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Split in the middle on Thai visa hike

Impact on Indian travellers to kingdom debatable

By Brian Higgs and Sirima Eamtako

BANGKOK Two camps of thought have emerged over Thailand's move to raise the visa fee for Indian nationals (*TTG Asia e-Daily*, October 7).

Some Thai hoteliers and agents believe the move is just and on track with the destination's aspiration to attract high-end and less price-sensitive Indian visitors. Other Thai players and Indian agents disagree, saying MICE – a high-end segment – would be affected and the move is unjust and ill-timed, coming after a visa fee waiver from 2009 till March this year.

The new fee, effective October 1, is 2,000 rupees (US\$40) per person and comes up to 2,350 rupees including processing charges. Previously, it was 1,400 rupees.

Anshuman Mitra, director, New Delhi-based Starlite DMC, said: "The visa fee waiver over the last few years was the biggest advantage Thailand had to attract markets like India. Other governments like Singapore, Malaysia and Macau are not raising visa fees. In fact, compared to Thailand, some of them are actually paying us subsidies to bring Indian MICE into their destinations."

Mitra said concern was already pouring in from MICE clients scheduled for Thailand. "We received lots of enquiries from corporates immediately after the

announcement. The extra cost is almost equivalent to the rate for a room night in Bangkok. I sincerely hope the Thai government reconsiders its decision," Mitra said.

"The visa fee is crucial in terms of overall costs, since MICE groups tend to be quite large compared to leisure."

Pranav Bansal, director, New Delhi-based Plenary Holidays, said: "On the one hand, they (Thailand) are asking for more tourism and promoting their destination as being value for money. On the other hand, they are discouraging us by increasing fees. Once their tourism performance has improved, they decide to put pressure on our resources."

Philip Hall, Centara Hotels & Resorts Thailand group director of sales and marketing, emphasised: "All these groups operate on a strict budget and a lot of our business from India consists of dealers incentives. It's almost like cutting a day out of their programmes."

A circular sent out by the Thai embassy in India just prior to IT&CMA explained that the adjustments were made "due to the cumulative changes in foreign exchange rates, and may be adjusted periodically in the future".

No other countries, however, were subject to an increase to-date, leading some

Continued on page 2

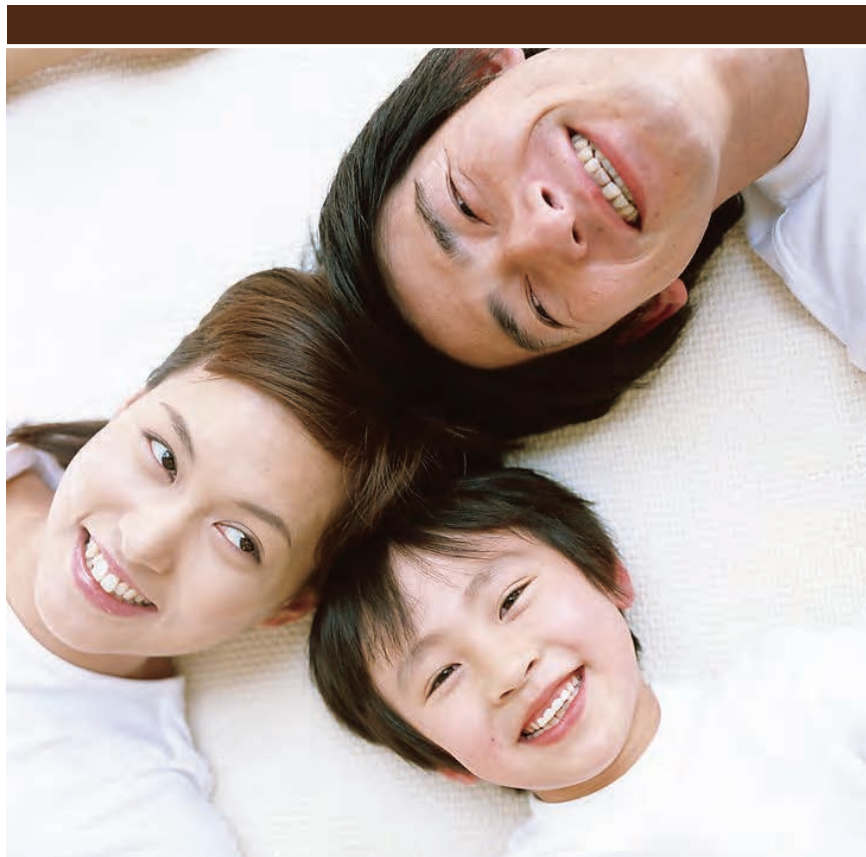


Hall: empathise



On a life's expedition

Hers is a lesson in creating USPs and circumventing life's many icebergs. **Linda Haden** talks to Sarina Bratton, owner of Orion Expedition Cruises, who staked her family fortune on the high seas – see page 6



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Expedia eyes SEA agents

TAAP to be launched in Malaysia next, then Indonesia, Thailand

By Ameer Enriquez

SINGAPORE Following its take-off in Singapore, Expedia will be launching its Travel Agents Affiliate Programme (TAAP) next in Malaysia, and in Indonesia and Thailand next year.

“We hope to launch TAAP in all South-east Asian countries where we have a live Expedia site. But in the meantime, we can confirm that we will launch very soon in Malaysia, and next year in Indonesia and Thailand,” said Charee Guico, manager Expedia, Travel Agent Distribution, South-east Asia.

TAAP is now available in Australia, New Zealand, India, Japan and Singapore. Expedia’s hotel business, however, is up and running in Thailand, Indonesia, South Korea and the Philippines, with Vietnam, Hong Kong and Taiwan being in the pipeline.

Dan Lynn, CEO, AirAsia Expedia, said Expedia was also looking into adding full-service offerings in these markets. “It’s step by step, but it’s happening much faster than we expected,” he said.

TAAP in Singapore, which



Guico: high commissions

now has 500 agents on board, already includes other services, from hotels only when it was introduced in June. “With the launch of the full service (programme in Singapore), we now offer packages on flights, and for our package business, we offer fantastic commissions,” Lynn said.

Guico said aside from the 10 per cent commission agents get on bookings of Expedia Special Rates hotels, and less than five per cent on other GDS hotels, they will also get six per cent for car rentals, 10 per cent for destination services/tours, and 1.5 per cent for flights booked as a package with another component.

Expedia also has added incentive tier schemes for agents, from Standard to Platinum, depending on booking volume. “As you go up the tier, your commission goes up,” Guico said. “We have some agents who were already

on the Silver tier just on their first month. In fact, since we launched (TAAP) in June (in Singapore), we already have some Platinum members.”

AirAsia Expedia, the joint venture company between on-line travel company Expedia and leading low-cost carrier AirAsia, operates Expedia’s businesses in South-east Asia, East Asia, India and Japan, as well as AirAsia Go.

“The AirAsia-Expedia partnership is really about bringing together the best of both worlds,” Lynn said, citing Expedia’s easy-to-use website with 140,000 hotels and more than 400 airlines and AirAsia’s wide regional reach and low rates as being a win-win situation for the customer.

“If you want to give customers the best deals, you have to be able to take half our hotel inventory with their very lowest rate and put that together and the best way of doing that is by doing a joint-venture partnership,” he added.

“Obviously, every market has its own set of factors that you have to get right. Every consumer is unique,” Lynn said.

Continued from page 1

New fee just, reasonable: Thais

industry members to speculate if the move was a tit-for-tat, as India slaps a hefty 3,300 baht (US\$97) visa fee (including agent service fee) for Thais.

Indeed, the high visa fee for Thai travellers to India is a reason why some Thai players, including Marwin Tours executive director Yupha Moonsarn, believe the new visa fee for Indians to Thailand is reasonable and just.

Universal Travel Link and Services managing director, Suwadee Pachariyangkun, said an increase of 600 rupees would not make Thailand an expensive destination. “The overall tourism price in Thailand remains inexpensive when compared to the high level of services offered.” She added Thailand also needed adequate funds to maintain its tourism resources and educate locals on sustainable tourism.

Onyx Hospitality Group sales senior vice president Suravut Thongtham said the waiver of visa fee had done its job in mitigating the negative impact of Thailand’s political woes during 2008 to 2010. Now, the slight increase was reasonable and should be expected by the trade.

“While the reintroduction

of the visa fee may initially impact the cheaper Indian FIT and group series travellers, this will only be temporary at best, and possibly mitigated by a growing number of middle-class Indian travellers,” said Suravut.

He said Onyx had forecasted a slowing of Indian growth next year to 10-12 per cent, from 15-20 per cent this year, but this was more due to the pressures of the global economic crisis and overall rate readjustment across Thailand’s hospitality sector.

Thailand recorded 627,670 Indian travellers in the first eight months, a 34.7 per cent increase over the same period last year.

India is among the ‘markets of hope’ for the Thai travel trade, especially as the country is registering sluggish growth or decline in the traditional European market due to the financial turmoil.

India ranks among the top three markets for Association of Thai Travel Agents members, whose top nine markets between January 1 and September 27 were all Asian markets – China, Russia, India, South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Vietnam, Hong Kong and Indonesia. All posted double or triple-digit growth.



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Business travel: amber

Corporates start to scale back but trips not totally red-lighted

By Raini Hamdi

BANGKOK Asian corporate travel has hit the amber light as companies begin to scale back on trips in view of the global economic uncertainty.

Corporate travel buyers interviewed at IT&CMA last week said while trips had not been completely red-lighted, they had definitely hit the amber light at this juncture.

The head of procurement Asia-Pacific of a Hong Kong-based financial firm said his company had, since July, placed a “freeze” on all travel except essential ones. “Although I can’t cite figures, the drop is significant,” said the manager, who spoke on the condition of anonymity due to company policy.

The last time his company froze travel except essential ones, and even enforced economy class-only on essential travel, was in 2008, he said. “It would never come to no travel at all; there is no such thing. But, because of the lack of confidence in the market, we are getting prepared for the worst,” he said.

“If it gets worse, the next step



Loong: Cutting down on spend

is to enforce economy class-only on essential travel, as we did in 2008.” The global category manager-travel global sourcing of a financial firm based in Singapore, who also requested anonymity, said: “I know for a fact that a lot of companies in the region are asking their employees to cut down on travel. Companies will be announcing their latest quarter results soon and you’ll see many are not meeting their numbers. Consequently, corporate travel will be affected. Internally, I know many have announced cuts, especially those in manufacturing, R&D, etc, which are not profit-driven sectors.”

