areas are popular among Thai tourists. But please hold on. Let me get the details for you.

(Pause.) Okay. The JR Tower is a shopping mall while Tanuki Koji is a shopping arcade. Both are in Sapporo. The last stop for shopping is Jusco Ion in Narita.

TTG Is this tour very popular?

What is your favourite activity on this trip?

PJ To be honest, I haven’t visited Japan yet, but I can give you details since I’ve studied about it. Have you been to Japan?

TTG Yes, but very briefly – just two nights in Narita on business.

PJ If that’s the case, I recommend you take the Highlight Japan tour, which is more popular among first-timers. There are year-round departures but rates differ per season and airline. We use either Thai Airways International or Japan Airlines. A Thai tour leader accompanies the group, and we use a Thai-speaking Japanese tour guide. We can also help with visa application.

TTG Okay. Let me think about it and check with my friend. We might go later in the year.

PJ May I send you the details via email? May I also have your telephone number for follow-up?

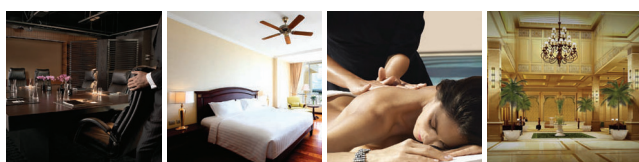
VERDICT I willingly gave the travel consultant my private email address and mobile number. She emailed me the tour programme within 10 minutes and included all her contact details. Her enthusiasm was appreciated, even if it took her some time to get the Bangkok-Hokkaido flight schedule.

– **Sirima Eamtako**

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Partners sought for Laos conferences

KUALA LUMPUR Malaysia-based conference organiser DiscoveryMICE is seeking commercial partners for a series of conferences it is organising in Laos over the next four years.

DiscoveryMICE CEO, Lee Choon Loong, said the three international conferences will focus on capacity-building for Laos and its Mekong Region neighbours in the areas of rural tourism, travel information and communications technology as well as MICE.

The first conference is scheduled for next year in Vientiane, in conjunction with Visit Laos Year 2012.

Lee recently signed an MOU in Kuala

Lumpur with Lao National Tourism Administration’s vice chairman Soukaseum Bodhisane. DiscoveryMICE is an affiliate member of the United Nations World Tourism Organization.

In preparation for these conferences, Lee is establishing an international network of partners in the region to collaborate with for the staging of these events, which are expected to draw hoteliers, tour operators, travel agents, destination management companies, tourist guides and ground operators.

Interested parties can get in touch with Lee at leechoonloong@discoverymice.com – **S Puvaneswary**

Marketplace

Jobs looking for people

Position FCm Travel Solutions – business development manager, based in Hong Kong

Job spec Must have at least two to three years of sales experience within the travel industry, with a proven track record. Should have thorough knowledge of the corporate travel market and the competitive landscape as well as an excellent command of English and Mandarin. Benefits are attractive remuneration and an incentive structure with uncapped earning potential.

Deadline 10-03-2011

Contact Send resumé and cover letter detailing experience and salary expectation to recruitment@hk.fcm.travel, addressing it to Catherine Hon

Position Synergy Tours – sales manager, based in Kuala Lumpur

Job spec Should be between 25 and 35 years old, have at least three years’ travel

industry experience and good public relations skills, be fluent in English and Malay, willing to travel extensively within the region, and preferably possess own transportation. Remuneration will commensurate with capabilities and experience, with an added incentive performance scheme.

Contact Submit particulars and a detailed resumé to recruitment@synergy-tours.com

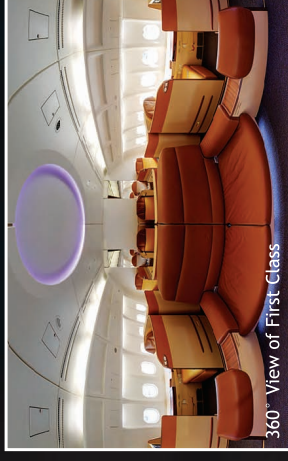
Position The Ritz-Carlton, Millenia Singapore – restaurant manager, based in Singapore

Job spec Responsible for the day-to-day operations of the all-day dining restaurant. Must have prior experience in running a restaurant of similar capacity.

Contact Please send CV to joyleyn.koh@ritzcarlton.com

For free job listings in this Marketplace section, email ttgnewsdesk@ttgasia.com

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Sailing in calm waters

A look at the main players in the cruise industry as it emerges from consolidation. By **Karen Yue**







Royal Caribbean Cruises

The world's second largest cruise company operates the Royal Caribbean International, Celebrity Cruises, Pullmantur, Azamara Club Cruises and CDF Croisieres de France brands, with 40 ships and a passenger capacity of approximately 92,300. The ships operate world-wide and call on some 400 destinations. Royal Caribbean Cruises also has a 50 per cent stake in TUI Cruises.



Genting Hong Kong Limited

Formerly Star Cruises Limited, Genting Hong Kong operates Star Cruises – Asia-Pacific, Norwegian Cruise Line and Resorts World Manila. Star Cruises, together with Norwegian Cruise Line, is the third largest cruise operator in the world, with a combined fleet of 18 ships sailing to more than 200 destinations, offering around 35,000 berths.

