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Expedia hots up B:B

World's largest online travel company woos Asian agents with commissions

By Raini Hamdi

SINGAPORE

Competition among B:B online players and GDSs to get Asian agents to book via their systems is intensifying, with Expedia launching its Travel Agent Affiliate Programme (TAAP) in South-east Asia (TTG Asia e-Daily, April 6) beginning with the Singapore market, which it recently entered (TTG Asia e-Daily, February 23).

Expedia has forged a sales and marketing partnership with Discover the World Marketing to market TAAP to agents in Singapore and Malaysia. Agents who join TAAP earn in general a 10 per cent commission on non-air bookings and one per cent on air, with other commission rates applied for special promotions and packages.

Expedia hopes to rope them in with commissions, plus its "wider inventory, competitive rates, availability and service support", said Stuart Udy, manager Expedia Travel Agent Distribution APAC, based in Sydney.



Udy: Agent-friendly

TAAP is an eight-year-old programme first launched in the US and Europe. In Asia-Pacific, it was introduced only last year in Australia/New Zealand and India. Apart from Singapore and Malaysia, it will also be launched in Thailand, the latter two being the markets Expedia will be entering in the next two months.

Udy said that based on Expedia's experience in launching

TAAP in various markets, "a flood" of agents already said they had been booking through Expedia to service their customers because of "great new products and a much wider inventory to work with".

With commissions, he expects to be a contender to the likes of B:B players such as Gullivers Travel Associates, which has also been expanding fast in Asia-Pacific.

And with the other top online B:C players in the region such as Agoda being without a travel agent programme, he believes Expedia can gain a share of the agency market without too much difficulty.

Udy said that while agent contribution to Expedia's bookings in mature online markets such as North America was small, it was "significant" in markets in Asia-Pacific such as India, where TAAP had been launched.

This was due to issues such as consumer confidence in booking online and credit card penetra-

tion. Asian agents with their loyal clients and database also stand to increase eyeballs to the Expedia sites being launched throughout the region.

"Expedia has such a fabulous reach in eyeballs around the world. The trick is getting through to the suppliers, 'give me your inventory and best rates and I'll give you the eyeballs that'll get you the business'. That's what it is about," Udy said.

But he said direct consumer bookings would always be the bigger share for Expedia to agent bookings in any market.

In New Zealand, 50 per cent of agents are Expedia TAAP agents, with 20 per cent in Australia. In India, 900 agents have signed up and the rate of growth is now 20-30 agents per week.

There is no fee to join TAAP. Registration is done online and once completed, a tracking number will be given to the agent to monitor his bookings and commissions.

– See Opinion page 4

TTG Asia e-Daily

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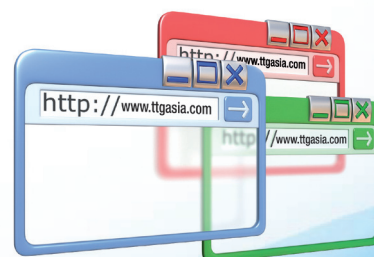
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- 2 Qantas slashes capacity and jobs
- 3 Expedia incentivises agents to book
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- 5 High arrivals have mixed effect on Singapore attractions
- 6 Pan Pacific to launch flagship PARKROYAL in Singapore
- 7 Apple Vacations and Conventions competes for Singapore outbound
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Asia World's good buys

Thai-based operator partners Transviet, with plans to enter more markets in the region

By **Sirima Eamtako**

BANGKOK Asia World is pressing ahead with plans to become a major regional player.

It has forged a 50:50 joint venture with Ho Chi Minh City-based Transviet, and registered Asia World Vietnam this month. It is also in the process of finalising Cambodia and entering Malaysia, Hong Kong, Singapore, China and Japan.

Asia World's managing director, Stephen McEvoy, said the Vietnam outfit was slated to begin operations on May 1, and would handle some 8,000 passengers in the first 12 months. Meanwhile, setup for Asia World Cambodia begins within the next few months. For other destinations, McEvoy said: "We are in negotiations to buy into existing companies in Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, China and Japan."

Asia World, which has been operating in Thailand for more than 15 years, kicked off its expansion last year by opening in



McEvoy: regional expansion

Indonesia in August and Sri Lanka in October. It first raised its regional profile through the forming of regional agency alliance Asian Connections (AC) in April 2009.

McEvoy, who was against the need to have equity in partners when forming AC, admitted the way to ensure business growth was to buy into existing companies, which explained the diminishing presence of the alliance.

He said he wanted to change the AC's structure and run its business through Asia World management. "We are still friends with AC's founding members in Singapore, Hong Kong and Malaysia, but we are now more like referrals in terms of business."

To secure business to support the regional expansion, the DMC

is also switching into aggressive mode to win more accounts.

It formed a 50:50 joint venture with Russian tour operator Coral Travel and established Coral Thailand in October last year, starting with offices in Phuket and Pattaya. The third office in Bangkok opened this month.

Coral Thailand handled some 25,000 Russian tourists last year. The number is expected to grow to 78,000 this year, which will make Coral Thailand the second largest tour operator handling Russian tourists in Thailand after Pegas Touristik, McEvoy said.

Asia World has also signed contracts to handle passengers for Germany's Panameo, France's Caravelle and UK's Hays Travel starting from this year. On a yearly basis, Panameo is expected to supply 20 groups, Caravelle will send some 6,000 passengers and Hays Travel will provide about 5,000 passengers.

McEvoy said other new accounts confirmed to use Asia

World's service included Finland's Aurinkomatkat, Ireland's Twohigs and Denmark's Villetkontoret. "We are close to signing a major account from Germany and hope to land deals with an Eastern European tour operator and a large European cruise liner," he added.

The company expects to handle 170,000 passengers to Thailand this year, up from 100,000 last year, with Coral Thailand and existing and new accounts from UK, North America, Europe, Scandinavia and Australia.

It is planning to handle 30,000 passengers to Indonesia, up from about 20,000 last year, while its Sri Lanka operation, which did not perform well last year, is expected to handle some 6,000 passengers this year, said McEvoy.

The company launched AW Destination Management, its DMC arm, in October last year, and plans to launch three new brands, AW Beds, AW Flights and AW Foundation, in May.

Numbers that matter

10 Customers' perception of airline used swings negatively by 10 per cent on average when they have to queue longer than 30 minutes to check-in, according to airline industry report Navigating the Airport of Tomorrow, based on a global traveller study conducted by JD Power on behalf of Amadeus.

21 Accor will open 21 hotels in India between now and end-2012. Accor has commitments for 62 hotels in India, and remains on track to achieve its previously announced ambitions of 90 hotels there by 2015.

34 Collectively, Singapore's attractions saw more than 34 million visitors last year, out of which 50.2 per cent were locals and 49.8 per cent were tourists. This represented a 56.3 per cent increase over 2009.

140 Tourism Australia aims to double overnight tourism expenditure to A\$140 billion (US\$145 billion) by 2020, an ambitious target given that its annual growth has slowed in the last decade.

Tier Bar time off

Aw Kah Peng (centre), chief executive of Singapore Tourism Board, officiated the opening of the brand new Tier Bar at Amara Sanctuary Resorts Sentosa. With her are Albert Teo (left), CEO, Amara Holdings, and Eric Brand (right), general manager & director of operations, Amara Hotels & Resorts.

The Singapore-based Amara group is expanding overseas, with the Amara Bangkok in Thailand due to open next year, and the Amara Signature Shanghai in China scheduled to launch in 2013.

Singapore hotels to celebrate milestone

SINGAPORE Singapore hotels will pop the champagne on June 9 to mark the 50th anniversary of the Singapore Hotel Association (SHA), a milestone that comes as the industry sees record-level occupancies and earnings.