The assistant director-administration of an auditing firm based in Singapore said: “My company is looking at controlling expenses by using technology, such as telepresence and the Cube Meeting Room, which

enables video-conferencing. We have not yet gone back to 2008, when we enforced essential trips only, but I think we will, looking at what’s happening in the world. Besides, if we put in all this technology, we do not need to travel unless it’s necessary.”

She added: “It may be a bit naive to think that the Asian market will be spared because Asia is doing better than the West. What’s happening in the world does concern us.”

Mediacorp Singapore assistant vice president-administration, Loong Chow Jin, said the broadcasting firm was cutting down on travel spend. The number of people sent for overseas training or meetings, for example, has been trimmed to 15 people, from 20 people, and fewer staff are going on overseas trips to acquire programmes.

“We started cutting back two months ago, but it has not come to the point when everyone – including the VPs (and higher-ranking staff) who travel business class for trips of more than seven hours – must travel on economy.”

Brunei trade fears RBA’s five-route suspension will hang transit traffic

By Gracia Chiang

BANGKOK Flag carrier Royal Brunei Airlines (RBA) is shaving off flights from the capital of Bandar Seri Begawan to Kuching, Ho Chi Minh City, Brisbane, Perth and Auckland for the time being, a move that members of the trade say will impact transit traffic.

Flights to Kuching service have already stopped, while flights to the other four cities will operate until end-October.

RBA controller direct sales Kelvin Goh told *TTG Asia* the performance on those routes was “just not there”, although he was not informed when flights would resume. In a statement, the company said this was part of a stabilisation plan, in order to allow it to “improve its operations, financial performance and customer service experience”.

Said Anthony Tours & Travel Agency commercial director Nordin Besar: “Although it’s just a suspension, it will affect the trust people have (in RBA) if it wants to resume those routes or start new services. We have start-

ed looking at other Asian carriers, and perhaps will use Singapore or Bangkok as a hub.”

RBA had just launched flights to Melbourne in March, while Brunei Tourism appointed a marketing representative for Australia/New Zealand earlier this year.



Zainie: Re-routing tours

Nordin did not want to comment on what kind of difficulties the airline was facing, but cited the emergence of low-cost carriers and diluted marketshare as possible reasons. AirAsia currently operates flights to the sultanate, and Cebu Pacific Air recently started serving the destination.

Megaborneo Tour Planner managing director Khirul Zainie said the changes would require some re-routing of itineraries. UK travellers, for example, flying from London into Bandar Seri Begawan en route to Kuching would now use Singapore or Malaysia as a transit to Kuching.

“We will lose out on transit traffic from Australia, but for leisure operators packaging Borneo, the pinch probably won’t be much,” he added.

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Thai visa hike: boon or boom?

Thailand's move to raise visa fees for Indian nationals has resulted in a heated debate on our website regarding the merits and flaws of the unexpected policy change.

US-based Thomas Cooleen said the visa fee hike was "a good way to prevent business".

New Delhi's Suresh Mehra agreed, warning the fee increase would definitely "affect (the) Thai tourism market, as far as Indian market is concerned". "Why they have increased, they know better, although Thai tourism is aware that India is one of their biggest markets," Mehra added.

Bangkok's Chariya was in support of the increase, arguing that "visa waivers shouldn't be a tool to promote tourist arrivals" in the first place, since they were "only a margin of the travel cost".

Chariya said the fee hike should also be applied to Chinese nationals. "Visa fees should be used as automatic screening for quality visitors. What does Thailand want? Quantity or quality?"

Finnair steps up Indonesia focus

Finnair's attempts to grab a share of the burgeoning Indonesia outbound market and promote air travel to Europe via its Singapore-Helsinki connection has met with positivity from some of our Indonesia-based readers.

Jakarta's Nugroho Setiatmadji said: "With Finnair entering the Indonesian market via Singapore transit point, we hope mutual air transportation between Jakarta and Helsinki will grow soon."

IT&CMA to push high-end travel

Travel agents are more eager than ever to participate in IT&CMA, following the addition of a luxury travel component from next year onwards. New Delhi's Aditya Tyagi said: "Being a luxury tour operator, this is good news. We would like to attend the show."

Thank you for the votes readers

Glamorous guests turned up in force for the TTG Travel Awards 2011 at Centara Grand in Bangkok last week to celebrate the industry's best in true Oscar fashion. And the winners are ...



The smile on Vietravel's Tran Doan The Duy says it all: Best Travel Agency Vietnam



Furama Hotels' Jason Peck flaunts Furama Riverfront's Best Mid-Range Hotel Award



Cox & Kings India picked by the TTG Asia editorial team as Most Entrepreneurial Travel Company



No, it's not Richard Gere. Travelport's Simon Nowroz picks up the Best GDS Award

Best North American Airline
United Airlines

Best European Airline
Air France KLM

Best Middle Eastern Airline
Qatar Airways

Best South Asian Airline
Kingfisher Airlines

Best South-East Asian Airline
Thai Airways International

Best North Asian Airline
Cathay Pacific Airways

Best China Airline
Air China

Best Pacific Airline
Qantas Airways

Best Regional Airline
Dragonair

Best Asian Low-Cost Carrier
AirAsia

Best Global Hotel Chain
Intercontinental Hotels Group

Best Regional Hotel Chain
Pan Pacific Hotels Group

Best Local Hotel Chain
Harbour Plaza Hotels & Resorts

Best Luxury Hotel
Raffles Hotel Singapore

Best Budget Hotel
Ibis Singapore on Bencoolen

Best Independent Hotel
Royal Plaza on Scotts

Best Boutique Hotel
The Luxe Manor

Best City Hotel - Singapore
Shangri-La Singapore

Best City Hotel - Kuala Lumpur
Hilton Kuala Lumpur

Best City Hotel - Jakarta
The Ritz-Carlton Jakarta, Pacific Place

Best City Hotel - Manila
InterContinental Manila

Best City Hotel - Bangkok
Mandarin Oriental, Bangkok

Best City Hotel - Hanoi/Ho Chi Minh City
Sofitel Legend Metropole Hanoi

Best City Hotel - Delhi
Taj Palace Hotel

Best City Hotel - Taipei
W Taipei

Best City Hotel - Tokyo
The Peninsula Tokyo

Best City Hotel - Seoul
Lotte Hotel Seoul

Best New City Hotel
Grand Park Orchard

Best Airport Hotel
Regal Airport Hotel

Best Mid-Range Hotel
Furama Riverfront, Singapore

Best Beach Resort
Amari Palm Reef Resort Samui

Best Resort Hotel (Non-Beach)
Amantaka, Luang Prabang

Best New Beach Resort Hotel
Banyan Tree Samui

Best Integrated Resort
Resorts World at Sentosa

Best Spa Operator
Banyan Tree Spas

Best Luxury Hotel Brand
Hyatt Hotels & Resorts

Best Mid-Range Hotel Brand
Best Western International

Best Budget Hotel Brand
Ibis

Best Hotel Rep Company
Worldhotels

Best Serviced Residence Operator
The Ascott group

Best Airline - Business Class
Thai Airways International

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Best Airport
Hong Kong International Airport

Best GDS
Travelport

Best Cruise Operator
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Best NTO
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Best Theme Attraction
Hong Kong Disneyland

Best Corporate Travel Agency
American Express Business Travel

Best Travel Agency - Australia
Intrepid Travel

Best Travel Agency - China
China International Travel Service

Best Travel Agency - Hong Kong
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Best Travel Agency - Japan
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Best Travel Agency - Malaysia
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Best Travel Agency - Philippines
Rajah Travel Corp

Best Travel Agency - Singapore
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Best Travel Agency - South Korea
Hanatour Service

Best Travel Agency - Taiwan
Phoenix Tours International

Best Travel Agency - Thailand
World Travel Service

Best Travel Agency - Vietnam
Vietravel

Best Online Travel Agent
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OUTSTANDING ACHIEVEMENT

Travel Personality of the Year
Shao Qiwei, chairman, China National Tourism Administration

Destination of the Year
Singapore

Most Entrepreneurial Travel Company
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Best Marketing & Development Effort
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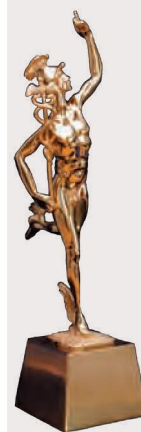
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Travel Hall of Fame



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 consecutive times for the same award title have been honoured in the Travel Hall of Fame.

Singapore Airlines and Singapore Changi Airport are the Travel Hall of Fame's pioneering honourees, 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. Joining this elite family are Hertz Asia Pacific, Star Cruises, Royal Cliff Beach Resort Pattaya, Abacus International, SilkAir and Lotte Tour

Retailfront

Dwidaya Tour's Cibubur outlet could use a revamped interior and a bit more warmth



PRESENCE Located at the Cibubur Junction Mall in the suburbs of Jakarta, the agency is next to the mall's main entrance, a café, a couple of banks and

a shop. As such, it has the advantage of attracting the mall's customers, while also being accessible to those who do not want to visit the mall.

However, compared to the colourful shops next door, the agency's signboard is not eye-catching. Fortunately, the standees outside and posters tacked onto its glass windows are adequately noticeable to passersby.

APPEARANCE The staff wear uniforms, and are acceptably presentable. There

were five sales staff when I visited in the morning. There was no other customer, but everyone seemed busy using their desktops. There were many brochures on the shelf and in boxes on top of the cabinets, but they were not neatly organised.

EASE The travel consultant was not sure when I asked him if he had packages to India. He looked up the brochure and later apologised with a smile. When I enquired about low-season programmes, he suggested several China, South Korea and

Japan options from the 2011 catalogue. He patiently answered my questions and was quite knowledgeable.