	Cruise line	2011 Asian plans
Royal Caribbean International 	Royal Caribbean International (RCI) offers value-for-money cruise vacations targeted at travellers of all ages. Its 22 ships are renowned for their innovative, industry-first amenities such as rock-climbing walls, ice-skating rinks and surf simulators. Its newest ships <i>Oasis of the Seas</i> and <i>Allure of the Seas</i> , with their signature neighbourhood concept, are heralded as the largest and most revolutionary in the world. RCI offers cruises in Alaska, Asia, Australia and South Pacific, the Caribbean, Canada and New England, Europe, the Middle East and South America. In Asia, RCI sails with the 2,076-pax <i>Legend of the Seas</i> . A spokesperson said the South-east Asian sailings draw “a lot of guests from within ASEAN as well as from Japan, China, Hong Kong and India”. Longer sailings of at least five nights tend to attract more longhaul guests.	The <i>Legend of the Seas</i> 2010-2011 season features more frequent and longer sailings. There are new cruises to Malacca in Malaysia, and Bali and Semarang in Indonesia. From March to October, there will be five- to seven-night itineraries from Shanghai and Tianjin to a variety of Japanese and South Korean destinations. From April to May and in September, the ship will sail out from Yokohama to destinations in Japan, China, South Korea and Russia. Because of the longer season on <i>Legend of the Seas</i> , greater market awareness for its cruises, and better cruising hardware coming into Asia-Pacific, RCI expects a growth of at least 30 per cent in passenger numbers.
Azamara Club Cruises 	Azamara Club Cruises is positioned as a destination-immersive cruise line for upmarket and experienced travellers and cruisers. Its two 700-guest ships offer a more intimate onboard experience with access to unique destinations, more overnights and longer stays at ports. Azamara features a boutique European hotel ambience, fine cuisine and wines from around the world, wellness and vitality programmes, and English butler service in suites. Azamara Club Cruises sails in Europe, Asia, the Panama Canal, Transatlantic, and the less-travelled islands of the Caribbean.	For the current 2010/2011 season, <i>Azamara Quest</i> offers 14-night South-east Asia voyages between Singapore and Hong Kong, calling at Bangkok, Koh Samui, Ho Chi Minh City, Hue, Hanoi and Sihanoukville, among others. In North-east Asia, it sails between Hong Kong and Shanghai, visiting Kagoshima, Kyoto, Xiamen, Beijing, Seoul and two new destinations Qingdao and Jeju Island. The 2011/2012 line-up includes a 12-night Christmas and New Year voyage from Singapore with calls to Krakatoa Volcano, Semarang, Lombok, Komodo and Benoa, Bali, followed by a series of 14-night sailings from Singapore and Hong Kong from January to March 2012, with overnights in Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi and Hong Kong, and two nights in Bangkok. The line-up includes a 12-night cruise from Shanghai to Busan, Hiroshima, Kobe, Kagoshima, Taipei, Hualien and Hong Kong; and a 17-night cruise featuring Manila, Benoa and Borneo. <i>Azamara Journey</i> will start its first Asian cruise in November 2012 – a 13-night Spice Coast & Ceylon voyage from Mumbai to Chennai. In December, it will run a 14-night South-east Asia voyage to Hong Kong from Singapore.
Celebrity Cruises 	Celebrity Cruises offers premium cruising, with modern, sophisticated environment, impeccable service, enriching onboard programmes and world-class cuisine. It sails in Alaska, California, Canada/New England, Europe, the Pacific Coast, Panama Canal, South America, and year-round in the Caribbean and the Galapagos Islands. Celebrity's fleet consists of 10 ships. Its Solstice Class ships present industry-first features such as a half-acre Lawn Club with real grass, the Hot Glass Show with live glass-blowing demonstrations, 10 dining venues and the new AquaClass, which offers a spa-focused ambience. Celebrity targets affluent vacationers and experienced cruisers aged over 35 years old, made up mostly of couples and singles.	Celebrity does not have ships homeported in Asia now. 
Star Cruises 	Star Cruises is an Asian cruise brand with a fleet of four vessels – <i>SuperStar Virgo</i> (915 cabins with 1,830 berths), <i>SuperStar Libra</i> (732 cabins with 1,472 berths), <i>SuperStar Aquarius</i> (765 cabins with 1,529 berths) and <i>Star Pisces</i> (692 cabins with 1,365 berths). Star Cruises itineraries cover Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam, Japan, Taiwan and Hong Kong. The company also has its own terminal in Langkawi, Malaysia. <i>SuperStar Virgo</i> , the largest in the fleet, draws cruisers of all ages, while the others are popular with families, young people and couples. <i>Star Pisces</i> is strong with incentive groups.	For the 2011 season, <i>SuperStar Virgo</i> , which is homeported in Singapore, will run a series of eight-day and six-day “special cruises” to Vietnam, Thailand and Malaysia, in addition to its three-, four- and six-day cruises. Since February 20, <i>SuperStar Libra</i> has been homeported in Penang, Malaysia, replacing <i>Star Pisces</i> . <i>SuperStar Libra</i> offers a three-night loop cruise from Penang with calls at Phuket and Krabi, as well as a one-night cruise, while <i>Star Pisces</i> has returned to homeport in Hong Kong for one-night South China High Seas cruises. Scheduled too for a new homeport is <i>SuperStar Aquarius</i> , which will be based in Taiwan from April 6. From there, it will offer three- to five-night itineraries to Japanese destinations.
Norwegian Cruise Line 	Genting Hong Kong owns 50 per cent of this brand, alongside Apollo and TPG. Norwegian Cruise Line has 11 purpose-built Freestyle Cruising ships, with the <i>Norwegian Epic</i> being the latest vessel to join the fleet in June 2010. The latter is also Norwegian Cruise Line's largest ship.	Although Norwegian Cruise Line does not sail in Asia, its bookings from Asia-Pacific doubled year-on-year in 2010, prompting it to open an office in the region. The contact centre with 16 reservation consultants opened in Manila in early February to provide real-time assistance to travel partners in the region. The centre is more than double the size of the original Asia-Pacific support team in its Miami head office.

Carnival Corporation

The global cruise company is one of the largest vacation companies in the world. Carnival Corporation's portfolio of leading cruise brands includes Carnival Cruise Lines, Holland America Line, Princess Cruises and The Yachts of Seabourn in North America; P&O Cruises and Cunard Line in the UK; AIDA in Germany; Costa Cruises in Southern Europe; Iberocruceros in Spain; and P&O Cruises in Australia. Carnival also owns a tour company that complements its cruise operations – Holland America Princess Alaska Tours in Alaska and the Canadian Yukon.

Costa Cruises

Costa Cruises, part of Costa Crociere, is Europe's leading cruise company, with more than 60 years of maritime passenger service experience. It is the first large international cruise company authorised to operate in China and depart from the country's ports.

Costa Cruises has 14 ships, each with its own distinctive characteristics, that visit 250 destinations in the Mediterranean, Northern Europe, the Baltic Sea, the Caribbean, South America, the United Arab Emirates, the Far East and the Indian Ocean.

Costa's cruises are positioned as contemporary and modern. More than 62 per cent of guests are aged from 25 to 54, of which 51 per cent are couples and 25 per cent are families.

Programmes onboard include workshops on gourmet food, cookery lessons with top chefs, arts and crafts, Italian language and yoga, as well as organised activities such as sports tournaments and free group fitness classes. There are daily theatre shows featuring ballet, comic acts and opera, among others, and guests can indulge in a wide range of cocktail and theme parties. Wellness treatments are also offered onboard.