Revenue of gazetted hotels rose nearly 22 per cent to S\$1.9 billion (US\$1.5 billion) in 2010, with all hotel tiers posting growth in AOR, ARR and RevPAR.

Some 700 guests from the industry are expected at a gala dinner at the Shangri-La Hotel Singapore on June 9, with Singapore's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence, Teo Chee Hean, gracing the event as guest-of-honour.

A commemorative book, *The heritage of hospitality – A history*

of the Singapore hotel industry, will also be launched during the dinner.

As well, *TTG Asia* is producing the *Special Edition, 50 years of the Singapore hotel industry*, in its June 10 issue, a purposeful and interesting guide aimed at the travel trade in the region on how Singapore hotels have evolved and the future of the industry amid changing customer mix and distribution.

For more information on SHA 50th Anniversary Dinner, contact SHA at secretariat@sha.org.sg or 6513-0233.

For more information on *TTG Asia's Special Edition*, contact (editorial or marketing opportunities) ttgnewsdesk@ttgasia.com.

Apple Vacations launches retail outlet in the Lion City

By **S Puvaneswary**

KUALA LUMPUR Malaysia-based outbound travel wholesaler and retailer Apple Vacations & Conventions is opening its inaugural overseas retail outlet in Singapore on May 2.

Apple Vacation Singapore, will be located at 2 Havelock Road.

Apple Vacations & Conventions' group managing director, Desmond Lee, said he saw potential in the city-state's outbound market, as Singaporean travellers and the expatriate community there were eager for new destina-

tions and quality in-depth tours.

He said Singapore's burgeoning market of high-yield travellers with big disposable incomes were on the lookout for quality travel products, which Apple Vacation Singapore would be able to provide.

Aside from selling outbound series tours to Scandinavia, Europe, Japan and the Middle East, Apple Vacation Singapore will also sell tours to emerging destinations such as Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Peru and the South Pole.

However, Lee explained that



Lee: high-yield travellers

the tour itineraries sold in Singapore will not be the same as those sold in Malaysia, as Singaporean travellers have different requirements.

"They are more hands-on and adventurous, and want more free time in their itineraries so they can venture out on their own," he said.

The new company will have a local partner, PS Cheong, who will be the executive director overseeing operations. Mimi Jee, senior manager of Apple Vacations office in Kuala Lumpur, will be promoted to general manager of Apple Vacation Singapore and will assist Cheong.

The Singapore outlet is Apple Vacations' second foray overseas. In 2009, the group opened a B2B wholesale outlet in Jakarta, Kanan Holiday, which only sells wholesale outbound tours to Japan. Last year, Kanan Holiday, a

wholly-owned subsidiary of Apple Vacations & Conventions, sent a total of 2,000 passengers from Jakarta to Japan.

Aside from its wholesale and retail business, the company also owns and operates two boutique hotels in Kuala Lumpur, with three more boutique hotels slated to open in the Malaysian capital's Golden Triangle next year.

Apple Vacations & Conventions, started in 1996 with two directors, Lee and YH Koh, had a sales turnover of RM150 million (US\$49.5 million) last year.

Indonesia in Aussie radar

TA intensifies campaign to lure more travellers from neighbour

By Mimi Hudoyo

SYDNEY Tourism Australia (TA) will be re-investing more resources on Indonesia to regain its share of the market which topped during the 80s and 90s.

TA managing director Andrew McEvoy said: "The Indonesia market is growing again. The market was growing in the 80s and 90s, then it stopped, and it looks like it is back where it used to be."

He added: "It is good for us and we will be doing a lot more, spending more money and time in Indonesia, working with the travel distribution system there and telling the Australian stories to the consumer."

Indonesia ranked number 12 in arrivals to Australia last year with 124,200, a 14 per cent increase over 2009. It was the second biggest growing market after South Korea, up 18 per cent.

Indonesia is Australia's 13th largest market in terms of spending, with A\$608 million (US\$640 million) last year. McEvoy said Australia expected Indonesia to contribute revenue of between A\$1.4 billion and A\$1.7 billion

2010's big haul

14

Percentage increase of Indonesian arrivals to Australia over 2009

by 2020. TA general manager South/South-east Asia & Gulf Countries, Maggie White, said: "We will have a big budget for Indonesia in the next fiscal year (July 2011 to June 2012). We are not able to reveal the number yet, as it is still being approved, but it will be much bigger than the current one."

The plan is to have more B2B and B2C events, as well as maximise online media to increase awareness among travellers.

White said that TA would be working with tour operators in Indonesia to organise a B2B lei-

sure roadshow in Jakarta and Surabaya later this month, followed by a B2B event in Jakarta in May. The other programmes include increasing awareness and cultivating the market by partnering with agents to reach key segments. TA will also work with partner airlines. State tourism offices such as Queensland are also moving to tap the market.

However, Bayu Buana Travel Services president director Pranowo Gumulia said that "the challenge for now is the price".

Chan Brothers Indonesia general manager Bobby Hendry agreed: "With the Australian dollar being so high now, package prices are competing with that of Europe. Europe has the advantage of a number of countries in one package as opposed to Australia (which is a single package)."

But White said "it is about value for money".

TA manager Indonesia and Vietnam Kelvin Yin added that while visas were difficult to get five years ago, "visas to Australia are now much easier to obtain than to the Schengen states".



Proud moment for PATA Singapore

The curtains were raised once more last Monday for PATA 60th Anniversary and Annual Conference. Just like old times, honours were conferred by PATA during the opening ceremony.

It was a proud moment for the PATA Singapore Chapter, which won the Award of Excellence. Receiving the award was the chapter's chairman Darren Ng. The UK chapter won the Spirit of PATA award.

The highest individual award, PATA Life Membership, was presented to Brian Deeson, who has held many important roles with PATA, including as interim CEO and chairman.

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Ask the Expert



New on our panel!

Ofelia Blanco is director of revenue management for Pudong Shangri-La, Shanghai. She shares her insights on pricing, revenue management and marketing based on nearly six years of experience.

Q What can a hotel or travel agent do to avoid price wars?

Q How do I deal with procurement managers who expect freebies that will cost me?

Log on to view answers and to post your own question

Hot Deals & Ideas

Travel agents enjoy a free night's stay at The Langham, Xintiandi, Shanghai, while Hotel Borobudur Jakarta is offering trade rates for its newly-renovated rooms.

Hot Moves

Qatar Airways appoints Marwan Koleilat to the new position of chief commercial officer, and Travelocity and Sabre Airline Solutions undergo a reshuffling of management.



Agents' hypermarts

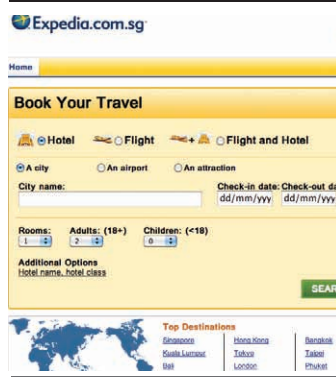
WELL, well, guess who is paying Asian travel agents a 10 per cent commission today?

Expedia, which is expanding rapidly in Asia and is paying agents a commission for using its site to book (*TTG Asia e-Daily*, April 6, and page 1 this issue) once again shows that Internet-based travel companies have broader thinking. They are non-inclusive and, for them, there are no boundaries or rigid demarcations. For instance, why limit oneself to being just a B:C, when one could get to "C" by including and rewarding "B"?

Traditional agents in Asia should respond by freeing themselves from the shackles of old thinking, where everything was so neat and vertical. Nowadays, they can get their supply from not just hotels directly, but the GDSs (which are all trying to boost their non-air supply; see our guide this issue), from on-line B:B players and, yes, from consumer websites such as Expedia, Agoda, ZUJI, etc.

These players all compete based on who has the best rate, availability, range of products, geographical spread of products and creative promotions.