SUGGESTION The retailfront is rather basic, with some sales counters and chairs. There is also no TV in the waiting area. Frankly, I felt more comfortable waiting in the bank next door because of the nice interiors and great service. The agency staff were polite and friendly, but could certainly show more 'service from the heart'. – **Mimi Hudoyo**

Case study

Private jet tours in Taiwan



Flying Master CEO Chen Min Tang (far right) and chairman Huang Shu-hsia (third from left), and Kaohsiung Association of Travel Agents chairman Lin Shang-chih (second from right), with passengers

WHAT Flying Master Travel Service Co. signed a contract with state-run Aerospace Industrial Development Corp (AIDC) to offer private jet tours of Taiwan aboard a seven-seater Gulfstream G100. Tours will originate from Taichung in central Taiwan.

"We are the first to offer this service, and we expect it to grow quickly," said Flying Master CEO, Chen Min Tang.

"Chinese visitors can fly on regularly scheduled flights from Xiamen or other Chinese cities to Taichung. From there, we will offer aerial tours around the entire island." Trips to scenic Hualien and Taitong are also on the cards.

Prices have yet to be set as routes are still being negotiated with Taiwan's Civil Aeronautics Administration.

WHO Flying Master, founded in September 2001, is one of Taiwan's largest full-service travel agencies. To date, nearly all of Flying Master's business is Taiwan outbound, with Taiwanese travellers accounting for half of its volume and foreign labourers making home visits to South-east Asia comprising the other rest.

WHY More and more high net worth Chinese will be arriving in Taiwan, now that FIT travel has begun. For travel agents, traditional inbound tours yield slim margins due to price competition. By offering private jet tours, Flying Master will be able to enter the high-end market and build a profitable business.

TARGET Chen foresees Chinese FITs as the largest potential market, as well as wealthy Taiwanese. "Immediately after our signing with AIDC appeared in the news, our agency was flooded with phone calls," he said.

The inaugural flight was booked by a group of top executives from Taiwanese IT companies (see picture above). Other queries came from wedding planners eager to offer this new service to honeymooners. – **Glenn Smith**



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Best Western Welcomes The New Hotel in Vietnam

BEST WESTERN PREMIER Indochine Palace, Hue (Vietnam)

Best Western International is expanding its presence in Vietnam with the recently rebranded BEST WESTERN PREMIER Indochine Palace in the historic city of Hue.

A property of elegance and grandeur, designed to reflect the romance of Indochine culture and it is located in the city and just 20-minute from the international airport.

Its 222 well appointed guestrooms boast the subdued elegance of an Indochine noble house. The Palace Floors offer lounges administered by butlers and the rooms feature an extended living area perfect for entertaining. The Indochine Club Suites provide guests with added privilege with its own check-in and luxury lounge.

Facilities include a swimming pool, sundeck with cabana day rooms, the restaurants La Brasserie and Le Petit Café, a lobby lounge, spa and gymnasium, executive lounge and 15 function rooms with a capacity of 400 people banquet style.



Best Western
PREMIER

Sarina Bratton Owner, managing director Orion Expedition Cruises

Hers is a lesson in creating USPs and circumventing life's many icebergs. **Linda Haden** talks to Bratton, who staked her family fortune on the high seas

On a life's expedition

What inspired you to cruising?

A gentleman from Holland America Line approached me when I was working at Sydney's Wentworth Hotel in marketing and sales. I was particularly drawn to how cruising could generate economic benefits for isolated societies. That appealed to me from the start.

How did Orion Expedition Cruises come about?

Prior to launching Orion Expedition Cruises, I started another cruise company in 1998. It was a joint venture among Norwegian Cruise Line (NCL), an Australian investor and myself. We chartered the *Norwegian Star* into Australia. The ship operated until the end of 2000, when NCL underwent a hostile takeover.

Shortly after, I thought it was best to do something niche. The difficulty was identifying exactly what I wanted to do, as all my knowledge was tied to the mainstream cruise industry.

After visiting the Kimberley coast on a friend's yacht, I saw an opportunity to create something really special by leading cruises into the remote regions of Australia and the Antarctic. It took me two years to find the right ship, which I finally did in 2003.

What challenges did you face?

It was important for me to establish barriers to entry when establishing the company, as I was putting my family's finances on the line again, and I wanted to make sure no one could replicate what I was doing.

In the case of Kimberley, we teamed up with one of our very first investors, the Paspaley family, who owns pearl farms in this remote region of Australia. The waters in Kimberley are unsurveyed or inadequately surveyed; what that means is, ships cannot simply sail into its waters, as insurers would not allow them to do so. To operate there, one has to prove that one has in-depth knowledge of its geographic make-up.

By partnering the Paspaleys, who owned research vessels, we ended picking up their private survey work for the whole area. With this newfound knowledge, we essentially made it difficult for other lines to offer cruises in this particularly hard-to-reach part of north-west Australia.

Is there anyone else that comes close to what Orion does?

I think so, but not necessarily in every market we operate.

When people ask us how we describe ourselves, we usually say we are Abercrombie & Kent on water. It's a high-quality experience. Going on a cruise with Orion can be likened to embarking on a luxury safari – but on the high seas.

Would you say you offer passengers a 'five-star adventure'?

Generally, shore experiences are the top priority for expedition cruise operators, while the finer points of food, wine and service are often forgotten. I asked myself – why do expedition cruises have to be a three-star product?



So how do you go against the grain?

The culture of our organisation is vital in that respect. All our staff, whether onboard or onshore, are made to feel as if they are part of a family. We have a shared vision; we are very open about where we are going, what we are doing and how we are going to get there together. Everyone is treated well, and this translates into how our staff treat our guests.

The crew love our guests, and because of the small size of our ships, they are able to offer a high level of personalised service – addressing our passengers by their names for instance. We also have a high staff to passenger ratio. For example, there are 70 crew to 100 guests on board the *Orion II*.

What are Orion's core markets and what are people typically looking for in expedition cruises?

Australia is our number one market, followed by the US and Japan. The average age of our

guests is 59 years. Most have never been on a ship. The majority are looking for adventure and meaningful experiences that give them the opportunity to interact with wildlife and cultures within the destinations that we operate to. Usually, they are inspired to travel to these destinations but find it difficult to get there themselves.

Are charters an important part of your business?

The charter side of our business was hit by the global financial crisis. Nonetheless, we anticipate a recovery as the economies of

our plans into action. There is good potential to develop itineraries to the Nicobar and Andaman islands, through to Myanmar and to the west coast of Sumatra, and into Java from Singapore.

Is that what you are strongest at – spotting opportunities?

Yes, seeing things that others have overlooked. I will never forget when I was raising money for my first venture and, let me tell you, it is one of the hardest things you can ever do. You get knocked back all the time. People will say to you: "It can't be a good idea because no one else has done it." That did not faze me at all. Orion is a pioneer within the expedition cruises arena, and I am glad I seized the opportunity.

Where do you see Orion in the next two to three years?

At this point we are consolidating our two-ship operation. However, I think there is opportunity for us to expand. It takes about two years to put something new into place. I am always looking at what ships are available, what we can do, where, and how we can position new ships.

I want to strengthen the business and tap into source markets in Asia. Singapore, Hong Kong, Indonesia and China are the potential markets. However, it's also about distribution and how you can reach these markets. It is also crucial that we impart the message that Orion is more than just a cookie-cutter cruise.

How important is environmental sustainability to Orion?

It is not just environmental, although it is key. It is also about the sustainability of cultures. Due to the fact that we run small ships, we have the ability to visit remote areas where passengers can interact with primitive cultures.

When it comes to the regions that we operate in – Kimberley, New Guinea and Antarctica – you simply cannot take hundreds of thousands of people out to these destinations, as you will destroy what's there. They simply don't have the infrastructure to facilitate tourism.

So for us, it is about the cultivation of meaningful relationships – money does not mean anything to the people living out in these remote areas. Instead, we try to enhance their lives. For instance, in the Antarctica, we work with Mawson's Huts Foundation to restore explorer huts.

Australia and South-east Asia are a lot more robust. Forget about going to the traditional markets of Europe and the US – they are beset by too many political and economic problems. We are going to focus on Asia.

Having forayed into South-east Asia with the inaugural sailing of Orion II into Singapore on August 31, are you making Singapore your hub?

The decision to create cruise itineraries originating from Singapore was based purely on demand. Many of our passengers are repeats, and they ask us to take them to new destinations. But at the same time, there is still strong demand for our Kimberley and Antarctic trips. In order not to lose our passengers, we needed to bring in a second ship and open up new areas.

There is certainly a lot of opportunity for us in Singapore. It has an English-speaking environment, making it easier to put

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Asia is so happening

Region has outstripped Europe as having more high net worth individuals

Asia-Pacific is the new A-list, both as a source and destination.

An annual report compiled by Merrill Lynch Global Wealth Management and Capgemini shows the number of high net worth individuals in Asia-Pacific rose 9.7 per cent to 3.3 million last year, outstripping Europe (3.1 million) for the first time and closing ranks with North America, which has the world's largest population of wealthy people (3.4 million).

High net worth individuals have investible assets of US\$1 million or more, excluding their primary residence. Last year, the total wealth of those in Asia-Pacific was US\$10.8 trillion, compared with US\$10.2 trillion in Europe and US\$11.6 trillion in North America.

According to the Merrill Lynch report, six out of the 10 economies with the highest growth in high net worth individuals last year were in Asia-Pacific, namely, Hong Kong (up 33.3 per cent), Vietnam (up 33.1 per cent), Sin-



Courtesy of The Peninsula Hotels

Move over Rolls-Royce, let's go into the Mini Cooper: New luxury travellers shun ostentatiousness

gapore, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and India, all up by more than 20 per cent.

As a destination, Asia-Pacific is also outstripping Europe as the fastest-growing region, according to a new qualitative and quantitative research conducted by Horwath HTL and International Luxury Travel Market (ILTM).

While Europe is the current top luxury destination, picked by 41 per cent of respondents, Asia-Pacific is the fastest-growing luxury destination.

Future A-list

In Asia, the top three destinations for the next five years, as seen by luxury travel buyers surveyed, are China, India and Australia.

In South-east and East Asia, Japan, Vietnam, Myanmar and Indonesia will also see growth, while Bhutan and Sri Lanka show promise in South Asia.

Substantial changes in luxury customer demand as a result of the global financial crisis are what's behind the increasing popularity of Asia-Pacific, in particular East/South-east Asia, among luxury travellers.

The region appears to be the right fit for a new mood of A-listers who, according to the survey, want less ostentatious places, off-the-beaten-track destinations and destinations that have fascinating cultures and traditions (see sidebar, right).