2011 Asian plans

Costa Classica's current season (December 2010 to April 2011) offers a new 14-day itinerary out of Singapore, with stops in Malaysia and Thailand. The programme can be broken down into two seven-day segments. *Costa Classica* was, however, repositioned to Hong Kong this month, running six sailings to Taiwan or Sanya/Halong Bay throughout February.

During the summer season, from May to October, the ship will be deployed to Shanghai, offering itineraries to Japanese and South Korean ports, including embarkation in Fukuoka (Japan) and Busan (South Korea).

Holland America Line

Holland America Line is well positioned in the premium cruise segment, armed with a fleet of 15 ships that offer nearly 500 cruises to 320 ports-of-call worldwide each year, from two-day mini vacations to Grand World Voyages of more than 100 days.

The cruise line draws passengers aged 50 and above, who are affluent and college-educated, as well as multi-generational families, families with children and senior citizens.

Its spokesperson described Holland America Line cruises' price point as mid-range.

Two ships – *Zaandam* and *Amsterdam* – will sail to Asia-Pacific this year and next.

In *Zaandam's* first sailing in the region, it will cruise for 30 days from Sydney to Hong Kong from December 23. From January 2012 to April, *Zaandam* will offer a variety of itineraries, lasting 14, 22, 28 and 36 days, to various Asian destinations including Singapore, Hong Kong, China and Japan.

The Grand World Voyage onboard *Amsterdam* – 70 days from September 26, 2011 and 75 days from September 21, 2012 – will feature a Grand Asia & Australia Voyage that showcases Japan, China, Vietnam, Indonesia, Australia and islands in the South Pacific. It will make a port call in Singapore with overnights.

AIDA Cruises

AIDA Cruises, headquartered in Rostock, is Germany's leading cruise company. It marked its most successful year in 2010, with a strong surge in both sales and passenger numbers. A total of 511,400 guests travelled on the seven AIDA ships, 97,400 more passengers than in the previous year.

The company's ships are *AIDAcara*, *AIDAvita*, *AIDAaura*, *AIDAdiva*, *AIDAbella*, *AIDAluna* and *AIDAblu* with a total capacity of 12,000 guests (cabins with double occupancy). They currently operate in the Mediterranean, Northern Europe, the Caribbean, Dubai, around the Canary Islands, North America and Asia. The Meyer shipyard in Germany has been commissioned to build three more ships for delivery in spring 2011, 2012 and 2013. The company's eighth cruise ship *AIDAso!* is due to be named in Kiel on April 9, before setting course on a maiden cruise in Northern Europe.

AIDA ships are dedicated to the German-speaking market and are renowned for their young style and casual service.

AIDAcara and *AIDAaura* took to Asian seas very successfully in 2009 and 2010, and the company will deploy an even bigger ship to Asia for its 2011/2012 winter programme. From November to March 2012, the *AIDAdiva*, which can take 2,500 passengers, will cover four 14-day cruises as well as two seven-day cruises. Destinations are Bangkok, Ho Chi Minh City, Singapore, Penang, Colombo, Cochin, Muara and Koh Samui.

There will also be two trans-Asian voyages that will take passengers to the highlights of the Red Sea and the west coast of India.



KEEPING AHEAD OF THE TRENDS

By Glenn de Souza
Vice President of International Operations – Asia & the Middle East of Best Western International

Keeping abreast of new and emerging trends in the hospitality industry is one thing. Going that extra mile to stay at the forefront of these trends is a key strategy. As The World's Largest Hotel Chain® and the fastest growing in Asia, Best Western International prides itself on being a pioneering force in accommodation in Asia and the Middle East.

Its observations, studies and analysis into industry trends and consumer behaviour have brought the chain's some impressive developments, from the refinement of its luxury **BEST WESTERN PREMIER**, to the creation of its own exclusive spa brand – **BHUVANA MY SPA**, and even the introduction of an entirely new hotel product – **BEST WESTERN PLUS** to Asia and the Middle East.

This wasn't decided upon lightly. The company's research and marketing team identified a growing segment of modern travelers who are increasingly sophisticated and seeking accommodation choices which offer a lifestyle along with the traditional bed and breakfast element. They are those who want new travel experiences with plenty of value-added offerings. Yet this doesn't necessarily mean they want to spend top dollar for their stay, not when today's mid to upper-range choices are better than ever!

Enter Best Western's product descriptor strategies, where the chain has clearly re-positioned its products into three tiers: the well-established mid-scale **BEST WESTERN**, the recently-introduced upscale **BEST WESTERN PLUS** and the luxury **BEST WESTERN PREMIER**.

BEST WESTERN PLUS is set to debut in Asia early this year, offering the characteristics demanded in a hotel by this growing sector of trendy, yet value-conscious traveller. Synonymous with the Best Western name, these properties will incorporate local charm, design and heritage with comfort and friendly service in strategically chosen locations which enable guests to easily enjoy their destination.

In 2011, the industry will also see the much-anticipated relaunch of the refined, upgraded and enhanced **BEST WESTERN PREMIER**, where existing hotels and resorts have been improving their facilities, amenities and services.

With the **BEST WESTERN PREMIER's** relaunch, guests will experience the new level of luxury standards and quality services set to exceed customer expectations in all possible ways.



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Food and culture are inseparable, according to Tourism Malaysia (Thailand office) director Iskandar Mirza Mohd Yusof. "Food is a good way to introduce history and culture to our visitors, and food festivals have been known to increase arrivals, especially from our key target markets of South-east Asia and Europe," he said.

MIGF 2010 also saw the launch of Gourmet Tours Malaysia, a series of packages that brings guests straight from the airport in limousines to various MIGF-featured restaurants, with the option of cooking classes, spa and wellness activities, and golf. The packages, which run till September, are priced from RM3,320 (US\$1,088) per pax, and include four nights' accommodation with daily breakfast, four gourmet meals, a cooking class, a three-hour Kuala Lumpur city tour and complimentary airport transfers.

India-based Dove Travels' managing partner Ashwani Gupta said Indian travellers' food-loving nature meant some clients chose to visit certain destinations specifically for the food festivals on show. "Food festivals, especially in Singapore, are a draw for Indian travellers," he said.

Islamabad-based Wanhar Express Travel & Tour CEO, Iftikhar Awan, pointed to food festivals in Malaysia and Singapore as being popular with Pakistani tourists,

Culinary tours aplenty

Singapore's Dorison Travel started gourmet tours to Thailand and Indonesia after seeing enthusiastic bookings for its food tours in France. The new programmes marry cooking classes with visits to quality restaurants, where participants can sample local dishes.