That can only spell one thing for agents: A whole new world of inventory at their fingertips, enabling them to in turn focus on their client, who at the same time is anxious for agents to understand that he is an individual and needs advice and pointers specific to his needs.



It is as if suddenly travel hypermarts had opened in the region for agents. Gullivers Travel Associates, Kuoni Connect and now Expedia are all expanding their reach in Asia.

All this has new implications for agents. For instance, barriers to entry for a travel agent have in fact become lower, as virtually anyone can be an agent, given the

booking engine choices available today. Even without Expedia's Travel Agent Affiliate Programme, any agent or consumer could use Expedia's global inventory of more than 130,000 hotels and over 300 airlines to package a deal for an individual traveller. Existing agents, therefore, will

That can only spell only one thing for agents: A whole new world of inventory at their fingertips, enabling them to in turn focus on their client...

have more new players competing for the traveller. In the end, the winner of the game will be the agent who eschews old structures and systems, who understands how to use new channels and tools available, in order to achieve new ideals of being an agent of the consumer – not the Expedias, GTAs, airlines or hotels of this world.

Most commented on www.ttgasia.com

Samui's supply and demand woes

THE DEBATE on what Koh Samui lacks lives on, with C9 Hotelworks managing director Bill Barnett writing in to address a comment by Emmanuel Marion, Accor's vice president of finance and administration, in response to February 10's "Koh Samui airlift hits hotel performance".

Research by C9 Hotelworks found that supply on the island was outstripping a demand hamstrung by limited airlift. Marion disagreed with the need for more flights, saying there should be a cap on the number of tourists visiting Koh Samui.

Replied Barnett: "Please note our comments on Samui's tourism growth are based on market

research and not opinion.

While the island's airlift is capped at 36 flights per day, a four-year build-up of new hotel snow has 14,401 rooms, with a seven per cent increase coming in 2011.

"The key issue is a disconnect between the private and public sector allowing growth, but no corresponding development controls or adequate infrastructure," said Barnett.

Intra-Philippines flights please

KUALA Lumpur's Hassari Sany Hassim was happy to read from our March 30 story "AirAsia Philippines flights to begin soon" that the low-cost carrier would be boosting international connections for Clark, where Air-

sia Incorporated is based.

However, he said domestic destinations such as Cebu and Davao, among others, would also benefit from more connections.

Firefly should base staff in Singapore

IN the article "Firefly takes over MAS' Johor flights to East Malaysia" on March 28, it was published that Malaysia Airlines' (MAS) will hand over to its low-cost subsidiary domestic routes from Johor Bahru to the two East Malaysian state capitals, Kuching and Kota Kinabalu.

"Firefly should have their own office in Singapore," said Singapore-based reader Yew, adding that this would facilitate access to Firefly staff instead of relying on an intermediary.

Sound bites

"It's the easiest thing I ever sold..."

Stuart Udy, manager, Expedia Travel Agent Distribution APAC, on getting agents to sign up for Expedia's Travel Agent Affiliate Programme (see article on page 1)



"I'm seeing a convergence, where the Expedias of

this world are realising it's not just about having technology, but legacy travel agency expertise, and where the legacies recognise it's not just about having the expertise, but accepting that the old structure is dying."

Hans Lerch, CEO and vice chairman, Hotelplan Holding Switzerland, commenting on the future of distribution in an interview with *TTG Asia* earlier this week during PATA 60th Anniversary and Annual Conference in Beijing

Tell us about the latest XML specs

AT the very-first ASEAN eTravel Mart, we had reported on March 25 in "ASEAN ramps up on technology" that Bangkok-based Travel Technology Association (TTA) was keen to expand its role in the region, having already trained 6,000 SMEs in the Thai travel industry. The association had also devised electronic standards for the region.

Jakarta-based reader Yusuf IJsseldijk said: "TTA should share with and educate the concerned industry about the latest XML specifications as set by the OpenTravel Alliance (OTA), the now universal and globally-accepted coding for the (online) travel industry."



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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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BEST WESTERN, THE BRAND THAT CARES

By Glenn de Souza
Vice President International Operations - Asia & Middle East

"When customers stay at any hotel, that hotel's cleanliness, comfort, convenience and service are always among the most influential factors which impact on guest satisfaction and their intent to recommend the property to others. Up until several years ago there wasn't any one brand customers would rank as the number one cleanest hotel group. That's where Best Western saw an opportunity to move forward" said Glenn de Souza, Best Western International's vice president international operations - Asia & Middle East.

In 2007, Best Western launched 'I Care', a training and education program aimed at creating a culture of caring and superior service at the chain's more than 4,000 locations worldwide. Since then, several training modules have been introduced to enhance service excellence in various areas of hotel operation.

Frontline staff are key to success in the 'I Care' program, as it is they who are in direct contact with guests. It is they who act as the brand's ambassador, creating the first and last impressions on customers. 'I Care' helps to empower hotel staff and prepare them to meet and exceed each guest's unique needs while providing personal, friendly service consistent with Best Western's global brand standards.

'I Care 1' - the first phase of the program - proved successful worldwide, and the second phase was launched in North America in 2010. Asia is gearing up for the launch of 'I Care 2' this year.

'I Care 2' provides hotel staff with more intensive training, designed to help them understand and eliminate common-but-high-impact problems which can occur during a guest's stay, deep cleaning and preventative maintenance of the hotel itself, and allowing guests to choose the amount of service they want. Staff are taught problem-solving skills and are trained to be proactive, taking the initiative when needed.

Be sure to read next month, for more details on Best Western's 'I Care' program with the ultimate aim of giving guests more than they expect.



Retailfront

TTG Asia reassesses Pricebreaker (HarbourFront Centre in Singapore)



PRESENCE The agency's storefront is hardly unnoticeable. It hits you even as you are going up the escalator from the floor below. The stark, red walls adorning the interior and exterior are a bit intimidating, but do help distinguish the agency from others in the vicinity.

Like a giant magnet, it pulls you in. There are pamphlets and travel brochures everywhere - the walls, on the tables and in rotating stands - as well as an LCD television with a travel video on repeat.

APPEARANCE The three travel consultants are friendly and approachable, attending to customers with minimum fuss. They are smartly dressed in red

uniforms, which goes well with the red storefront.

The entire store is like a giant portfolio and prominently displays everything the agency has to offer, with a clear thoroughfare for interested parties to saunter through.

EASE While the store is located right smack in front of the escalator as you head up from the second floor, it is not easy to

find because of the confusing layout of Harbourfront Centre.

This mall has a myriad of passageways and separate pockets of stores, making it seem more like a catacomb rather than a shopping centre.

Harbourfront Centre is well-connected, though, with convenient access to public transport like the MRT and bus.

SUGGESTIONS Even though

the store is able to strongly emphasise brand identity through the use of visuals, which lends an air of professionalism to the place, it tends to be slightly too intimidating for some.

With so much excess space, it would be ideal if there was a sit-down rest area with various collaterals to appeal to any customer in need of respite. It may also win the agency more walk-ins. - **Brian Higgs**



Brian Higgs

COLUMNIST Brad Gurrie

Sharpening tactical tools

The travel industry is now blessed, or some may say cursed, with hundreds of options to distribute travel products: OTA, SEO, SEM, EDM, among others.

Each of these channels hold a very important place in the distribution pyramid. Travel suppliers need to have a variety of tools in their arsenal to handle the industry's volatile demand patterns.

Employing tactical marketing - the art of being able to get those who were never planning on utilising your service without displacing existing business - is a way for travel suppliers to reverse market trends and maintain integrity. Here are the top five tips to execute a tactical marketing campaign.

Right forum Choosing the right forum to distribute your tactical offer is critical. Creating an immediate impact means us-



"Choosing the right forum to distribute your tactical offer is critical."

ing "push media", as opposed to "pull media", which is search-based. When it comes to speed-to-market and cost, email can be a viable solution if it is a closed

user group, as it allows positioning to a select audience.