At the same time, Asian destinations are seen as actively developing and promoting luxury tourism.

There are however several challenges specific to emerging destinations, especially in the area of DMCs, inbound tour operators and groundhandling, according to the report.

"Most commonly, inadequate-

Well-heeled but less spoilt – the face of the new luxe traveller

- Wants to be entertained and stimulated, not just pampered: Pampering was often top priority before the economic turnaround, now, there are new expectations for more active holidays and experiential journeys
- Demands authenticity, simplicity and environmental care: Out, ostentatiousness! In, hugging locals and immersing in cultures
- Yearns for exclusive products: More privacy, custom-tailored products and services, in line with desire for higher degree of personalisation

Source: *The future of luxury travel*, Horwath HTL/ILTM

ly trained staff, uncertainty regarding access, and safety and security issues (political instability and natural catastrophes) are cited as the major factors restricting the potential number of destinations suitable for luxury tourism," it said.



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Silver spoon

Gastronomy's hand in creating A-list



Gastronomy has played a big role in transforming plain places into A-list meccas – think Maison Lameloise in Burgundy or The River Café in the Thames, London. In Singapore, Joël Robuchon Restaurant does it for Sentosa. **Raini Hamdi** describes how

MENU A 16-course degustation menu or a la carte selections. I chose the former, substituting a foie gras dish with Le Boeuf. Immediately, a fresh menu reflecting the change is printed and presented to me.

Each course is a work of art. With looks like that, who needs to eat? Frankly, I'm thinking, if only I can just eat bread at Robuchon – a beautiful trolley is being wheeled to my table and it has 30 types of breads for me to choose from. My bread plate suddenly looks tiny, while my iris and stomach grow and grow.

But how is it that one could

feel so full – purring happily like a satisfied cat – after having just a little bread and first course (asparagus *blanc-manger*)? I realise I am living, not merely eating, and it is a delicious feeling.

AMBIENCE The ambience contributes hugely to my salubrious state-of-mind. The room is obviously luxurious yet does not intimidate; if anything, it is practically glowing with warmth and comfort – every bit the dream family dining room Robuchon visualised it to be. Professional lighting, the sparkle of Christofle cutlery and shiny glassware, the beige, black and gold hues of the interior décor, all blend together and emanate a sparkle.

SERVICE Deserves all the stars there are. I had thought it would be rather stiff and formal. On the contrary, restaurant manager Guillaume Anglade, sommelier Jonathan Tingaud and the service staff are professionals par excellence – extremely courteous, friendly, charming and attentive.

For example, Le Black Cod



Both photos courtesy of Resorts World Sentosa



Name Joël Robuchon Restaurant

No. of seats 54

Contact Tel: (65) 6577-7888

Email: robuchon@rwsentosa.com

Verdict ***

Legend *** must recommend to clients
** good
* recommend @ your own risk

(black cod with a yuzu radish velvet puree) is a tad too sweet and I cannot finish it, which is something of a horror to them. Anglade comes over personally to assure me that the next course, beef ribeye with wasabi spinach and a medley of bell peppers, is being adjusted to suit my palate.

PRICING Close to S\$500 (US\$385) per person for the 16-course sounds horrifying, but one could be spending more and

getting so much less on another outing. I think the cost of an unforgettable evening is priceless.

TRADE APPLICATION The restaurant can be booked in its entirety by corporate/MICE groups. The total capacity is 54 (seating), 38 in the main dining room and 16 in the indoor winter garden adjoined to the former.

It is open only for dinner Tuesday to Saturday from 17.30 to 23.00.



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The city is starting to show off more of its green sights such as Ngong Ping (pictured)



Not to be outdone yet

Hong Kong's leisure and MICE sectors continue to flourish amid the gloom, says **Prudence Lui**

Arrivals Visitor arrivals to Hong Kong climbed to 23.2 million in the first seven months, a rise of 15.9 per cent compared to the same period in 2010.

The volume of overnight arrivals grew by 9.9 per cent to over 12.4 million, or 53.6 per cent of all arrivals. Same-day arrivals exceeded 10.7 million, a 23.7 per cent increase year-on-year.

As of July, tourist traffic into Hong Kong increased by 22.4 per cent to 3.8 million – a new record for monthly arrivals.

Mainland China, Taiwan, Japan, the US and South Korea, were the top five source markets between January and July. China and Indonesia were the fastest-growing. India, which grew rapidly in 2010, registered a 5.1 per cent decline.

NTO The Hong Kong Tourism Board (HKTb) opened its Taipei office in September, strengthening ties between the SAR and Taiwan, paving the way for HKTb to develop more initiatives to lure the Taiwanese market.

Overnight arrivals from Taiwan hit 469,448 between January and July, a rise of 10.9 per

cent over 2010. For the first half of this year, per capita spending by Taiwanese visitors also rose by 15 per cent year-on-year to HK\$5,800 (US\$744).

Since September, Taiwan residents holding a valid Mainland Travel Permit have been able to visit Hong Kong for 30 days, an extension from seven days. In addition, the local government is looking to launch an online system that will allow Taiwanese visitors to apply for entry permits independently at no extra cost.

Hotels Hong Kong had 61,828 hotel rooms as of June. Six hotels will open by end-2011, adding another 511 rooms.

For the first seven months, average occupancy grew to 88 per cent, an increase of three percentage points over the same period last year, while average room rate climbed by 17 per cent to HK\$1,281.

Kosmopolito Hotels International rebranded its three-star Dorsett properties to Silka Hotels in July. The group now has three hotels under the Silka label.

Hong Kong Hotels Association anticipates another record year. Executive director James Lu said: "We expect October and



"Taiwan is the second-largest visitor source for Hong Kong. Despite the loss of transit traffic after intensifying cross-strait direct flights, overnight arrivals are still showing an upward trend."

Anthony Lau
Executive director
Hong Kong Tourism Board

November to be robust, barring any unforeseen global troubles that may occur between now and the end of the year."

MICE Overnight MICE arrivals grew by 10.3 per cent for the first six months to 725,779. About 42.8 per cent were from mainland China, a 15 per cent rise compared to the same period last year. South and South-east Asia also shone in the areas of corporate meetings and incentive travel, exhibiting an 11 per cent rise in MICE arrivals.

Carly Lewis, business director, Cievents, observed an increase in the number of Hong Kong-based companies planning year-end incentive trips.

"To some extent this is because some firms put their incentive programmes on hold in 2008 and 2009. Over the past 12 months, they have resumed organising incentives."

According to Lewis, local and foreign companies are continuing to host events in the SAR.

"Hong Kong remains a key location for inbound MICE events due to the plethora of meeting venues, the food, shopping and local tourism activities," she said.

Access Between January and July, Hong Kong International Airport (HKIA) handled 30.8 million passengers, a rise of 5.7 per cent over the same period in 2010.

Cathay Pacific launched daily non-stop flights to Chicago on September 1, and a four-times-weekly service between Hong Kong and Abu Dhabi on June 2. Frequencies to Milan and New York have also been increased, now daily and four-times-daily respectively. Continental Airlines will also launch a daily non-stop Hong Kong-Tokyo Narita flight on October 31.

Meanwhile, Hong Kong's Civil Aviation Department said it had received five applications from new airlines since July.

HKIA has also expanded its upstream check-in service in the Pearl River Delta region. Macau Taipa became the fifth upstream check-in ferry point in late July, while from August, two new city-based check-in counters at Shenzhen Futian Coach Station and Shenzhen Grand Theatre allow passengers of participating airlines to obtain their boarding passes before taking the shuttle buses or limousines to the airport.

The Russians are coming

Since visa requirements were lifted in 2009, the market has rapidly developed. By **Prudence Lui**

1 How has the Russian market performed since 2009? According to the Hong Kong Tourism Board (HKTB), the number of Russian arrivals doubled in 2010 over the previous year (see chart below). Per capita spending stood at HK\$10,655 (US\$1,367) in 2010, up 25.1 per cent, with stays lasting an average of 3.1 nights. Much of the travel was made during the harsh Russian winters.

For the first eight months of this year, Russian arrivals grew by 56.7 per cent. Based on arrivals to date, HKTB is optimistic that the Russian market will again achieve double-digit growth in 2011.

2 What are the factors driving the growth? Apart from visa-free arrangements, HKTB attributed the robust growth in Russian arrivals to the rapid development of Russia and the rising number of middle-class households, which have fuelled a continuous increase in travel expenditure (domestic and outbound).

Not forgetting an expansion in air capacity – in addition to Aeroflot Russian Airlines (1992) and Transaero Airlines (1997), Hong Kong Airlines and flag carrier Cathay Pacific Airways began offering direct flights to Russia in summer 2010.

Double-digit growth

57
Year-on-year percentage increase of Russian arrivals from January to August

As of July, there were 14 flights per week connecting Hong Kong to Moscow.

Cathay Pacific highlighted that Russia is a market with massive potential. Corinna Lam, manager-revenue, Europe/South Pacific, said: “We have been operating a three-times-weekly service to Russia’s capital, Moscow, since mid-2010. Flights to and from Domodedovo International Airport are operated using Airbus A340-300 aircraft with a seat capacity of 283. Current load factor is about 70 per cent.”

“Through our Oneworld partner S7 Airlines, we also offer connections from

Moscow to 20 other domestic destinations in Russia. The most popular secondary destination is St. Petersburg,” she added.

3 How does HKTB intend to tap this market in 2011 and 2012? HKTB appointed its first Russian marketing representative in August 2007. The NTO soon realised that Russia has a highly fragmented tourism market with no clear differentiation between tour operators and retailers. There are 12,000 travel agencies and 5,000 operators in Russia (all privately owned).

Thus, it has been crucial to build awareness of Hong Kong through tactical co-operative programmes with the travel trade and PR activities in order for the SAR to be top of mind.

HKTB’s representative office concentrates its marketing activities in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Travel missions were also deployed to Moscow and St. Petersburg in June, joined by 33 Hong Kong trade partners. The networking events were well received and over 200 Russian travel trade attendances were recorded.

HKTB executive director Anthony Lau said: “Leveraging on the largest tradeshow in Russia, HKTB again participated in the annual Moscow International Travel & Tourism Exhibition in March, together with 13 Hong Kong trade partners as co-exhibitors, to increase awareness of Hong Kong as a premier tourist destination.”