Louise Nathan, product and marketing manager of Exotissimo Group, noted a trend towards more niche and special in-



Ready! Get set! Eat!

What Gourmet dinners featuring renowned explorers giving talks about the planet. Arctic explorer Tom Avery will kick off the lecture dining series on April 14 at Soneva Fushi.

Price TBA

What On April 5 and 6, the resort together with renowned wine writer and commentator, Curtis Marsh, will host two wine dinners and a wine lunch showcasing celebrity wine connoisseur Sam Neill, Burgundy expert Allen Meadows and award-winning winemaker Josh Jensen.

Price RM3,485 (US\$1,140) nett for single occupancy and RM 5,070 nett for double occupancy in a deluxe room. A superior villa option is available.

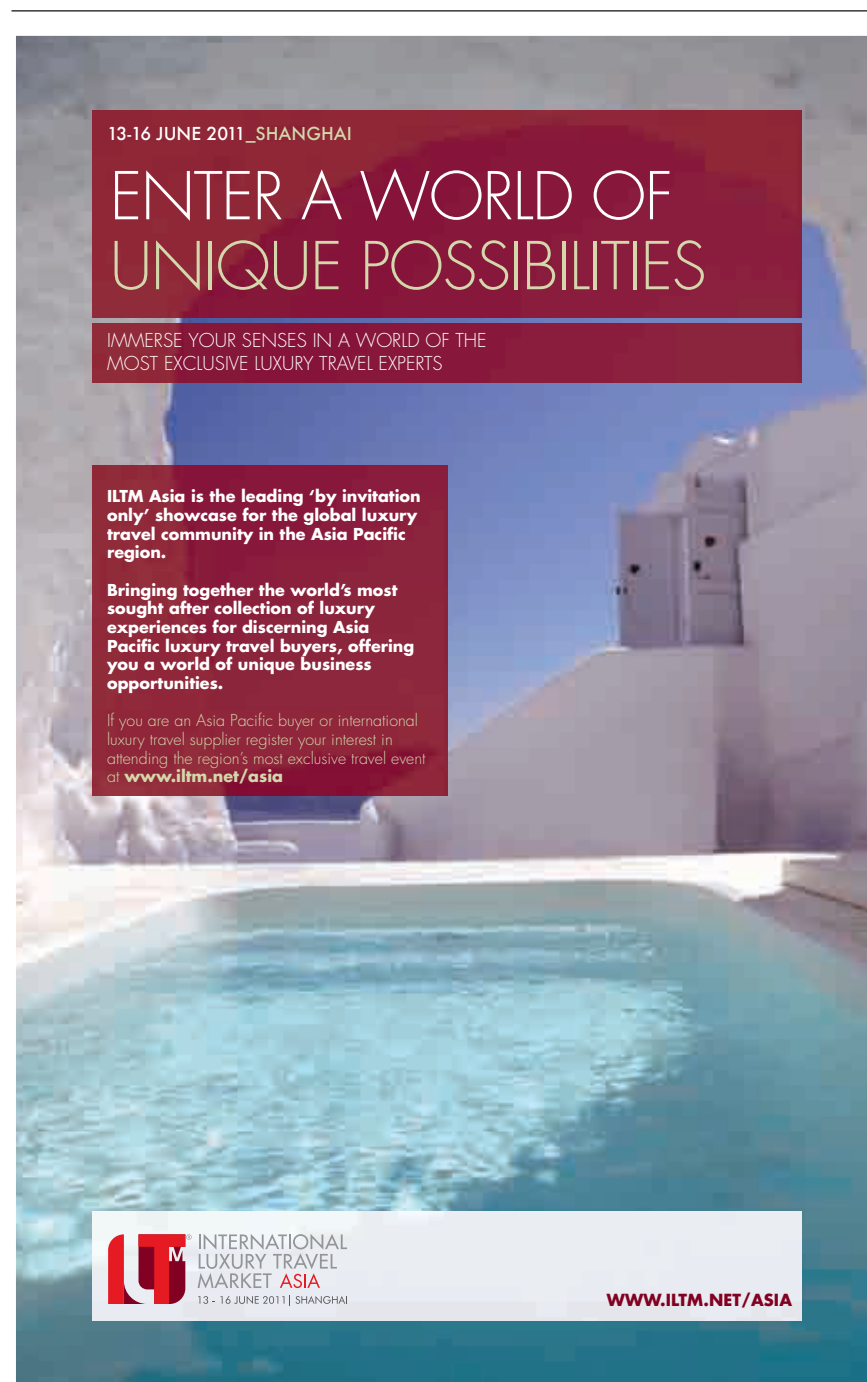
What Upon request during low season, the hotel's chef will teach guests to prepare *nasi campur*, a rice dish with an assortment of accompaniments including *sate* (meat skewers), *sayur urap* (Balinese salad),



Price Now complimentary for hotel guests, but the hotel may soon turn this into a chargeable activity due to increasing interest.

What A regular cooking programme is held every morning and afternoon for groups of four (for leisure groups) or 10 (for incentive groups) in a tiny hut amid the serene paddy fields surrounding the resort.

Beginning with a trip to a traditional market, where an accompanying chef will introduce local herbs commonly used in Balinese cooking and help pick out fresh ingredients, the group will then return to the hut and whip up Balinese dishes under the



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NTOs and tour operators are dangling gourmet experiences to jetsetting clients who crave for local tastes, cultures and fine foods. By Karen Yue



terest packages, including culinary tours, in recent years. “For visitors to Asia, experiencing the cuisine is an integral part of the trip. Such tours appeal to most markets, but especially the European and US markets.”

Nathan added: “Gourmet attractions can boost a destination’s tourism appeal, as travellers are becoming more refined and savvy about what they want.”

Indonesia’s Mapanget Mega Wisata Tours and Travel Services sales and marketing manager Muchlis Kaharuddin said his company had seen an increase in requests for culinary tours over the past two years, but often only as part of a complete tour package or as an optional add-on.

Hoping to court an unusual niche segment, Mapanget also organises culinary tours to a specialised restaurant in the highlands, where guests can sample house cat, jungle rat and bat meat. Kaharuddin pointed out that these are unique products that only the more adventurous travellers can stomach.