Keeping tabs on the competition Before you craft the killer deal, conduct extensive market research so your competitor does not get all the uplift in bookings. Knowing what the competition is up to requires Internet research, making phone calls and site visits.

Crafting the killer offer You need a "wow" deal. Consumers need to see your deal and ask themselves, "Why wouldn't I do this?" as opposed to "Why would I go?" Things like a free upgrade and a bottle of wine in the room on arrival go a long way to adding to the experience.

Length of the campaign It is essential to create urgency when launching a tactical offer. If you are a CBD hotel, you can be

very aggressive in your booking window for the tactical offer, such as 48 to 72 hours, which should yield very good results. If your product is further afield and requires planning, then a seven- to 14-day booking window may be more appropriate.

Track, track, track The best part of running a tactical campaign online is you can track its success. Travelzoo has seen that using promo codes that are supported by most web booking engines are an effective way to track a campaign. Although everyone is talking the Internet, the phone still yields great returns and gives you the opportunity to up-sell, although it has its pitfalls as well.

Brad Gurrie
General manager
Australia and Singapore,
Travelzoo Australia

Is this your agency?

TTG Asia has mixed reactions about D'Tour Holiday in Kuala Lumpur



TTG I would like to check my booking for a five-day/four-night ground travel package for two to Beijing, which I won in a lucky draw. The tour starts on June 18. My name is Puvaneswary and my redemption number is B107168.

D'Tour I cannot find your

name. Did you fax the gift voucher and your particulars to our company?

TTG The person I spoke with from your company a month ago took my details verbally. She did not ask me to fax over anything.

D'Tour You must fax over the voucher and your details so we can book seats on the tour for you.

TTG According to my voucher, the city tour component is complementary, so is accommodation, four lunches and two

dinners. What areas do I need to pay for?

D'Tour You will have to pay for the tour guide fee of RM100 (US\$15) per person, agent collection fee of RM50 per person, and optional tour of RMB560 per person. You must buy this tour from the tour guide in China.

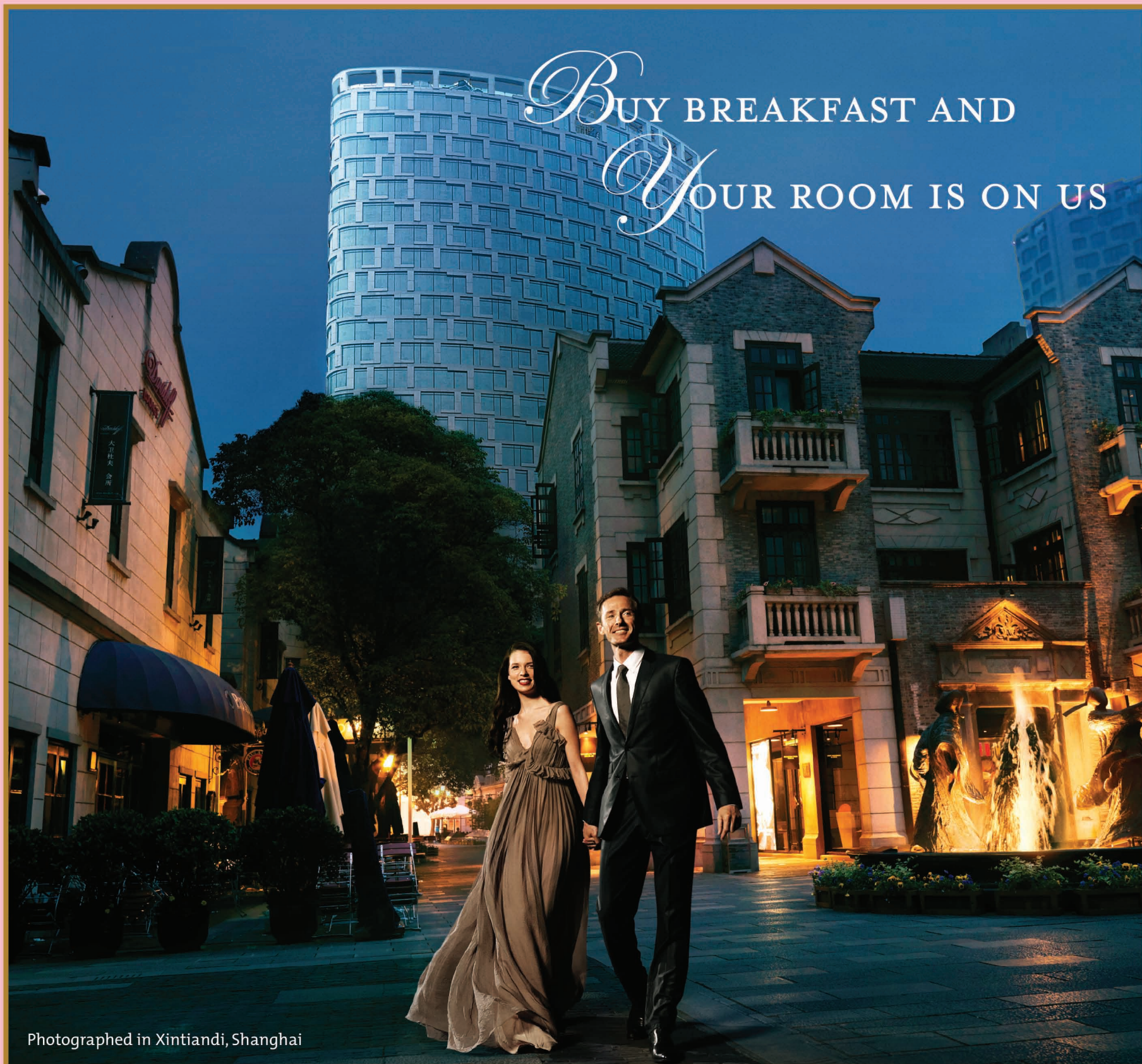
TTG If this tour is optional, why do I need to purchase it?

D'Tour You must purchase it. Everybody has to go.

VERDICT The phone conversation does not inspire confidence.

I still do not understand why it is compulsory to purchase tours that are supposed to be optional. I also checked the website. It uses the phrase "optional tour", which I feel is misleading.

Later on, this salesperson contacted me and tried to sell add-ons such as travel insurance and visa. She was generally helpful and not aggressive. She agreed it would be more convenient for me to get my visa done by a travel agency closer to home. I am looking forward to this trip. - **S Puvaneswary**



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Photographed in Xintiandi, Shanghai



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Inspired by Britain

Wedding bells are in the air, with Britain's royal wedding on April 29 inspiring the travel industry to come up with packages fit for princes and princesses. **Raini Hamdi** rounds up the mood



Love is in the air and a happy ending is in store, not just for Kate Middleton and Prince William, but also for travel professionals who are more than happy to gate-crash the party.

For them, there is no shortage of packages as hotels, resorts and cruiselines jump into bed with the times to ensure everyone can be part of Britain's Royal Wedding if they wish, or have a "royal" wedding of their own.

Thanks to Kate and William, the travel industry is inspired.

More lavish packages are appearing on the market, packed with more punch and eschewing the run-of-the-mill.

For those getting hitched, YTL Hotels' Royal Wedding, costing US\$68,000 for example, throws in a date for the couple with world-famous Jimmy Choo, who will share with them his wisdom on life and how to have the perfect wedding in style.

A pair of Jimmy Choos is not included for the bride, but there is enough to hold her enthralled: An entire property (Tanjong Jara, Malaysia) will be turned into a 17th century Malay palatial resort and the Tanjong Jara team will create a fairytale for the couple and 100 guests.

The couple can choose to wed in many interesting ways, even underwater if they wish. The resort's spa will prepare the bride and groom for the wedding, ensuring they will be glowing on the big day.