Hong Kong also intends to retain its strategic partnership with Hainan to promote city and beach multi-destination itineraries to Russian visitors.

4 How are hotels capturing this emerging market? Most Russian visitors are high-spenders who prefer international five-star hotels, such as the Peninsula. Regional director of marketing Simon Yip said: “Our Russian guest mix, while small, is nevertheless important. We work with local business partners in Hong Kong to target this high-yield segment.”

He added that Russians have high expectations and spend accordingly. How-

ever, he argued that due to language barriers and payment issues, direct sales have become key.

“Our regional sales office travels to Russia at least twice a year to build relationships with key travel partners in this market.”

The Mira Hong Kong director of sales and marketing Connie Kwan revealed that the hotel had identified a few Hong Kong partners to help them tap the Russian market. The hotel had also published its first Russian-language fact sheet last year and has Russian-speaking guest relations staff to accommodate to the market’s needs.

“We continue to work with key wholesalers. But we are also tapping into the B2B and B2C business models as online platforms are becoming popular with Russian consumers,” she said.

Kwan added that many Russian guests often combined their trip with a mainland China leg, enticed by resort destinations such as Sanya.

5 What challenges do agents face in catering to Russian visitors? The growth in Russian arrivals to Hong Kong is being impeded by a shortage in Russian-speaking tour guides, said the trade.

W Travel Service managing director Wing Wong said: “We tried to tap the market earlier but couldn’t find Russian-speaking tour guides. There are about 10 in town but most of them deal with business translation and only a handful are dedicated licensed tour guides.”

Paul Leung, managing director, Holiday World Tours, added that he had difficulties dealing with Russian clientele, referred by Hainanese travel trade partners.

“It’s a small market and hard to nurture. Most are FIT, and a tour guide is a must as they can’t speak English. However, Russian-speaking tour guides charge double the rate.”

However, Wong said that most Russian visitors to Hong Kong were still coming for business and shopping, with just a handful on group tours. Hong Kong is still more of a transit point, he added.



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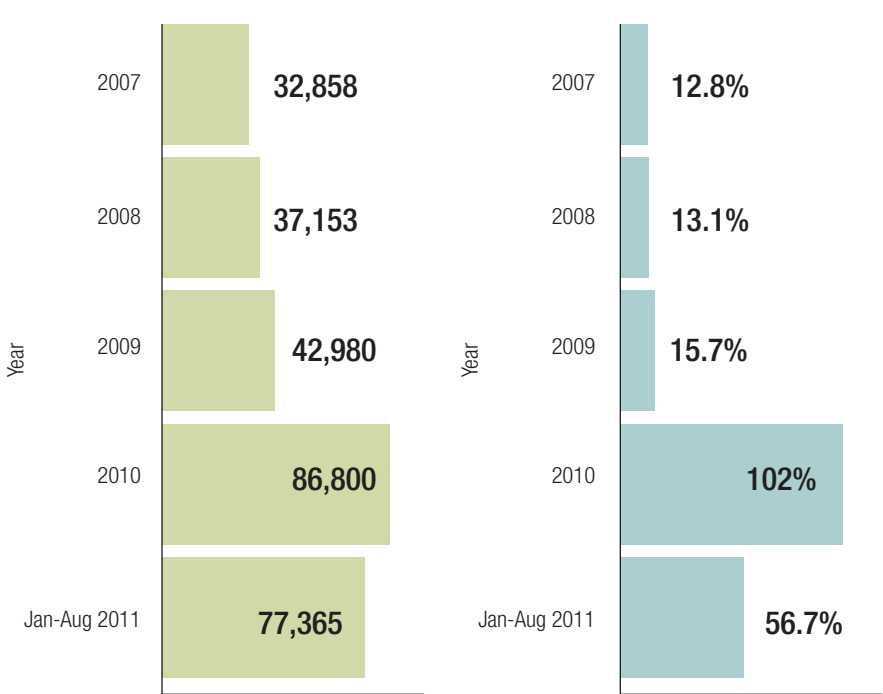
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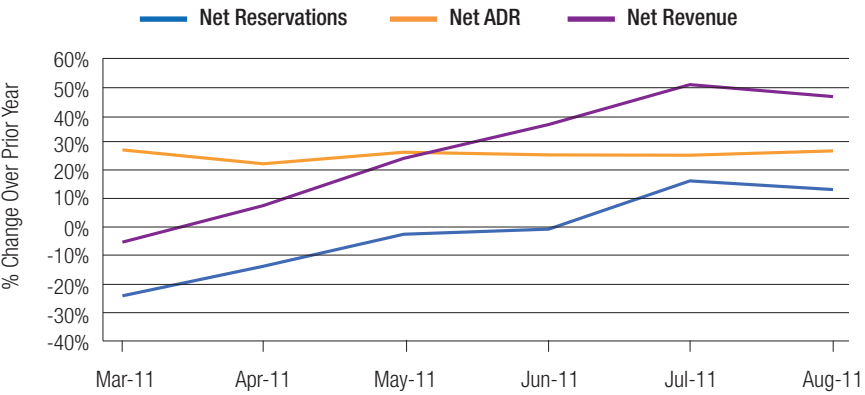
Russian arrivals to Hong Kong and their corresponding percentage change



Source: Hong Kong Tourism Board

Hong Kong leisure's positive direction

Leisure-focused ADS channel results



	Aug-11	Aug-10	% change
Net average length of stay (nights)	2.56	2.57	-0.5
Net average booking lead time (days)	36.78	36.14	1.8

Data represents bookings from the leisure-focused alternative distribution system (ADS) channel which consists of purely Internet bookings. This includes non-GDS online third-party channels or online travel agents primarily used by consumers. The data is stated on a date of booking basis and a constant exchange rate is used for calculations in order to eliminate currency exchange rate fluctuations.

Hong Kong experienced robust growth in leisure over the last few months, with the trend expected to continue further.

Its lower reservation performance in March is a reflection of the impact of the Japan earthquake and related crises on tourism. Although mainland China is the leading source of arrivals, the virtual halt of inbound travel from Japan was the

primary cause for the significant decrease from the previous year. With conditions in Japan stabilising, the negative impact greatly lessened by June.

By July and August, Hong Kong's leisure sector bookings grew by 17 per cent and 14.2 per cent over the past year respectively. Much of the growth can be attributed to Hong Kong's strong flow of visitors.

While increased travellers from mainland China is the biggest driver of this double-digit growth, shorthaul markets are also key. Arrivals increased from markets like South Korea, Indonesia, Singapore and Thailand, and overnight stays from Taiwan also grew. Smaller and varied increases were noted from longhaul markets such as the Americas and Europe, with an uptick in Russian guests.

Even while Hong Kong's leisure travel was most heavily hindered by Japan's events in March, the market's average daily rate (ADR) remained strong at a growth of over 20 per cent.

This speaks of the temporary nature of March's booking decline and the positive effects of ongoing demand, along with controlled room supply growth.

Whether due to cost and/or busy work schedules, consumers are generally not staying more nights per trip than last year. Hong Kong's leisure average length of stay (LOS) is consistent with the general global trend, remaining close to prior year levels (see table).

While Hong Kong's August average LOS at 2.56 nights was not the longest in the region – China averaged 3.01 nights in August – it is longer than the leisure global average of 1.96 nights.

Hong Kong's average booking lead time may only have grown by 1.8 per cent in August, but an average leisure booking time of over 36 days is commendable; the

global leisure average was 16.02 days and the average outside North America was 26.87 days in August.

Hong Kong's reservation and rate growth is expected to continue at a solid pace from analysis based on Pegasus data, and confirmed by other industry sources. In South-east Asia, the relatively stable political and economic conditions, combined with increased flights to Hong Kong, as well as competitively priced air tickets and packages offered, have encouraged greater inter-regional travel. Mainland China's positive economic environment and Individual Visit Scheme policy have also helped sustain elevated levels of outbound travel to Hong Kong.

The Hong Kong Tourism Board and agencies are also determined to sustain consumers' desire to visit. They have lined up large-scale events and promotions, and intend to best suit their marketing strategies to the latest market trends.

In this tie-up with TTG Asia, Pegasus Solutions provides an up-close look at destination-specific hotel performance. Data and analysis is based on over four billion monthly transactions processed through Pegasus' hotel switch technology. Besides tracking leisure-focused ADS channel results, Pegasus also looks at transactions made through the business-focused GDS channel. For regional trends, visit www.pegs.com/thepegasusview.



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What a great neighbour

Hotels, attractions benefiting from record number of mainland arrivals, reports **Andrew Dembina**

1 How are mainland China arrivals to Hong Kong doing? According to the Hong Kong Tourism Board (HKTb), visitor arrivals from mainland China for August grew by 23 per cent year-on-year to exceed 2.91 million, making it the highest-ever monthly record for the market.

For January to August, mainland arrivals totalled 18.3 million, 23 per cent higher than the same period last year.

Said HKTb executive director Anthony Lau: “Sustained growth of the mainland economy and appreciation of the renminbi provided extra incentive for mainland holidaymakers, especially families.

“HKTb has already planned for a series of promotions, which will be rolled out in the coming months to keep up the growth momentum.”

2 With government efforts to curb the mainland’s spiralling economy, are Chinese visitor numbers still expected to grow? “We project that mainland China will continue to be the key driver of arrival growth,” said Lau.

David Wu, deputy general manager, CITS Hong Kong, was also upbeat in his outlook. “More and more mainland visitors can still afford trips these days – and when they can, their first choice is often



Courtesy of Hong Kong Disneyland Resort

Hong Kong, which is close by,” he said. “This is a difficult period for the Western markets because of the weak euro and US dollar, and rising Hong Kong hotel rates. Hence, many agents are targeting mainland visitors.”

Wu added that the bigger challenge was the room crunch.

“At recent official tourism forums we attended in Beijing, we heard that the (central) government would like to increase the number of mainland visitors to Hong Kong, but was concerned there would not be enough hotel rooms,” he explained.

“There is an adequate supply of highly-priced business hotels but not hotels at lower price points.”

3 Has negative publicity surrounding Hong Kong’s low-cost, shopping tours affected business? Following last year’s high-profile incidents of Chinese travellers being coerced into shopping by tour guides, the Travel Industry Council came up with measures to prevent this from recurring, said CITS’ Wu. These include a demerit system and a service agreement to be signed between travel agents and tour guides.