Not all markets take well to culinary tours incorporating cooking classes, according to Wanhari Express’ Awan. He explained that in Pakistani culture, cooking was a woman’s responsibility. “Tours with cooking classes are not as popular as food festivals for my travellers, as the men are

only interested in eating, not cooking.”

Stay and cook a dish or two

Hotels have also gotten in on the act, offering culinary programmes to enhance guest experience. In Singapore, for in-

stance, Fairmont Singapore and The Regent Singapore have both seen good uptake for their gourmet workshops.

Fairmont Singapore has a Secret Garden Experience, as part of the Fairmont brand’s Apprentice Trip programme, of-

fering guests an opportunity to pick up a skill while on holiday. The Regent Singapore’s cooking programme at its Italian restaurant Basilico is now conducted six times a week, up from the initial three-weekly sessions when launched in 2009.




chef’s guidance.
Price US\$100 per person

Singapore-based Dorison Travel
What The agency conducts four- to five-day culinary tours to Thailand and Indonesia, where participants will visit markets, take grocery shopping and cooking lessons from quality chefs, learn about Asian spices and the culture behind popular local dishes, and dine at restaurants famous for local cuisine. The package includes accommodation and airfare.
Price S\$700 (US\$550) per person

Fairmont Singapore
What The Secret Garden Experience takes guests on a journey with skilled chefs as they learn how to whip up a fine meal. The package includes one night’s accommodation twin-share, breakfast for two at Prego, a tour and harvesting session in the hotel’s herb garden, a hands-on cooking demonstration and a three-course meal with a glass of wine and coffee.
Price S\$500++ (US\$390) per room per night








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Eye of Tianjin

Hoping for stardom

City gets serious about tourism with a fresh round of upgrades, reports **Prudence Lui**

Arrivals Tianjin had a good 2010, welcoming 1,660,682 foreign visitors, a 17.6 per cent increase over 2009.

The city's top six markets were Japan (569,028 arrivals), South Korea (279,991), Singapore (103,327), the US (101,355), Malaysia (77,220) and the Philippines (37,817).

NTO Tianjin's longterm growth has been hobbled by a lack of tourism resources hence the government and tourism authorities have been busy upgrading both hardware and software in recent years.

The city's 12th five-year plan, starting 2011, envisions Tianjin as a major hub in northern China. Local newspapers report that some 30 new tourism projects will be developed in the city.

The New Binhai District, for instance, will be revitalised with a coastal tourism zone, a yacht port with 750 berths and a polar Sea World.

"Florence Town" in the Wuqing rural district will have clusters of Italian architecture-inspired buildings housing luxury retail shops and F&B outlets, when it opens its first phase in May and

its second phase in October.

Martin Verpoorten, The Astor Hotel general manager, said: "Tianjin needs an image, and all these heritage buildings, trading houses and old premises such as the British Club in the financial areas are well-preserved."

Hotels According to Tianjin Tourism, the city has graded some of its hotels in star rankings. At press time, Tianjin officially had 10 five-star, 32 four-star and 49 three-star hotels. Another 30 are to be ranked next, including 10 purpose-built five-star hopefuls.

New international chains such as Marriott, InterContinental Hotels Group, Ritz-Carlton and Shangri-La are entering the city, with properties presently under construction.

The latest entrants are 322-room Sheraton Tianjin Binhai Hotel, which opened last October near the new cruise terminal, and 152-room The Astor Hotel.

Verpoorten noted that room supply growth in the city was not commensurate to demand, which was lagging behind.

"In the last two years, new flags descended (on the city) some 20 years after the Hyatt



"Just as it was for the Bund in Shanghai, the government invests to conserve old buildings (in Tianjin) and transform them into tourist attractions."

Martin Verpoorten
General manager
The Astor Hotel

and Sheraton first opened. All of a sudden, Tianjin went from no developments at all to an influx of Raffles and Westin. In 2011, it'll be the turn of Ritz-Carlton, St Regis, Four Seasons... The city needs to develop faster to fill the rooms," he said.

Rates of hotels in Binhai are more competitive than those of properties in downtown Tianjin as there is less competition among brands in the former.

Access The Tianjin Binhai International Airport welcomed 7.28 million passengers last year, up by 25.9 per cent.

The airport will complete the second phase of its expansion in 2013. This will give it a new terminal and more parking space for aircraft. It will also eventually be connected to the Tianjin city metro as well as the high-speed train network.

Domestic connectivity has improved tremendously in the last few months. Okay Airways Company launched three new routes: Tianjin-Ningbo-Sanya, Tianjin-Xian-Nanning and Changsha-Tianjin-Harbin.

Meanwhile, Tianjin Airlines has added Tianjin-Shijiazhuang-Yinchuan to its network and

has turned its Tianjin-Wuhan-Nanning service into a daily flight. Tianjin Airlines has been operating direct flights to Taiwan since 2008. Other airlines offering cross-strait services from Tianjin are Air China, EVA Airways and Transasia Airways.

Cruises Inaugurated last June, the Tianjin International Cruise Terminal covers 700,000m² and can accommodate six large cruise ships at a time. The actual terminal building can handle up to 4,000 cruisers, with a total capacity of 500,000 passengers a year.

Costa Romantica was the first cruise ship to call at the new terminal on June 26 last year.

Costa Crociere president Gianni Onorato said: "The new terminal is a reward for our pioneering investment and work in this part of the world. The ultimate aim is to popularise a new form of vacation in China – cruise vacations."

Tianjin has a busy cruise lineup for this year, welcoming newcomers *Artemis*, *Queen Mary II* and *Sun Princess*, in addition to regular international cruises like *Legend of the Seas*, *Princess Diamond* and *Oceana Princess*.

Tianjin puts on its MICE cap

Heightened economic activity allows business tourism to prosper in new Chinese hub. By Prudence Lui

1 **How is Tianjin faring as a business hub?** The Chinese Central Government has identified Tianjin Binhai New Areas (TBNA) as a pilot area for key reforms on financial enterprise. Comprising Tian-

jin Port, Tianjin Economic-Technological Development Area, a duty-free zone and three administrative districts, TBNA covers 2,270km². Binhai New Area is four times the size of Shanghai's Pudong.

TBNA has attracted a number of MNCs such as Motorola, Toyota, Samsung and Airbus, which has located its first assembly line outside Europe in Tianjin. All this has been driving corporate and MICE traffic.