Even the honeymoon is taken care of: The couple will be one of the first guests to a enjoy complimentary two-night stay at Gaya

Island Resort, YTL's upcoming luxury rainforest resort in Borneo.

To commemorate Kate and William's big day on April 29, Royal Caribbean International (RCI) is offering couples the chance to marry or renew vows on board one of its 22 ships at a price that starts from US\$2,904.

Its Royal Wedding package offers the couple a wide range of royal wedding essentials, including a tiara for the bride, a 12-rose hand-tied bouquet, strawberries and champagne, toasting flutes and keepsake server each engraved with a crown, and of course, dinner at the captain's table. All this comes with a dedicated wedding planner, photographer, boutonniere, save-the-date announcements and a tiered wedding cake.

The couple's family and friends can contribute a dinner at a specialty restaurant, a couple's massage, or an excursion to zip line through a new honeymoon registry. "Inspired by the pending royal nuptials, the Royal Wedding package and honeymoon registry offer guests the royal treatment on their special day and honeymoon cruise," said RCI's Betsy O'Rourke, senior vice president of marketing.

For those who want to be part of Britain's royal wedding, there is also no shortage of offerings in the market catering to the fancy.

And your clients need not be



in London itself. The world, it seems, is celebrating.

The Langham, Xintiandi, Shanghai, for instance, is throwing a gala charity dinner on April 29, where a highlight will be a charity auction of items donated by British iconic brands, including a pair of Wedgwood royal wedding cups and trinket box; a Dunhill made-to-measure men's suit; a Berry Bros wine tasting course in Hong Kong for six people; a chauffeur-driven Jaguar

Checking in

For lovebirds



Soneva Kiri by Six Senses whisks off honeymooning couples to an enchanting land that is as whimsical as it is luxurious, says **Raini Hamdi**

LOCATION Thailand does not come to mind as a remote destination, but this resort's location in Koh Kood shows that the kingdom still has remote areas which are unspoiled by mass tourism.

Koh Kood, 200 miles east of Bangkok, is actually Thailand's fourth largest island, but is the least populated with fewer than

2,000 people. Getting there requires a journey from Bangkok to Trat, then an hour's boat ride to Koh Kood – the kind of access that keeps mass tourism at bay, but dashes any notion of a romantic, stylish honeymoon.

Fortunately, Soneva Kiri has made the transfer a part of the experience for newly-weds seeking to quickly forget the stress of planning the wedding. A private Cessna from Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi Airport will whisk them off their feet, landing 90 minutes later on a Six Senses Resorts & Spas' runway and, from there, a 10-minute ride to Soneva Kiri in a shiny Six Senses motorboat.

VILLA I've seen beautiful resorts with the most polished hardware. This one speaks to me of a different value in luxury, one that prices the natural state above everything else.

My tented luxury villa, one of 29, is built of eucalyptus logs, native bamboo and treated pine. I have my own buggy – battery-powered, naturally – to drive around and the carpark for it is made of thatched dried palms. Separating my villa from the next are not walls but bamboo, plants and trees.

Couples can be forgiven for thinking they are all alone on this 150-acre resort – not just because they are besotted with



each other, but because the villas are so well-hidden, so large, so well-equipped, with their own private beach and private pool, that there is hardly a need to be

anywhere else. So you hardly see a soul around.

A 150-acre land is a huge playground for Six Senses' CEO Sonu Shivdasani to effect his vi-

m's royal wedding



and Range Rover for the day; a Vertu mobile telephone; and a Boadicea the Victorious luxurious perfume gift box. All funds raised from the auction will go to the International Red Cross.

One lucky guest will also win two British Airways Club World tickets to London with five night's accommodation in a Grand Junior suite at The Langham London.

Agents with clients who wish to be in London can indulge in royal wedding packages such as the one offered by Millen-

nium & Copthorne Hotels. It comprises an overnight stay with full English Breakfast at a selection of the chain's four-star and four-star deluxe hotels in London from £155 (US\$253) per person.

Guests who book the Royal Package by April 18 will also receive a special royal wedding commemorative golf umbrella.

VisitBritain expects the media hype over the royal wedding and a string of special events, such as the Diamond Jubilee marking the Queen's 60th year on the throne

and the Olympic and Paralympic Games in 2012, to translate into four million extra visitors over the next four years.

It has even created a royal wedding tool kit, a B2B website which shows the route of the royal wedding procession and other useful information agents can use to map out packages.

Agents such as STA Travel Singapore general manager, Eileen Yee, however, do not expect the wedding itself to be a huge draw for clients to go to London, but agree it plays a part in "hyping

up" the destination.

"We're excited to work closer with VisitBritain, as we agents ride on media hype, which puts destinations in the mind of clients," Yee said.

Asian agents are already seeing the effect of a weaker pound translating into more UK-headed passengers and longer stays. "We're seeing people staying five nights in London, from three nights previously," said Yee.

Diners World Travel Singapore's director/GM Robert Koh said Britain always had high ap-

peal and anticipated more flights would be required because of the various special events.

With a marketing budget of £100 million from now to 2014, comprising 50:50 public and private sector collaboration, VisitBritain has formalised its biggest-ever marketing campaign, Britain You're Invited. It has tied up partners, including carriers such as British Airways, and is upping the level of support it gives to travel agents to ensure they take advantage of "a period of unprecedented opportunity to sell Britain" – in the words of VisitBritain's regional director Asia-Pacific, Middle East and Africa, Garry White.

White said in his 20 years as a destination marketer, this was the first time there was "political will" backing UK inbound tourism. The £50 million budget from government, to be spent solely on marketing, was also a first; usually, VisitBritain would get £35 million for both operation and marketing, he said.

On Britain You're Invited, White said: "The premise is simple – an invitation to the world to visit Britain at all levels, ie, businesses invite people to visit Britain, celebrities invite the world to visit Britain, and British people inviting visitors to come and enjoy Britain."

Some two billion people worldwide are expected to watch Prince William marry his fiancée Kate Middleton at Westminster Abbey on April 29, according to a government statement.

Just the kind of hype British tourism and the weddings/honeymoons market needs.



Name Soneva Kiri by Six Senses
No. of villas 29
Rates From US\$2,400 (accommodation, full board, roundtrip Cessna Caravan transfer for two guests, inclusive of taxes, service charge)
Contact details
Tel: (66-0) 3961-9800
Fax: (66-0) 3961-9808
Website: www.sonevaresorts.com

being screened on a cool, moonlit night. Or head for the Ice Cream Parlour and Chocolate Room from 11am till 11pm for free ice-cream of 60 different flavours and every chocolate treat imaginable. Hey, Willy Wonka lives here!

Soneva Kiri is, in design and concept, a resort that tries to eke out the child-like wonder in us, devilishly daring us to don the humour cap, to not get critical, but to just *be* – be oneself, be in the present, be at one with oneself. A good place indeed to start a marriage.

Above all, it is a joyride back to nature. I had an *Alice in Wonderland* moment as my buggy bounced along the paved road through the resort, with landscaping as the only enhancement by man allowed.

This tames a wild forest into a gorgeous spectacle of a garden resort filled with tropical palms, ferns, banana trees, casuarina trees, bamboo trees, mango trees, heliconias – how Alice's wonderland might look like in Southeast Asia.

F&B Guests who are on full board will enjoy meal experiences at restaurants such as Benz's, built on stilts over a mangrove homeland, or The View, which has spectacular views of the sea. Those who are not on full board, like me, may question the value equation of the F&B prices.

FACILITIES Extremely generous and wonderful. Aside from

the cinema, ice cream and chocolate rooms, there is a Six Senses Spa, an awesome gym, meeting spaces that can satisfy any group's needs, a beach which defines the meaning of "idyllic", and one of the most well-stocked resort libraries I've ever browsed. I'm sure there are other facilities, but these were the ones I discovered during my stay at the resort and can therefore vouch for.