“More and more companies are also trying to improve their service, and (packages and tours) are returning to their full price,” Wu said.

HKTb’s Lau added: “The Hong Kong SAR government and mainland tourism administrations have joined hands to strengthen supervision of the operation and regulation of the tourism sector. HKTb has also stepped up our consumer education programmes in specific mainland provinces to promote Quality and Honest Hong Kong tours.”

4 How are hotels courting mainland China visitors? Five-star Kowloon Shangri-La has assigned designated sales managers to oversee its corporate, wholesale and MICE markets.

“We transferred an assistant guest relations manager from a sister hotel in China to take care of our guests’ needs and to assist colleagues in better understanding

(mainland) Chinese culture and customs,” said Lilian Lui, director of sales and marketing.

The hotel also participates in roadshows and tradeshow in Chinese cities, and engages in cross-exposure and training programmes with its 32 sister hotels across the border. As well, all in-house collateral is bilingual or trilingual, including simplified Chinese characters.

5 What about tourist attractions? Major theme parks in Hong Kong are already seeing about half of their customer base coming from mainland China, and are aiming to grow the market further.

Ocean Park Hong Kong executive director, sales and marketing, Paul Pei, said: “In addition to our representative offices in Guangzhou, Shanghai and Beijing, we will open an office in Chengdu next year to give us a strong presence in the fast-growing central China region.”

He added that visits to Chinese cities, hosting of media, advertising efforts and promotional campaigns helped to keep the park top of mind.

Visitors from the mainland account for over 50 per cent of the park’s overall attendance.

Hong Kong Disneyland Resort, on the other hand, “is the only Disneyland in the world whose cast members speak three languages: English, Cantonese and Mandarin,” noted vice president of sales and distribution marketing, Aliana Ho.

All park materials such as the map, (event) times guide and some signs are written in English, traditional and simplified Chinese, added Ho.

In its 2010 financial year ending April, 42 per cent of the resort’s guests were from the mainland.

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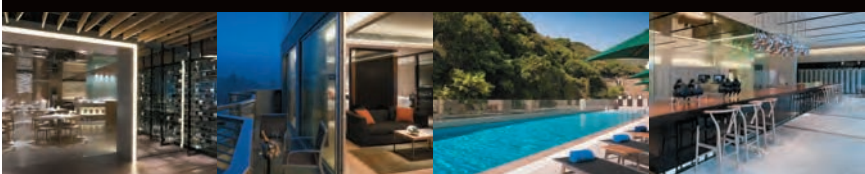
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Green shoots emerge

Despite Hong Kong’s push for its ecotourism offerings, operators in Hong Kong say the take-up for their products is still limited among mainstream travel agents, but note a steady interest from niche FITs.

The Hong Kong Tourism Board (HKTb) started promoting green, outdoor activities two years ago, and continues to highlight the existing large expanses of protected country and marine parks, which account for 40 per cent of the SAR. The Hong Kong Geopark, which opened in November 2009, has also enriched the city’s portfolio of natural attractions.

However, boutique ecotourism players that were interviewed told *TTG Asia* that overall, there is little support from hotels or travel agents for activities they offer, which include hiking, bird-watching, landscape photography, snorkelling and kayaking.

Hong Kong Dolphinwatch, which allows visitors to view endangered Indo-Pacific humpback dolphins that live in the Pearl River region, said it gets a steady trickle of business from travel agents but far more from its website and guidebook listings. Facebook has also been a successful publicity tool.

Said senior tour conductor Janet Walk-

er: “We’re known by some travel agents, but not as many as we’d like.”

The company gets half of its business from overseas visitors, mostly Westerners – from Europe and Australia – and Japanese, with some from India.

Martin Williams, ex-chairman of now-defunct Firststep Nature Tours, said: “I’ve worked on trying to nurture eco-tourism, but it was a dead loss in the main travel industry...The tourism industry here is orientated towards big hotels, big restaurants and theme parks. I had to shut down partly due to bureaucracy.”

HKTb executive director Anthony Lau said the NTO would continue to highlight Hong Kong’s greener side, having recently launched an *Outlying Islands Guide*. Local residents were invited to introduce four popular islands, and an English-language version will be available later this year.

He added that HKTb had been organising the Great Outdoors Hong Kong programme for two consecutive Novembers, showcasing the city’s hiking trails and natural attractions.

The NTO and some independent travel agents also run tours to a handful of islands and rocky outcrops in the New Territories. – **Andrew Dembina**

Products

Lantau heats up with new MICE branding strategy

Lantau, Hong Kong's largest outlying island, is positioning itself as a MICE destination, leveraging on enhanced product offerings and the unprecedented move by the Hong Kong Tourism Board (HKTb) to roll out a MICE marketing campaign with the tagline *Lantau Experience: An Inspirational MICE Destination*.

Apart from hosting fam tours, HKTb also provides customised support to event organisers and fosters business opportunities between suppliers and them. There is also a dedicated marketing brochure highlighting MICE products.

HKTb executive director Anthony Lau said: "(Lantau) has full-scale venues and hotel facilities to suit all MICE activities, and there are unique cultural offerings that provide business and leisure experiences for business travellers."

AsiaWorld-Expo COO, Stuart Wang, recalled that a similar partnership was also previously attempted by a few stakeholders. "However, we need someone like HKTb to take the lead. Hopefully, this new platform would draw more conference and convention business opportunities," he said.

Regal Airport Hotel, Meeting and Conference Centre general manager Jan Kirstein said: "Lantau is already being recognised as a destination within a destination, and its position will be further elevated as a result of this campaign."

"We are already experiencing a tremendous increase in MICE business and expect this trend to continue and to accelerate as a result of this campaign. We have succeeded in the repositioning of our hotel from just being an airport hotel to becoming the Regal Airport Hotel, Meeting and Conference Centre."

At Lantau attraction Ngong Ping 360, MICE accounts for only one to two per cent of business. Deputy managing director Wilson Shao said: "Our hope is to tap more incentive and off-site meetings."



Courtesy of Hong Kong Tourism Board

Shaolin Wushu Culture Centre

What Learn the discipline of Shaolin from accredited Chinese masters at the 3,500m² Shaolin Wushu Culture Centre. Ideal for teambuilding for 20 to 200 people, activities include Shaolin martial arts, physical training and ancient Zen meditation techniques. Facilities include an outdoor training ground for 100, five hostel rooms that can fit 64 and a canteen that serves Shaolin-style vegetarian meals.

Contact
www.shaolincc.org.hk

Hong Kong Olympic Trail

What Delegates can test their endurance on a 5.6km path, passing through old villages, historical monuments, an abandoned silver mine and a waterfall, among others. As a reward after the mountainous trek, recharge at one of the waterside cafes at Silvermine Bay.

Contact
www.hkwalkers.net/eng/trail_list/region.htm

Tree planting at Ngong Ping 360

What Ngong Ping 360 offers an eco-friendly alternative with a twist, like learning how to plant a tree at an altitude of 400m above sea level. The three-hour programme caters to teams between 15 and 50 people. Depending on the group size and itinerary, exclusive use of the cableway or park is also possible. For MICE groups with 50 pax

or more registered with the Meetings and Exhibitions Hong Kong Rewards Programme, a welcome kit is also available.

Contact
www.np360.com.hk

Tai O fishing village

What The Tai O Cultural and Ecological Integrated Resource Centre provides a

wide range of experiential programmes involving the local community like how to knit fishnets, row a sampan or make a traditional sweet bean dessert. Located in the 700-year-old Tai O village, one of the last working fishing villages in Hong Kong, the centre is run by the Hong Kong Young Women's Christian Association.

Contact
http://cerc.ywca.org.hk

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Comprising over 20 atolls, more international airports in the Maldives will improve access greatly

Courtesy of Angsana Velaratu

Casting a wider net

Maldives wants to expand its business from just the ultra-wealthy. By **Feizal Samath**

Arrivals The number of tourists for the first seven months recorded an 18 per cent increase to 520,483, with much of the growth coming from emerging markets like China and Russia, owing to sluggish trends in Europe. Chinese arrivals were up by 65.6 per cent, whereas arrivals from other top markets UK and Italy fell by 6.1 per cent and 3.8 per cent respectively.

David Kevan, partner at UK-based Chic Locations, pointed out that the actual number of UK travellers may not even be as high. “Many of the ‘UK arrivals’ are UK passport holders working in the Gulf or South-east Asia (earning much higher salaries than in the UK). So while hoteliers or the tourist board might claim the UK is still strong, the real figure should be based on point of residence,” he said. Viluxur Holidays managing director Shafray Fazley said: “Outside fishing (the country’s largest industry after tourism), everyone in the industry is talking about the Chinese. Such is the domination and potential of the market.”

NTO The 11-year old tour-

ism slogan *The Sunny Side of Life* is in the process of being replaced by a new one, which authorities say will reposition the destination not only as a honeymoon destination or a place for the super rich, but for the mid-market. Plans are also underway for a midscale resort, opening the Maldives to a wider audience, said tourism officials. In addition, the government is intending to develop the southernmost Addu Atoll, hoping to attract several resorts, shops and restaurants for each island, a shift from the current one-island, one resort concept.

Hotels As of July, the Maldives had 246 accommodation establishments in operation, relatively unchanged from 244 last July. For the first seven months, average occupancy also stayed at roughly 72 per cent, while average length of stay was fairly constant at seven days. Planned openings include the Hilton, Radisson Plaza, Raffles and Dusit Thani. New properties in the pipeline also boast some first-to-market facilities like a floating golf course, a shariah-compliant resort and an underwater spa.



“We must always be aware of how the Maldives is priced compared to other destinations, as travellers look at overall costs.”

Peter Foreman
Director of sales and marketing
Sheraton Maldives
Full Moon Resort & Spa

Rates Room rates have gone up by between eight and 10 per cent this year against last year, said hoteliers interviewed. Though unwilling to drop rates, hotels are dangling off-season offers, like an extra complimentary night, half-board arrangement and free transfers. For 2012 contracts, however, packages are minus these frills.