2 **But is Tianjin ready for MICE?** Yes, if its recent hosting of international events is anything to go by. Tianjin's first test came during the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The city hosted the football matches at the purpose-built Tianjin Olympic Center Stadium and inaugurated the high-speed Beijing-Tianjin railway a week before the games started. Travelling at 350kph, the first inter-city rail connection between Beijing and Tianjin covers the 120km distance in just 30 minutes, remarkably faster than the previous 70 minutes.

Last September, the Summer Davos Forum descended on the Meijiang Convention and Exhibition Centre (MCEC), Tianjin's newest and largest venue. MCEC has a floor area of 100,000m², with six halls and an exhibition area of 50,000m² for 2,600 international-standard booths. It also has 23 meeting areas across 7,000m².

3 **Does Tianjin have enough hotels for MICE groups?** International chains have been pouring into the city over the last few years. Crowne Plaza Tianjin Binhai and Ibis Tianjin Tanggu opened in 2009, while last year saw the arrival of Raffles, Ibis Tianjin Railway Station and Astor Hotel. The Hyatt Regency Tianjin closed in July 2009 for an extensive renovation due for completion in a year or two.

An estimated 20 more international hotels are to make their Tianjin entry over the next few years. China Classical Holiday vice general manager Peter Wang said: "Before these international flags came, we didn't have enough high-end properties. Rates were high, given the limited supply. Now, rates have gone down slightly but they're still high for travel agents. I need more group rates for incentive tours."

4 **But what is the present MICE situation?** So far, so good. China CYTS Tianjin International Travel Service's National Centre business manager Claudia Kong noted that the high-speed train to Beijing had resulted in year-round business.

The 322-room Sheraton Tianjin Binhai Hotel has been reeling in the events since opening last October. General manager Ma Lin said: "We've yet to experience the high season for exhibitions. But downtown Tianjin has a new big venue, and we have our 700m² ballroom."

Five-star Astor Hotel goes for high-end meetings and incentives for small groups. General manager Martin Verpoorten said: "Since reopening, we've hosted meeting groups from Shanghai and Beijing. We can grow this segment if we raise awareness of our unique MICE offers."

5 **How can Tianjin get more MICE business?** Raffles Tianjin general manager Gilbert Madhavan sees the need to develop more iconic attractions to keep incentive groups in the city longer, as Tianjin only gets a small number of incentive groups that stay just one to two days.

"The Tianjin government is keen to tap the MICE market and has invested in upgrading and restoring old buildings, and adding new attractions such as a museum at the Sea World in Tanggu," he said.

Sheraton Tianjin's Ma agreed, saying: "We need to do more to generate incentive business as the city is short of attractions such as scenic spots."



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Checking in

The Astor Hotel



The iconic land-mark recently debuted as China's first Luxury Collection Hotel. *Prudence Lui* checks in

LOCATION The 148-year-old Starwood Hotels & Resorts-managed property sits on the promenade in Tianjin's Heping commercial district in the British Concession, facing the Hai River. A 15-minute stroll to the nearest metro station that connects Tianjin to Beijing in just 30 minutes, The Astor Hotel, which recently underwent an extensive RMB300 million (US\$45.5 million) makeover, is the only hotel included in China's national cultural relic preservation project.

ROOMS The Astor Hotel has 152 rooms and suites decked in either classic colonial décor or contemporary designs. I stayed in the old wing, featuring 78 heritage rooms that, post-renovation, retain colonial and indigenous



Chinese touches. The doors and panels, aged polished wooden floors and furniture highlight the grandeur of these timeless rooms, while the built-in mirrors and television bring the units to modern times.

I liked the media hub on my sizeable working desk. Additional sockets would have been welcome, as guests now travel with a host of gadgets – all of which need power.

F&B The hotel's numerous Chinese and Japanese restaurants were consolidated into three outlets and two bars after the renovation.

The Victoria Café, originally a stable, is now a three-storey structure with a restaurant and spacious café, under a glass roof that bathes the establishment in natural light.

For a spell of nostalgia, drop by the O'Hara Bar in the hotel's old wing and delight in the intimacy of an English gentleman's lounge with regal Winchester-

Name The Astor Hotel, Tianjin
No of rooms 152
Rates From RMB735 (US\$111)
Contact details
Tel: (86-22) 2331-1688

style sofas and an oversized bar counter for meals.

FACILITIES The old wing's five themed multifunction rooms accommodate meetings for 10 to 14 people. Each carries a stamp from the past. For instance, the Viceroy Room serves menu favourites of China's past leaders. If these do not satisfy, the Hai River Wing's 8th floor houses the Buckingham Ballroom and multifunction rooms. There is also an in-house museum. Coming soon is a 24-hour fitness centre.

SERVICE Staff are attentive and responsive to ad hoc requests, even late at night.

VERDICT A journey into the past with service from the heart.

Test drive

No bulls in the china shop



Imagine a building covered in porcelain ware. *Prudence Lui* navigates the delicate structure

WHY How can a residence built from hundreds of porcelain pots not strike my curiosity?

China House is imaginative, creative and incomparable. The French-style private residence underwent a US\$64 million six-year restoration that transformed it into a building adorned completely with porcelain pots, many from antique collections.

WHAT The building was turned into a private museum in 2007 by owner Zhang Lianzhi, who found a novel way to display his porcelain collection, amassed over two decades.

China House contains more than 4,000 pieces of ancient porcelain, 300 white-marble carvings, some 400 white-marble sculptures, over 20 tonnes of crystal and carnelian, and several porcelain pieces from vari-

ous dynasties, including the Tang Dynasty's Tri-color pottery and the Qing Dynasty's Famille Rose Porcelain.

The exterior is not the only gem, as a valuable collection of antique wooden furniture can be found on each floor.

HOW Hire a local tour guide as there are no signs, literature or background information. Wear comfortable shoes as it takes a lot of walking to appreciate the four-storey building's offerings.

VERDICT Bizarre yet awesome!



Name China House
Rate RMB\$35 (US\$5.31)
Contact details
Chifeng Road, Heping District
Tianjin
Tel: (86-22) 2712-3366

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Golden Lion, Sihanoukville

Spreading the wealth

Cambodia promotes and develops tourism beyond Angkor Wat, reports **Sirima Eamtako**

Arrivals Cambodia expects to welcome 2.75 million visitors this year, an improvement over 2010's 2.5 million arrivals, a 16 per cent hike over 2009.

This year's results are likely to mirror 2010's in source markets and 60:40 ratio between regional and longhaul arrivals.