SERVICE My "Friday" Uwe and the local service staff at the bar and dining room were the only people I had any interaction to speak of at the resort, and they showcased the warmth and charm one associates with Thai hospitality.

VERDICT A secluded location on Asia's doorstep for newlyweds or those renewing vows who want a touch of the extraordinary in their honeymoons.

sion of a romantic Robinson Crusoe-like sense of discovery and intelligent luxury, and he does that in Soneva Kiri with more playfulness than I remem-

ber seeing at Soneva Fushi in the Maldives.

Couples, for instance, can drive their buggy to an outdoor cinema and watch a classic movie

Non-air coming up roses

Market leaders show why the sector is picking up and what to expect. Compiled by **Ollie Quinquini**

	Travelport	Abacus	Amadeus
When did your company start offering non-air products in its system?	Travelport launched Galileo RoomMaster in 1996, which was soon followed by Galileo CarMaster. Travelport Leisure, an upgrade of the popular Galileo Leisure, was introduced last year.	Abacus first launched non-air products in 1993, and now has a whole range of non-air products that support the traditional core of flight bookings.	Amadeus first offered non-air products in 1992, with the launch of Amadeus Cars and Amadeus Hotels.
How many non-air categories/products do you offer?	The company has three non-air products. Travelport Leisure is a free one-stop leisure booking portal. Galileo CarMaster provides access to inventories of most car rental companies worldwide. Galileo RoomMaster provides direct access to the internal reservation systems of over 400 hotels and 87,000 properties worldwide.	Abacus offers a wide range of non-air products, from hotels, car rental, cruise and insurance, to rail and airport transfers.	In addition to the 713 airlines available through the Amadeus distribution, it also offers over 36,000 car rental locations, 88,000 hotels, 100 rail providers, 200 tour providers, 80 travel insurers, and over 50 cruise or ferry lines.
What portion of revenue and of business comes from bookings of non-air products?	Non-air is a fast-growing sector for Travelport. In 2010, the company generated 12.1 per cent growth over 2009 in hotel bookings through Galileo and Worldspan.	Non-air forms a material and highly profitable part of Abacus' revenue. It has experienced an average of 40 per cent year-on-year growth in its non-air category so far. Abacus expects continued growth for non-air products, as agencies look to grow their revenue and margins throughout 2011.	For fiscal year 2010, Amadeus recorded 59.2 million euros (US\$84.6 million) for all non-air bookings, which accounted for 13.4 per cent of the total travel agency bookings (both air and non-air) for the year. Total bookings (both air and non-air) for 2010 were 441.6 million euros.
What is your target for the non-air sector in terms of number of products, number of bookings and share of revenue?	Travelport is focusing more on the hospital-ity sector this year. The company is also looking at ways to help hotel suppliers sell to the right customers and maximise their average room rate and sales.	The company expects sustained growth of the same or higher than the growth rate of 40 per cent current.	Amadeus will continue to maximise existing content and use their technology to make this work for customers. It will also focus on pursuing wider distribution channels for its rail customers.
What new products in this segment have been launched recently/will be launched soon?	The company is in the process of launching a number of hospitality product improvements and concepts, including solutions that will allow travel agents to shop and book content from an array of sources.	Abacus recently launched ground transportation content for airport transfers, a fast-tracked meet-and-assist service, and flexible chauffeur-driven services.	In 2010: Amadeus Cars, a new booking tool integrated into the Amadeus Selling Platform for travel agents; LinkHotel, a new distribution and marketing service aimed at small- and medium-sized hotels; Rail Europe Smart Tab on the Amadeus selling platform in India and Japan; and Amadeus Hotel Platform.
Why should travel agents book non-air products through the GDS?	Access to a global inventory of 95,000 hotel properties, as well as automated integration into the PNR (Passenger Name Record) and mid- and back-office solutions. This makes bookings fast and efficient.	It takes only two minutes to complete a booking on the Abacus system, and confirmation is almost always instant. This saves time and productivity on top of additional revenue that agents get.	GDS automates many of the cumbersome processes involved in booking and managing a travel itinerary. It offers access to unrivalled air and non-air content and choices, as well as an efficient, cost-effective, and reliable means of distribution between airlines and travel agents to travellers.
How many airlines are offering their ancillary services through your system?	Travelport recently announced an agreement with British Airways for use of Options Integrator. It is also working with other airlines to implement configured solutions. United Airlines, for example, is working on providing Economy Plus seating with Travelport subscribers.	Asian network carriers are more cautious about moving full-steam ahead with ancillary services compared to the airlines in Europe and North America. Abacus travel agents are able to access ancillary services offered by Malaysia Airlines and AirAsia.	France's Corsairfly is using Amadeus technology to offer ancillary services. Amadeus also implemented an Electronic Miscellaneous Document Server for five carriers in 2010, with 25 more carriers in the pipeline for 2011.
Why should travel agents book airline ancillary services through the GDS?	Travelport offers agents a compelling source of ancillary service content from carriers worldwide. These can be quickly and efficiently booked from within the agent workflow, enabling them to provide complete service to their customers.	Agents can look forward to being able to handle passengers' requests comprehensively and completely. The alternative would be a cumbersome and unnecessary multi-step process of flight booking by the GDS and a separate connection for ancillary services.	Ancillary services will not only benefit airlines, but also travel agencies and travellers. GDS continues to be unmatched as the most efficient, cost-effective, reliable and proven means of distribution between airlines and travel agents to travellers.

Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka



New dawn in tourism

Travellers are flocking to Sri Lanka as it emerges from 30-year strife. By **Gracia Chiang**

Arrivals Sri Lanka is proving that it is more than just a drop in the Indian Ocean. Following the end of a 30-year civil war in 2009, it had a 46 per cent spike in arrivals in 2010 over 2009 with 654,476 visitors, the highest in a decade.

Based on official data, Sri Lanka's top five markets were India, the UK, Germany, the Maldives and Australia. Close behind was France. As a region, Europe delivered the most travellers, with Denmark, Finland and Norway showing the biggest growth.

Total tourism receipt figures were unavailable as of press time, but the Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau said it was aiming to increase yield of currently US\$80 per pax a day to US\$130 by 2016. Its goal is also for 2.5 million tourists by 2016, an attainable feat given current sentiment, as described by one agent: "Two years ago, there were hardly any enquiries (at trade-shows). We would just sit and wait. This year, we saw a 100 per cent increase in enquiries at ITB and WTM."

NTO With 2011 being Visit Sri Lanka Year, a special

campaign titled Refreshingly Sri Lanka has been launched. Promotions focus on a different theme each month, highlighting, for example, the country's beach, wellness and religious products. Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau acting managing director Malraj Kiriella said the idea was to "showcase to the world that we are back", banking on Sri Lanka's diversity to gain attention as a refreshing choice.

However, he said there would not be a big advertising campaign, with word mainly going out in media as tourists were already flocking to the country but finding a lack of rooms. Kiriella said the priority was to increase accommodation capacity throughout Sri Lanka and equip locals with skills to cope with the influx in areas that had been neglected during the war.

Hotels According to the NTO, Sri Lanka's biggest hotel chains are investing about US\$5 billion to up room inventory by 45 per cent over the next few years through a series of expansions, refurbishments and new developments (see page 12). Kiriella estimates the country will need 50,000 rooms, more than triple



"In the last few years, we hardly saw any growth, but now, our priority is to grow and expand. Rooms are very, very tight at the moment, but we can't wait for them to be ready to bring tourists in."

Nishantha Wickramasinghe
Chairman
SriLankan Airlines

its current capacity, to cope with the over two million tourists it aims to attract by 2016.

As of last year, there were 14,714 rooms, a minimal increase over the previous year, where there were 14,593 rooms. Most rooms are concentrated in the south coast, followed by the city of Colombo, Greater Colombo and ancient cities like Kandy.