Narelle McDougall, area director of sales & marketing at Anantara resorts, said the new goods and services tax (GST) of 3.5 per cent from January, though initially frowned upon, was now less of a sore spot. “(The tax) was widely taken as acceptable, given that most travellers to the Maldives experience higher GST on consumables back home,” she added. However, another price increase is just around the corner. From January, there will be a US\$25 airport development fee for every outgoing passenger at the Malé International Airport, recently renamed Ibrahim Nasir International Airport (INIA).

Access Mega Maldives, the country’s first international airline, began operations

in January, feeding the burgeoning Greater China market. It operates direct flights – the only airline to do so – every five days to Hong Kong, Shanghai and Beijing. In September, it also launched direct flights to South Korea. Peter Foreman, director of sales & marketing, Sheraton Maldives Full Moon Resort & Spa, said while there were many flights from China, most were chartered. “We need more scheduled, direct flights,” he said. Farther afield, Etihad Airways is starting direct daily flights from Abu Dhabi in November, while Singapore Airlines has increased frequencies to 10 flights a week, up from seven previously. Three international airports are either being redeveloped or built to cater to the growing demand. The existing INIA will have improved facilities and new runways. When completed by 2013, it is expected to handle five million passengers compared to two million now. An enhanced Gan International Airport will also cater to resorts in the south, while the north will have a new international airport at Hanimaadhoo. This is in addition to eight domestic airports being built.

China becomes a priority

Market overtakes UK to become the biggest source for the Maldives, reports **Feizal Samath**

1 How important is China to the Maldives? Over the past three years, China has emerged to become the number one source market for the Maldives, overtaking traditional European source markets like the UK, where growth has slowed mostly due to the financial crisis.

Shafraz Fazley, managing director of Viluxur Holidays, which handles a large slice of Chinese inbound traffic, predicted it would remain the biggest market for at least the next five years.

“For hoteliers, it fills the gaps in seasonal European market arrivals, since most of the business from the Chinese market comes during the low season on a higher tier,” he said.

He noted that while the global economic crisis has hurt European travel, “the Chinese market single-handedly helped the industry to be operational”.

“Also, from an agent’s point of view, a market with such a large volume helps to strengthen our relationship with hotel partners.”

Ajit Gunewardene, president-leisure group of Colombo-based John Keells Holdings, which owns three resorts in the Maldives, said with China’s rapidly growing middle class, the group “strongly feels that China is poised to stay as the most important market in the years to come”.

2 How did the market perform last year? Chinese arrivals totalled 118,961 last year, a phenomenal 96 per cent increase from 60,666 in 2009.

This represents 15 per cent of total arrivals to the Maldives. In comparison, the UK, the biggest source market for years, grew 14.4 per cent.

For the first seven months, Chinese arrivals were up 65.6 per cent to 103,734, and represented 19.9 per cent of total arrivals. UK arrivals, on the other hand, fell by 6.1 per cent in the same period.

According to tourism minister Mariyam Zulfah, studies show that the Chinese are into shopping and trying out numerous

Arrivals upswing

96

Percentage increase of Chinese tourists to the Maldives last year

restaurants, options not widely available in most resorts.

“But because of the importance of this market, we are seriously looking at these needs and even considering a exclusive resort with these facilities,” she said.

3 What trends do operators see for this market? While the Chinese market started off in the three- to four-star cate-

ries for hotels, some clients are opting for five-star now. Travel patterns are also changing, with less groups and more FITs.

Michelle Flake, contracting and marketing manager at Scaevola Travel, which derives 85 per cent of its business from China, said the Chinese are not necessarily booking budget resorts. “In fact, ours are booking high end,” she said.

Flake observed that the Chinese look for free nights, complimentary upgrades and good honeymoon resort packages. “We have also noticed an increase in the (length of stay), from four to five nights, to six to seven nights,” she said.

M.U. Lantra, general manager-marketing, Adaaran Resorts, added that Chinese guests “don’t bargain on prices”.

4 What improvements are there to cater to the market? Mega Maldives, the country’s only international airline, started direct flights to Shanghai and Bei-

jing in July, departing once every five days. There are also charters from Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou.

5 What are the challenges to the market? Resorts only have a few Mandarin speakers on staff and are not adjusting to the needs of Chinese travellers fast enough, although some have started to hire Mandarin-speaking frontliners and feature relevant cuisine in their F&B outlets.

Chinese travellers from tier-two cities like Chengdu, Sichuan and Kunming are also not as familiar with the Maldives. This is why agents and hoteliers want to create awareness by attending many travel fairs in China.

According to Viluxur Holidays’ Fazley, the biggest challenge for an agent is controlling market share. Competition among local and Chinese operators is also high, with resorts sometimes pitching in and trying to approach the consumer directly, he explained.

A solar shift for the island



Soneva Fushi has cut diesel consumption

The Maldives’ Ministry of Economic Development recently announced its plan to reduce consumption of oil-based energy – a big expense for luxury resorts relying on diesel generators – by turning to solar energy for at least 60 per cent of the country’s power needs by 2020.

Last month, the ministry said it was prioritising the use of renewable energy in the Maldives, which is currently totally dependent on imported fossil fuel.

“We are investing in renewable energy because it is cheaper and cleaner than burning fossil fuels,” Mahmood Razee, Minister for Economic Development, was quoted as saying in the statement.

Some properties, like the environmentally sensitive Six Senses Resorts & Spas’ Soneva Fushi resort, are already gradually shifting towards solar power. The resort cut diesel consumption from 200,000 litres in 2006 to 85,000 litres last year, further projecting a 25,000-litre usage by end-2012.

Sonu Shivdasani, chairman and CEO of Six Senses, which plans to de-carbonise all its resorts by 2020, said it planned to use solar energy for hot water and air conditioning, and work the diesel generators only at night.



Shivdasani: use of solar energy

At the Diva Maldives resort, staff work with islanders to protect the atoll. “We encourage all islanders throughout the atoll to protect their islets and raise awareness on the already fragile marine life ecosystem,” said general manager Dominik Ruhl.


The resort also recycles the heat waste produced by generators to create hot water for the whole island. It provides a daily average hot water production of 60,000 litres, out of the total daily average production of 300,000 litres of water, without using any extra energy.

At a recent UN-organised climate change conference in the capital of Malé, environment minister Mohamed Aslam told *TTG Asia* on the sidelines of the meeting that the biggest challenge facing the Maldives is a shift in the island’s formation.

“That is worse than an island sinking because in such cases, you can raise the island,” he said.

He explained that engineering solutions would eventually be found to this problem, but they may be very costly.

“These are the challenges that the (resorts) and other inhabited islands face,” he said. – **Feizal Samath**




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Kithajima Restaurant



Exquisite, fresh seafood served with finesse makes this traditional Japanese restaurant a must-visit for Asian guests staying at luxury resort Adaaran Prestige Vadoo, writes *Feizal Samath*

MENU Kithajima prides itself on its use of the freshest of seafood in its dishes. Akampa Alwis, executive chef of the resort, explained that he sources fish from local markets.

Our dining experience began with well-prepared sushi, accompanied by fiery wasabi washed down with sips of sake.

However, I made the mistake of eating wasabi just after treating myself to a few beers. The after-effect was quite jarring – I felt like I was kicked by a mule!

After the initial initiation into traditional Japanese food, Ayoki Kumaki, the so-called ‘concept lady’, kept us at ease by explaining the various dishes served as we waded through the menu, sampling tempura, sashimi and sushi.

I found the food delightful, particularly the fresh fish, miso soup and teppanyaki, which we ate while seated at a circular, bar-like table and watching food being prepared in show-cooking fashion.

AMBIENCE Bamboo is used abundantly throughout the restaurant, making it resemble the interior of a typical traditional Japanese restaurant or home.

For food connoisseurs, a seat at the fan-like table for 10 that fronts the small show kitchen is a must to observe the cooks up-close in action.

The rest of the seats are spread out along the perimeter of the dining area, and are partly separated by bamboo partitions into two to three cosy corners featuring low-lying Japanese-style tables seating three to five.

The restaurant’s ambience was enhanced by the rich flavours and fragrance emanating from the show kitchen, especially the whiffs of the garlic rice cooked in soya sauce.

For those who fancy a glass of sherry, a few beers or some whisky on the rocks, it is best to drink them on the nearby sunset deck while watching shoals of stingray and other fish gliding through shimmering blue waters.

Though the resort is a mere 20 minutes away by boat from Malé, the restaurant is not recommended for Malé residents or guests from other resorts as boat transfers are very expensive. Guests staying at the Prestige Vadoo, however, should not miss this. The venue currently draws a good number of Chinese, Japanese and South Korean diners.

SERVICE Excellent service which was enhanced by Kumaki’s banter about Japanese cuisine. I found out that she is an expert on the traditional tea ceremony, but there was little time for this, nor was it the appropriate place for this intricate ceremony.



Name	Kithajima Restaurant
No. of seats	Around 35
Contact details	
Tel:	(960) 664-3976
www.adaaran.com/prestigevadoo	
Verdic	⌘⌘
Legend	⌘⌘ must recommend to clients ⌘ good 1 recommend @ your own risk

PRICING Surprisingly, it did not cost an arm and a leg to dine at this charming restaurant. A meal ranges between US\$35-US\$85 per head, catering to all tastes and budgets. Kithajima is open for both lunch and dinner.



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Zecha: Ideal prices

No overcharging here, he says, of new hotel marketing vehicle

By Raini Hamdi

BANGKOK Four industry veterans have come together to launch what they say is the first “low-cost marketing” alliance for hotels, saying they could offer what current hotel marketing organisations do for a fraction of the cost.

Alwin Zecha, founder of Pacific Leisure Group Thailand, is chairman of Ideal. Its three directors are David Paulon, former head of Holiday Inn Asia/Pacific; Terry Francis, chairman of PATA Foundation and travel and tourism consultant; and Sanjeet, owner, Durga Das Publications India.

Zecha told *TTG Asia* there was a gap in representing independent, mid-range hotels as the crop of umbrella marketing bodies largely looked at the upmarket segment and “charge an arm and a leg” for representation.

Ideal charges an annual fee of US\$3,000 per property, which Zecha said was an “all-inclusive”

fee to market the hotel via a website, directory, monthly newsletter and at key trade shows.

“The other representation companies charge a much higher fee to join and, on top of that, everything else that is done costs extra.”