The top markets last year were Vietnam, South Korea, China, Japan, the US, France, the UK, Thailand, Australia and Taiwan.

The highest growth rates were recorded by Vietnam, South Korea, China and Taiwan, due to increased air access as well as the relaxation of visa regulations for Vietnamese nationals. But numbers from the UK, the US and Thailand dipped slightly, owing to the weak UK and US economies and the ongoing border dispute with Thailand, respectively.

NTO To spread the benefits of tourism beyond Siem Reap and Phnom Penh, the Cambodian Ministry of Tourism (MOT) is promoting and developing Cambodia's southern coastal cities and north-eastern provinces.

The Mekong Discovery Trail, an MOT project with the UN

World Tourism Organization and Dutch non-profit organisation SNV, focuses on ecotourism and community-based tourism in the north-east.

The MOT also last year nominated the country's 450km southern coastal stretch for listing in the Club of the Most Beautiful Bays in the World. A decision is expected this year from the Berlin-based club that counts 30 bays in 22 countries among its members. Cambodian tourism minister Dr Thong Khon said getting into the club would promote tourism to the south.

Hotels Most of the new hospitality developments are concentrated in the southern coastal area. These include Sokha O'Chheuteal Beach and Casino in Sihanoukville and Sokha Boko resort near Kampot, opening in the next few years.

This year, Sokha Hotels and Resorts will open 69-key Moha Mahori Chalet in an exclusive corner of 172-room Sokha Beach Resort Sihanouk Ville's 25-hectare beachfront. Late last year, the resort added the 112-key Lakeside wing to its inventory.

Song Saa Private Island, open-



"This year will be better than 2010. New air connections will help open new markets for Cambodia."

Ho Vandy
Chairperson - steering committee
Cambodia Association of Travel Agents
Managing director
World Express Tours and Travel

ing this year off the coast of Sihanoukville, will be Cambodia's first luxury island resort project, with 25 Maldives-style villas.

Accor's 54-room Ream Resort opens in 2013, and the US\$1 billion mixed-use Morakot Island project of the Koh Puos Investment Group follows in 2016.

Phnom Penh's inventory of 870 five-star rooms, boosted by last December's opening of 201-room Sofitel Phnom Penh Phokeethra, will balloon further next year, when Sokha adds 380 rooms through a new hotel.

Siem Reap, where around 2,500 of 8,900 rooms have four- or five-star certification, saw the rebranding of 18-key Best Western Suites and Sweets Resort Angkor, Siem Reap and the upgrade of 188-room Borei Angkor Resort and Spa to five-star status after a US\$2 million facelift.

Rates High domestic airfares on Cambodia Angkor Air appear to threaten the competitiveness of tour packages.

The trade says that the airline's 35-minute Phnom Penh-Siem Reap and 55-minute Phnom Penh-Bangkok services cost almost the same – around US\$170. Ho Vandy, World Express Tours

and Travel's managing director, said the carrier should amend its "high price, low service" policy, which hurts tourism efforts.

Hotel rates are also on the rise, as properties in Phnom Penh, Siem Reap and Sihanoukville nudge tariffs up, citing good first-quarter business.

Borei Angkor Resort and Spa's new certification allowed it to bump rates up to US\$100, from US\$75, said managing director Finan Khim. Sokha Beach Resort Sihanouk Ville fetches an average daily rate (ADR) of US\$245 and US\$150 in the high and low seasons respectively. General manager Michael Lim expects ADR to rise further once the Moha Mahori opens at US\$400 to US\$1,000 a night.

Access Cambodia will have a European connection again, courtesy of Air France which returns to the country after suspending operations nearly 40 years ago.

The French carrier will resume its Paris-Phnom Penh service via Bangkok on March 27. It will operate three flights a week, initially on 275-seat Airbus A340 aircraft before deploying a 309-seat Boeing B777-200 on the route.

Establishing better linkages

Air France's return to Cambodian skies is just the latest in a spate of access gains. By **Sirima Eamtako**

1 What's the latest in Cambodian skies? Cambodia is getting its first regular scheduled longhaul service from Europe with Air France's thrice-weekly flight between Phnom Penh and Paris via Bangkok, from March 27. The French carrier suspended its operations in Cambodia in 1974.

The airline's return to Cambodian skies resulted from breakthrough talks between Air France and Cambodia's State Secretary for Civil Aviation, according to Société Concessionnaire des Aéroports (SCA). The latter develops and operates Cambodia's international airports in Phnom Penh, Siem Reap and Sihanoukville under a contract with the Cambodian government that runs until 2040.

2 What other air links have cropped up? Myanmar Airways International introduced a twice-weekly flight between Yangon and Siem Reap on February 23.

This and Air France's upcoming service come fast on the heels

of Air Berlin's flights via Bangkok through a codeshare agreement with Bangkok Airways. They also follow a string of capacity introductions and increases last year by regional carriers from South Korea, China, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand.

At present, Cambodia is served by 23 airlines that fly to international airports in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap.

In 2010, 52 per cent of visitor arrivals to Cambodia arrived in the country by air.

3 How will these benefit Cambodian tourism? To capitalise on the new air links, the travel trade in Cambodia is organising a series of familiarisation trips for agents. At press time, one such trip for agents from Myanmar was scheduled for end-February.

Raffles Hotel Le Royal and Raffles Grand Hotel d'Angkor are working with Air France on familiarisation trips for MICE agents from France, said the hotels' sales and marketing area director Peter Foster.



Phnom Penh International Airport

In the meantime, SCA continues to market Cambodia in Japan, China, South Korea and Europe to spur interest in regular and charter flights to its three airports in the country. It is also planning a day-long conference in end-March or early April on air transport and economic development in the face of Air France's return to Cambodia.

4 What is on the drawing board? According to Ho Vandy, steering committee chairman of the Cambodia Associa-

tion of Travel Agents, a number of other international carriers such as Philippine Airlines, Emirates and Lufthansa have expressed interest in mounting direct flights to the country.

Om Pharin, managing director of Charming Cambodia Tours, was also confident of new direct flights from the Philippines as well as from India.

He said he hoped the recent bilateral agreement between Cambodia and India would lead to direct air links between the two countries.

5 What remains to be done? Sihanoukville Airport is currently without airline clients or flights. The airport is not lacking in infrastructure though, as it has a 2,000m² passenger terminal and a 2,300m runway that can accommodate Airbus A320 and Boeing B737 aircraft.