Properties enjoyed monthly occupancies of mostly 60s to 80s in 2010, a far cry from 2009, where most months fell into the 30-to-50 range. This was capped off by a whopping 91.1 per cent in December 2010. Occupancies in the last decade have hovered between 40 and 50 per cent.

Access Flag carrier SriLankan Airlines added new flights to Kochi and Guangzhou, with Zurich, Amsterdam and Moscow still on the horizon. It is looking to hike capacity to Frankfurt, Paris, Karachi, Bahrain, Doha and Muscat by end-2011, as well as increase seats to China – Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Hong Kong – by next year.

International carriers Singapore Airlines and Emirates have also increased flight frequency.

On the domestic front, SriLankan Airlines restarted its Air Taxi operations in December, allowing passengers to take off and land on lakes, lagoons and reservoirs. Scheduled connections to SriLankan's international flights also operate daily, while charters and scenic routes are also available. State-owned Sri Lanka Air Force relaunched its Helitours helicopter flights in 2010.

A second international airport being built in Hambantota could be ready by end-2012.

Events In keeping with its ambitions to show off a different strength each month, Sri Lanka has a number of large-scale events this year. In February, it hosted its first GP14 sailboat World Championship, as well as several matches of the ICC Cricket World Cup.

In July, the Ayurveda Expo 2011 mega-exhibition will help demonstrate the country's capabilities in healthcare and MICE. Rounding up 2011 will be a new signature event, the Colombo Shopping Festival, in December. Kiriella said major malls would be involved, with the country's apparel, leather goods and handicraft taking centre stage.

A fresher hospitality scene

The destination is working towards better accommodations to meet the demand, reports **Gracia Chiang**

1 How big a problem is Sri Lanka's room crunch? With tourists returning in droves, the industry remains concerned over the lack of rooms. While Sri Lanka saw a jump of almost 50 per cent in arrivals last year over 2009, room supply grew by less than one per cent.

Asian Wings managing director Shelton De Alwis said he had 850 clients in 2010 but by March, the figure had already hit 300.

"The need of the hour is to have rooms in tourist areas and even in new locations such as the east and north," said Taj Hotels Resorts and Palaces regional director of sales for Sri Lanka & the Maldives, Amal Goonetilleke.

Mandara Resort manager Vajira Jayawickrema said the shortage might be felt even more during the summer season, between May and October, as many hotels would be upgrading.

2 What are properties doing to prepare for the influx of tourists? Most of the hotels and resorts around the country have either undergone refurbishment

"We need to get support from the locals and for them to understand the importance of tourism. We're trying to find ways to get the community to participate in tourism."

Malraj Kiriella

Acting managing director,
Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau

and/or expansion or are planning to do so over the next year.

By end-2012, hotel chain Jetwing will have new properties into its fold, in places such as Colombo, Yala, Dambulla and Trincomalee, boosting its current supply of 12 hotels. It is also launching a new logo and identity in May.

"We've not increased capacity all these years because we've been wanting to just fill rooms," said Barbeyn Ayurveda Resorts director Kamini Rodrigo. Her 75-room Ayurvedic health resort, said to be Sri Lanka's first, recently reopened, while 15 rooms will be added to another resort.

3 Are there new developments? Mega-resorts are being planned in the north, north-western and eastern parts of the country, contributing around 18,000 rooms, said Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau acting managing director Malraj Kiriella. The NTO is also looking into non-hotel accommodations, including homestays.

Mandara Resort's Jayawickrema said holiday bungalows were also good alternatives. "A lot of Europeans like budget accommodation. These could go for as cheap as half the price of a three-star hotel room," he said.

4 What are the rates like? Jetwing Travels managing director Shiromal Cooray said: "Most hotels are refurbishing, so prices have gone up." She explained that while Jetwing's properties used to run at 75 per cent occupancy at low rates, it went up to 85 per cent occupancy with high rates in 2010.

Taj Hotels Resorts and Palaces' Goonetilleke said a five-star hotel in Colombo could now fetch US\$150, a hike up from US\$50 previously. "The increase in price, however, has not reduced business," she said, adding that prices in Sri Lanka were considered as "very cheap".

According to a report by NDB Stockbrokers released in February, five-star room rates in Sri Lanka are around US\$110-US\$450 a night compared with US\$125-US\$850 in Malaysia and US\$200-US\$3,000 in Bali.

Said Cooray: "The high-end market is growing very fast. Sri Lanka had good value for money during the war, but it will eventually become a high-end destination."

5 What other challenges is the country facing? After close to 30 years of catering to the average traveller, Jetwing Hotels managing director Ruan Samarasinghe said Sri Lanka's tourism industry had to "improve quality and service standard to match the price increases".

Jetwing is pouring money into HR-related areas, including hiring foreign managers. Most of its properties have homegrown general managers.

Restaurants and shops around the country also need to get up to par, Samarasinghe added, saying many hotels up until a year ago were selling all-inclusive stays, resulting in local businesses not being tourist-savvy.

Kiriella agreed, saying: "We need to get support from the locals and for them to understand the importance of tourism. We're trying to find ways to get the community to participate in tourism." He added this included working with private schools to provide accreditation for tourism-related courses in order to develop relevant skills.

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A constant evolution

Macau is eyeing more tourists with new flights, hotels and attractions. By **Prudence Lui**

NTO The Macau Government Tourist Office (MGTO) aims to build the destination into a global tourism and leisure centre by focusing on quality tourism, events and products, cultural tourism and business tourism.

Some of MGTO's new measures include cross-departmental cooperation, expansion of the Quality and Honest Macau Tour scheme to more markets, as well as changing its current slogan, A World of Difference, The Difference Is Macau, by mid-year.

The city recorded a robust 15 per cent growth in visitor arrivals last year, at 25 million.

While the MGTO declined to give any projections for 2011, the first two months saw arrivals rise by 3.3 per cent year-on-year, to 4,240,313. Same-day visitors made up 54.5 per cent of the total, at 2,312,210. The top five inbound markets were China (2,424,835), Hong Kong (1,186,976), Taiwan (178,416), Republic of South Korea (81,459) and Japan (68,236).

Hotels As of January, the city has 62 hotels and 31 guesthouses offering 20,988 rooms. The average occupancy

rate of three- to five-star hotels in 2010 was 84.5 per cent, an 8.4 per cent increase over 2009. The average room rate also rose 7.7 per cent, to US\$138.9.

In 2011, Galaxy Resort's 2,200 new rooms – Banyan Tree, Hotel Okura and Galaxy Hotel – will open starting May 15, followed by Cotai Strip's parcel 5 and 6 later in the year.

According to Sheraton Macao Hotel managing director Josef Dolp, the area will be home to the Sheraton Macau with 4,000 rooms and the St. Regis Macau with 460 rooms.

"We feel that parcel 5 and 6 will be ideal for families, as well as a great destination for business," he said.

Airlines The Macau International Airport (MIA) added four new airlines and six new routes to its fold last year. Now flying from Macau are Air China to Wuhan, Mandala Airlines to Jakarta, China Eastern Airlines to Shanghai and Jin Air to Seoul.

China-based low-cost carrier Spring Airlines is also starting daily flights between Macau and Shanghai this month.

Among the new routes are



"We anticipate that 60 per cent of our traffic will originate from China, followed by Hong Kong, and the rest from South-east Asia. MICE is definitely a vital segment, and we target small to medium events and incentives."

Francis Lui
Vice chairman
Galaxy Entertainment Group

Tuguegarao and Laoag by Cebu Pacific Air, Jinjiang by Xiamen Airlines, and Singapore, Ningbo and Hefei by Air Macau.

MIA is projecting 4.2 million passengers and 39,000 flight movements for 2011, up three and five per cent respectively, compared to 2010. The company will not extend its service contract with the Administration of Airports, which will expire on September 11.