“The fastest-growing and largest segment of the hotel industry is the middle range, yet that is the segment which is under-represented. We had the idea for Ideal in 1995, but back then, it was not possible to offer low-cost marketing. Today, you can marry marketing with technology and offer dramatically-increased value for hell of a lot less,” Zecha said.

With the partners being well-connected in the trade, Zecha said Ideal was able to assemble a sales force in 15 countries in four continents to service its members in no time at all.

Ideal has also appointed Rachel Griffin as COO and Ruby Verma as marketing manager.

Both are based in Hong Kong.

Currently, Ideal has fewer members than sales forces – six in India, four of which are in Rajasthan, and the Gallery Hotel in Singapore.

But in two years, the aim is a total of 1,515 members, based on a limit of 15 hotels in 101 key cities identified worldwide.

Hotel members are classified as business, leisure, value or ultimate.

Ideal’s website, www.idealhotelsWW.com, hyperlinks bookings to the members’ websites, which Zecha pointed out was yet another value, as members would not have to incur a booking fee. Its directory and monthly newsletter are distributed to 110,000 travel professionals, including the media, according to Zecha.

He added that the potential for Ideal was enormous.

“Any hotel which is not running 100 per cent occupancy, 365 nights, can use extra sales and marketing support. Name me one that achieves that.”

“That makes Ideal an additional must.”



Zecha: low cost, big value

IT&CMA adds luxe section

BANGKOK A luxury travel component will be added to IT&CMA from 2012, the year the show celebrates its 20th anniversary.

Far from being strange bedfellows, BT-MICE and luxury travel go well together, according to Darren Ng, managing director, TTG Asia Media (organiser of IT&CMA).

“They are both niches and high-end markets. We’re also noting an increase in luxury MICE groups, particularly from Asian markets such as China, Hong Kong, India and Singapore, and our feedback consistently shows buyers requesting for more ‘tailor-made’ and ‘unique’ luxury products to cater to increasingly sophisticated clients,” Ng said.

The luxury travel component would attract a new set of luxury travel buyers worldwide, benefiting sellers, while IT&CMA buyers would stand to gain from a new range of products, Ng said.

The move brings for the first time a luxury travel show to South-east Asia, a region which Horwath HTL’s research identifies as one of the fastest-growing

luxury destinations in the world (see page 9). As a source, Asia-Pacific has also surpassed Europe as having a greater number of high net worth individuals.

Said Ng: “Thailand is the perfect destination to host a luxury travel show, as it is focusing a lot on luxury development and promotion. With IT&CMA’s track record, we don’t have to reinvent the wheel.”

IT&CM India, which will be inaugurated next year in New Delhi from August 21-24, will also incorporate a luxury travel component.

Ng said the luxury MICE and leisure market was resilient, although the market had changed following the global financial crisis, with customers preferring more meaningful experiences and shunning ostentatiousness.

Eduardo Blanco, founder, Different Spain, foresees “no problems ahead for the luxury market” despite the US and euro debt crisis. He said: “High net worth individuals are still willing to spend on the finer things. The markets I deal with – the US, the Middle East and South America – are still buoyant.”



Ng: Good pair

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Why fly off this way?

Firefly's handling of Johor Bahru hub closure irks agents

By N. Nithiyananthan and Mimi Hudoyo

KUALA LUMPUR & JAKARTA

Firefly has come under attack from agents in Johor Bahru for the way it closed the hub in the southern tip of Malaysia and caused operators' brochure investment to go to waste.

Initiated in August, Firefly's Johor Bahru to Bandung services ceased on September 29, while Johor Bahru-Surabaya flights will end on October 28. The flights to Kuching and Kota Kinabalu, which started in May and June respectively, were terminated on September 15.

But more than the terminations, it is the manner in which they were done – with little advance warning – that irks the trade.

Malaysian Association of Tour & Travel Agents Johor chapter chairman and CK Vacation managing director, Kenny Ngi, said: "We are very disappointed with Firefly. It is a drastic move at short notice. Some (agents) had spent money printing brochures and advertisements. The biggest (negative) impact is on the image

of Firefly and to Johor overall. We won't trust Firefly anymore."

For secured bookings, Ngi said Firefly had advised agents to apply for a refund or look for alternatives.

Travel agents in Kuching and Kota Kinabalu, on the other hand, count alternative flight services as a blessing. CPH Travel

and Kota Kinabalu. Not many use us to book flights on Firefly to Bandung and Surabaya."

Bandung agents are expecting AirAsia to pick up the dropped routes, after its cooperative agreement with MAS, Firefly's parent company.

Atalanta Tours Bandung CEO, Ameriawati Atmasubrata, said:

"It is a drastic move at short notice."

Kenny Ngi, chairman

Malaysian Association of Tour & Travel Agents Johor chapter

Agencies (Sarawak) sales director, Hannah Choo, said: "AirAsia has regular direct flights to Johor Bahru."

"So far there has been no impact," said Discovery Tours Sabah operations executive, Louis Lee. "Most of our clients fly MAS (Malaysia Airlines) via Kuala Lumpur or fly AirAsia direct."

A source at the Johor Bahru branch of Reliance Travel, who declined to be named, said: "Customers prefer AirAsia for flights from Johor Bahru to Kuching

"I think the decision has to do with the entry of AirAsia into MAS. If the route between Johor Bahru and Bandung is lucrative, AirAsia will increase frequency to Bandung."

Bandung-based Tama Indonesia managing director, Reza Novaldi, pointed out: "In the last two months since its launch, Firefly's load factor was low. I'm not sure whether many travellers were aware of the service, but clients from Johor still fly AirAsia through Singapore."

Anxiety lingers on new visa rules in Sri Lanka

By Feizal Samath

COLOMBO

The travel trade said new visa rules for foreign visitors to Sri Lanka from January 1 would either turn out to be a lucrative revenue earner or the country's biggest folly.

All inbound travellers are required to apply online for an Electronic Travel Authorisation (ETA) for a 30-day visit beginning next year, with a processing fee of US\$50. Visas on arrival that are now issued free to nationals of 78 countries will be available only in emergency situations.

Agents said the government was adamant about implementing the new scheme despite their pleas. One veteran agent, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said: "When most countries are making it easier to travel, we are placing restrictions, and this too is coming at a time when the government is trying to attract 2.5 million tourists by 2016. The new rules don't make any sense with this strategy."

Nilmin Nanayakkara, president of the Sri Lanka Inbound Tour Operators, said: "I don't find the visa fee prohibitive, if

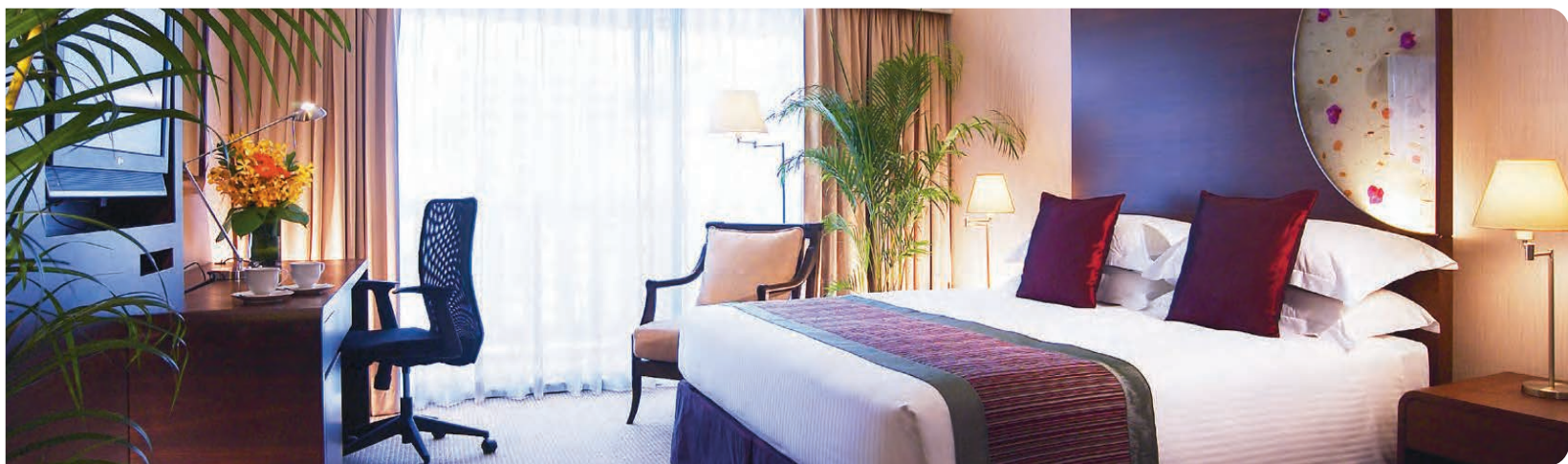
one takes this cost in isolation. However, if we take into account all other costs that tourists have to pay to enter various cultural sites in Sri Lanka, it would have an impact.

"For example, a tourist pays more to visit one of our cultural sites than visiting the pyramids (in Egypt) or the Taj Mahal (in India). Hotel rates have also doubled in the past year."

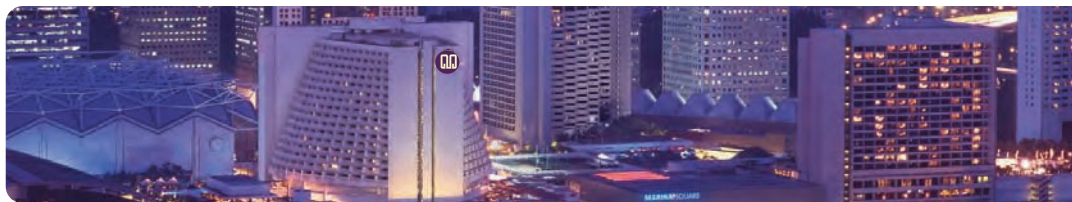
A local agent who mostly handles Indian visitors, said he expected a slight drop in the first few months due to the new cost. "A large segment of the Indian traffic comes from South India, where a return ticket to Colombo costs US\$150. With this additional US\$50 charge, the cost goes up by 30 per cent," he said.

A new transit visa fee of US\$25 until December 31 is also likely to affect Indians travelling to the Middle East through Colombo using cheaper packages offered by Sri Lankan Airlines.

UK operator David Kevan, partner, Chic Locations, said "rival destinations such as Mauritius must be clapping their hands".



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