Michael Lim, general manager of Sokha Beach Resort Sihanoukville, hopes the new Air France and Air Berlin flights would spur demand for direct domestic and international services to the coastal town. The injection in room capacity in mainland Sihanoukville, off the coast and on Bokor Mountain would also make the destination more commercially viable for airline and charter services.

Intent on bringing longhaul charter flights to Sihanoukville, SCA is studying its options for future development. These include an extension of the existing runway or construction of a new 4,000m one, and the aeronautical capability to handle all types of aircraft and an annual passenger throughput of 10 million.

Test drive



A surprising journey

Asian Trails Cambodia debuts a unique gala evening and dinner programme for groups. Raini Hamdi joins a night full of surprises

WHEN Asian Trails Cambodia used the chance to show off its creative streak and debut this new programme to a group of buyers and media at the recent ASEAN Tourism Forum (ATF) in Phnom Penh.

HOW An *Invitation au Voyage* made its way to my room, with an intriguing message for me to be at the lobby at 6.40pm.

In the comfortable coach with a few other delegates, I was dying to know where we would be taken to. Surprises have a way of making people excited and, like children, we started pressing the Asian Trails staff for clues. The

only clue we had was a memorabilia bookmark, stamped with vintage tickets.

Never in our wildest dreams did we imagine to be transferred to the Cambodian Railways Maintenance area where, amazingly, a vintage Czechoslovakian yellow train car from the 60s – which used to transport Prince Norodom Sihanouk and VIPs – was on the tracks. Cocktails were served as we moved along a red carpet towards the stationary train.

Just as I thought we were going to have dinner in the train – which would have been good enough for me – a boarding announcement came. Uniformed train stewards with white gloves punched a hole in the bookmark ticket and, as soon as all guests were aboard, a whistle blew and the train chugged a 10-minute ride to the landmark Phnom Penh Central Railway Station.

On the platform, circus acro-

Name *Invitation au Voyage*
Rate Depends on group size
Max no. of pax 200
Contact details
Tel: (855-23) 216-555 (Ext. 57)
Fax: (855-23) 216-591
Email: sophearun@asiantrails.com.kh
Website: www.asiantrails.info

bats – young Cambodian artistes from a local NGO – gave a performance *Cirque du Soleil* would approve of. More surprise came: To the sound of Richard Strauss, we were led inside the station, where the Grand Hall had been set up for fine dining.

As if that were not enough, the Royal Ballet of Cambodia performed for us during the evening, under the artistic direction of HRH Princess Buppha Devi Norodom of Cambodia who was present behind-the-scenes. An energetic circus show finale – and excellent food by Cambodiana Hotel – made it a night to remember.

VERDICT A creative and uplifting gala that is full of surprises.

Phokeethra goes places

The Phokeethra Group hopes to increase the rates at its two Cambodian properties as investor interest in Phnom Penh grows and the leisure travel segment bounces back.

Its US\$50 million Sofitel Phnom Penh Phokeethra, which opened last December, is the country's first new international five-star hotel to open since the 1990s.

Phokeethra Group deputy managing director Supachai Verapuchong said Cambodia's economic boom would bolster corporate travel and MICE business, all of which would allow the new luxury hotel to command a 10 to 15 per cent premium over market rates. Five-star properties in Cambodia are expected to average between US\$110 and US\$150 this year, depending on seasonality.

"The Sofitel Phnom Penh Phokeethra's quality allows it to charge higher rates. I also prefer that we enter the market with higher rates so that we do not create unnecessary price competition," said Supachai.

The 201-room property already bests competitors in size as it occupies a four-hectare plot, compared to other five-star hotels' one hectare. Its 1,800m² ballroom is Cambodia's largest, while its So Spa and executive club Club Millésime are the first purpose-built facilities of their kind in South-east Asia. Supachai also expects the hotel's eight F&B

outlets, once fully operational, to set new dining benchmarks in Phnom Penh.

The group is also looking to adjust tariffs at its 238-room Sofitel Angkor Phokeethra Golf and Spa Resort. The property opened its US\$2 million Phokeethra Ballroom last May. At 400m², it is Siem Reap's largest and most modern.

Supachai said the multiple crises of the last four years had dampened hotel rates in Siem Reap. But as business has been rebounding since late last year, "rates will be rebuilt by 10 per cent this year," he said.

Aside from its two hotels, Phokeethra Group is also developing a 36-hole golf course on a 500-hectare plot in Kandan, some 20km from Phnom Penh. This will be the group's second golf course, after the Phokeethra Country Club in Siem Reap.

– **Sirima Eamtako**



Sofitel Phnom Penh Phokeethra

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*Come join the 5th Anniversary celebration of
Hong Kong Disneyland!!*

Come join our celebrations of the 5th anniversary of Hong Kong Disneyland

as we take the magic to a whole new level of excitement! Get ready for Celebration in the Air as Sorcerer Mickey and Tinker Bell transform the park into an enchanting wonderland. Join the new, interactive **Flights of Fantasy Parade** led by Sorcerer Mickey and his Magical Airship, taking our 5th anniversary festivities to new heights. And to dazzle you further, **Tinker Bell** has transformed the Sleeping Beauty Castle into her very own **Tinker Bell Castle** with magic pixie dust.



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Flights of Fantasy Parade takes interactivity to new heights – you and your Guests will be invited to dance along with Disney's most innovative parade ever!

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Our 5,000 cast members are ready to bring you and your Guests a celebration year like no other - from everyone's beloved Disney friends in their all-new themed costumes, resort-wide celebration offerings including food and beverage, merchandise assortments and hotel activities, to the finest details of atmospheric decoration.

There is **Celebration in the Air** during Hong Kong Disneyland 5th Anniversary festivities and now you can make every sale a new magical experience for your Guests every time they visit Hong Kong Disneyland. Visit www.hkdlttravelagents.com for more details.



Tinker Bell Castle

Sleeping Beauty Castle will become a dramatic centerpiece for Celebration in the Air. Tinker Bell will shower it with her magical pixie dust, transforming it into **Tinker Bell Castle**. By day, it glistens as the golden pixie dust sparkles and shimmers in the sun. By night, it magically illuminates, adding a rousing spectacle every night during the 5th anniversary festivities.



Tinker Bell

Tinker Bell is thrilled to make her debut at Hong Kong Disneyland. You and your Guests will be able to meet her in her own magical garden newly built in Fantasyland.