MICE Last year, a total of 1,399 MICE events were held in Macau, an increase of 184 events, or 15 per cent, year-on-year. The average duration increased from two days in 2009 to 2.5 days in 2010, while number of attendees went up by 41 per cent, to 806,135.

Exhibitions played a key role, with 57 attracting 656,303 attendees and average duration extended from 3.1 days to 4.3 days. There were 1,342 meetings and conferences, with average duration increased from two days to 2.4 days, and participants totaling 149,832.

The inaugural Macao International Automobile Expo 2011 is set for October, and its significant size is expected to help en-

hance Macau's standing. Market leader Venetian Macao-Resort-Hotel has demonstrated a good performance, with an increase of 42 per cent in event bookings year-on-year.

Vice president of conventions and exhibitions Wolfram Diener said: "We hope to keep the momentum going into 2011. We strive to enhance our destination with even more entertainment, new leisure activities, and more reasons for our client to come back."

Products The Macao Giant Panda Pavilion at Seac Pai Van in Coloane opened last January and the long-awaited 550,000m² Galaxy Macau, which cost HK\$14.9 billion (US\$1.92 billion), is set to have its big day on May 15. Located in the Cotai entertainment area, it is the only Asian-themed integrated resort.

Vice chairman of Galaxy Entertainment Group, Francis Lui, said: "We anticipate that 60 per cent of our traffic will originate from China, followed by Hong Kong, and the rest from South-east Asia."

"MICE is definitely a vital segment, and we target small to medium events and incentives."

Not just all work and no play

Macau has been attracting more MICE with its world-class entertainment options, reports **Prudence Lui**

1 What entertainment options are available to Macau MICE visitors? The opening of Venetian Macao-Resort-Hotel in 2007 and the City of Dreams (COD) in 2009 have transformed Macau into a more diverse destination from just gaming. In the limelight is COD's *The House of Dancing Water*, which has been playing to a packed audience and has since held its 150th show.

Venetian Macao, on the other hand, has a cast of 150 performers to entertain delegates and make meetings livelier. The performances – from singing waiters, musicians, acrobats and Elvis impersonators – are regularly changed. This is in addition to Cirque du Soleil's *Zaia* at CotaiArena, which has new acts, and an 18-hole rooftop mini golf course.

2 To what extent is entertainment a key element in drawing MICE traffic to Macau? As one of the more important MICE players in town, the Venetian Macao-Resort-Hotel's MICE business grew 42 per cent in 2010 compared to 2009.

Vice president of conventions and exhibitions, Wolfram Diener, said: "Entertainment is a key driver when choosing a destination. Clearly, one of the key reasons why Macau and The Venetian have been so successful in growing our MICE business is the exciting entertainment we provide delegates".

Director, Japan, Asia, Pacific and Australia meetings at Ameri-



House of Dancing Water

can Express, Danielle Puceta, said integrated resorts were gaining popularity among MICE groups "because they offer attractive elements to both customers and organisers".

"Entertainment options are a significant factor for MICE professionals in Asia when they choose a destination. For example, customers are choosing Macau and Singapore for the multitude of new entertainment," she said.

"It is also important to consider the type of trip involved. It goes without saying that if it is an incentive trip, then high-level entertainment must play a leading part. For meetings, conventions or exhibitions, entertainment is

seen as an added benefit."

3 Has entertainment really generated more MICE in Macau? Diener said that while they could not give exact figures, "entertainment was a key reason for our success".

To highlight entertainment offers to planners last year, the resort offered delegates a choice of complimentary *Zaia* tickets or the 30-minute Streetmosphere, an in-house entertainment troupe performance, when they booked a meeting package.

Diener said it was vital that it constantly reinvents and expands its entertainment options to maintain the "wow" factor for delegates.

Entertainment options are a significant factor for MICE professionals in Asia...For example, customers are choosing Macau and Singapore for the multitude of new entertainment choices."

Danielle Puceta

Director, Japan, Asia, Pacific and Australia meetings, American Express

4 What new forms of entertainment can visitors look forward to? Those into the night-life can anticipate the opening of the two-storey Club CUBIC this month. Its 30,000m² venue at COD is the biggest in town and delivers the ultimate clubbing experience. The lower level has a stage and three bars with different themes.

The upper level features six VIP karaoke rooms for those who prefer private parties. It also has the 360-degree multimedia experience *Dragon's Treasure*, which has just launched a special celebratory fortune edition that continues to welcome visitors to COD.

There is also the soon-to-open

Galaxy Macau, which will include a hybrid, private membership club called The China Rouge, a performance theatre and a multi-function cinema theatre with nine screens to debut this year.

5 How important is entertainment to MICE? CiEvents business director Carly Lewis said: "Almost all of CiEvents' clients who are hosting meetings, conferences or incentives look for some type of entertainment to help create the 'wow' factor for their event. Activities can range from local performances to gambling, spas, city tours, dancers at gala dinners or shows like Cirque du Soleil."

Lewis said that the type of entertainment varied significantly, depending on the size and nature of the company, its culture and budget, adding that as Asian companies were focusing more on teambuilding activities, CiEvents was seeing more requests for entertainment.

Macau is proving to be the most popular destination among the company's Hong Kong-based clients.

Lewis said: "While Macau has been a MICE destination for some time, it is now more actively growing and promoting the activities it has to offer. Hotels are tailoring their packages to appeal more specifically to MICE groups through initiatives like partnering with teambuilding groups and offering tickets to popular shows."

Test drive

A new way to sail



TurboJET's Premier Jetfoil promises luxurious ocean trips between Macau and Hong Kong. **Prudence Lui** gets her sea legs on

WHY Thousands of travellers arrive and leave Macau by ferry. For high-end travellers looking for a seamless journey on the Macau-Hong Kong route, the personalised service and luxurious ride on TurboJET's Premier Jetfoil could be a good option.

To sweeten the experience, TurboJet even has lounges at the ferry terminals in Macau and Hong Kong.

Two dedicated jetfoils ply the route. Unlike ordinary jetfoils that can fit 230 on average, the Premier Jetfoil only seats 190, which translates into a more spacious and cosy environment.

WHAT Launched in 2009, two refurbished five-star vessels provide three seat classes—VIP Cabin (two cabins of four seats each), Premier Grand (40 seats) and Premier Class (142 seats). All have complimentary food and beverage service.

I travelled on the Premier Grand from Macau to Hong Kong on a Sunday night. This class entitled me to additional benefits such as free porter service within the Hong Kong-Macau ferry terminal, priority disembarkation, as well as wine.

The ticket price (HK\$370, or US\$47.50, for night sailing) reflects the level of service.

I was led to my seat and the staff promptly took care of my hand luggage. Throughout the journey, they regularly checked on the passengers. In addition to the space and tranquil ambience, the reclining leather seat also added to my comfort.



TurboJET's Premier Jetfoil

I spent more than an hour in the TurboJET Premier Lounge at the Macau Maritime Ferry Terminal prior to departure. Though small, the lounge is cosy and well-equipped with free WiFi, newspapers and complimentary snacks and drinks.

Since the lounge is on the first floor of the departure hall, it is advisable to allot 15 to 20 minutes for immigration purposes before heading to the ferry boarding gate.

HOW For convenience, TurboJET offers ticket booking via WAP, online booking and self-service ticketing.

Travellers are encouraged to plan their journey ahead and buy tickets in advance. This can be done up to 90 days prior to their travel date.

In April, one vessel will undergo maintenance, so service will be eight trips per day. From May onwards, the service will return to the normal 20 trips daily. Seat

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upgrades from standard TurboJET to Premier Jetfoil can only be done in Hong Kong, as the central ticketing service counter is not available in Macau.

VERDICT Worth the ride and arriving in style.

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