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Thailand takes a hit

Thousands of roomnights swept away

By Brian Higgs
SINGAPORE Thailand is taking a hit from the ongoing flood crisis in the country, with buyers and sellers at ITB Asia last week saying that media coverage exaggerating the extent of the disaster has impacted both leisure and MICE.



Hallin: it is all being cancelled

the coming weeks," he said. "Europe, Asia, business, leisure, you name, it is all being cancelled."

Hallin said not only were cancellations pouring in, the booking pace had slowed considerably. "Many people are writing in to ask about the situation before they even consider coming to Thailand," he said.

John D Owens, senior vice president, global sales, Pegasus Solutions, also reported a drop in bookings for Thailand properties, which include those under Utell Hotels & Resorts.

"People are still shopping around for Thailand, but the number of confirmed bookings has definitely dropped," he said, blaming the lack of updated media coverage on the floods.

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Next stop: the world

Chinese brands are virtually unknown outside the mainland, a fact that China's leading hotel group intends to change. **Xinlei Wang** talks to Bernold O. Schroeder, CEO, Jin Jiang International Hotel Management Co. – see page 6

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Feeling 'So' great in Singapore

By Raini Hamdi
SINGAPORE Sofitel Luxury Hotels ends its nine-year search for a hotel in Singapore with a deal worthy of popping a Cristal back at the corporate office.

At one fell swoop, the management agreement signed on Monday with Royal Group Holdings (RGH), as tipped by *TTG Asia e-Daily* on October 20, enables Sofitel to flag its new brand, So, on an iconic building circa 1927, in a location at the heart of the CBD, and with a partner who told *TTG Asia* he was in it not for the money but the "legacy".

Asok Kumar Hiranandani,

RGH president, said: "For me, this is not commercial. If I can leave a legacy, it'll be nice. The building is something you want to keep, like a piece of painting you want to hang on the wall."

A hotel developer told *TTG Asia* if it was for legacy, Hiranandani was in it for the right reason. "It's difficult to make money when you can carve out only that many rooms in a heritage building – because of the floor plate and plan – and adhere to conservation guidelines at the same time," she said.

So Sofitel Singapore will have 135 rooms and suites, with floor

areas between 24m² and 140m², when it opens in early 2013. RGH is pumping in S\$130 (US\$103) million to S\$150 million in the 60-year leasehold property which was up for tender in January.

The building has a neo-classical architecture and was formerly The Cable and Wireless Building, and the office of the Telecommunications Authority of Singapore and The Ogilvy Centre.

Sofitel Asia-Pacific senior vice president Markland Blaiklock expects to make money, with an average room rate in the high S\$300 range. He said the corporate market would fill the hotel



Artist's impression of Sofitel So Singapore, a conservation building

during weekdays and, as So appealed to high-end leisure travellers and So Singapore was just minutes away from Marina Bay Sands, he expected weekends to be full too.

"Our concern is 135 rooms

and suites are too few," he said.

This will be the third So to open worldwide. The first opened in Mauritius last December, while the second So will

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The new 'king of rooms'

Three big boys in Indonesia form online firm, hires Blume

By Mimi Hudoyo

SINGAPORE Three competing tour operators in Indonesia are putting aside their rivalry to grab a share of the country's emerging online market.

The Panorama Group, Dwidaya Tour and Travel, and Smailing Tours have formed Raja Kamar International and have hired former ZUI CEO, Scott Blume, as group CEO, effective November 1.

Their first roll-out is Raja Kamar Indonesia. Rajakamar.com, which literally translates to 'king of rooms' in Bahasa, aims to be the number one B2C online hotel booking channel with the largest inventory of Indonesia hotels, selling primarily to Indonesian consumers.

Panorama's Satrijanto Tirtawisata, who is Raja Kamar International's president, said more hotel rooms were opening in secondary and tertiary cities throughout Indonesia. This, along with Internet access and "phenomenal" growth in the number of mobile phone



Satrijanto: "obvious"

users, made online hotel booking an "obvious" form of distribution for hotels, he said.

"The Indonesian consumers are also starting to look at all distribution choices, whether traditional offline or online. With this new company, they now

have a choice."

Blume said: "We want to be the one-stop-shop for Indonesians to find comprehensive, competitive hotel content across a broad spectrum, from two stars to five stars, in Indonesia."

Raja Kamar Indonesia also aims to tailor itself to market conditions. For example, as not all Indonesians have credit cards, or are comfortable with paying with credit card online, it will accept payment via local bank accounts or cash.

"Indonesians also want to be able to talk to somebody. Today fewer than 20 per cent of consumers make a booking without

talking to somebody, therefore, we will have a 24-hour call centre and offices in different cities," Blume added.

The initial target is to be among the top three sellers of hotel roomnights in Indonesia in the next four months. The next goal, said Blume, was to take the lessons in Indonesia to the neighbouring Asian markets.



Blume: regional ambition

Within a year, Raja Kamar International is expected to spread its wings to the region, be it in the form of joint ventures or strategic alliance partners.

Blume said: "Raja Kamar International is a holding company for the existing and potential new businesses and partnerships."

Quizzed on why Panorama decided to go to bed with rivals, Satrijanto said, in this instance, it was more effective for the three tour operators to combine resources than compete. They would also remain neutral and not elbow their inventory through to Rajakamar.com.

Sound bites

"People are happier before their holidays than on them."

Rod Cuthbert, founder and chairman emeritus, Viator, explaining that studies have shown that it is the expectations of a vacation that have a stronger emotional resonance than the whole trip itself. What this means for the trade is that customer experiences at the pre-trip or initial stage, such as a general manager coming to greet you at the lobby when you check-in, should be considered more carefully

"Social guys like to do the talking, we mostly like to do the acting."



Ali Yilmaz, head of travel, Google South-east Asia, on the ongoing debate between whether marketing dollars are best invested in search engines or social media channels. He pointed out that Google offered companies a tool to track the real-time customer buying process rather than just analysing brand conversations

Cruise CEOs to drop anchor

SINGAPORE The inaugural Cruise Shipping Asia (CSA), to be held in Singapore from November 16 to 18 at Sands Expo and Convention Centre, has lined up several captains of the cruise industry to speak at the tradeshow's conference.

Among them: Rick Meadows, EVP of marketing, sales and guest programmes, Holland America Line and president, Seabourn; Michael Bayley, EVP International, Royal Caribbean Cruises; Roberto Giorgi, president, V.Ships; Helen Huang, MD, MSC Cruises China; Gianni On-

orato, president, Costa Crociere; and Sarina Bratton, founder & MD, Orion Expeditions.

A travel agent education programme is also available.

The tradeshow is seeing a healthy exhibitors' list, according to Michael Duck, EVP of UBM Asia, organiser of CSA.

The latest list on the CSA website shows a broad representation, including cruise specialists, attractions, tourism boards, cruise lines, ports, hotels, cruise associations, shipyards and shipping companies, aside from a wide Asia-Pacific showing.




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‘We don’t know’

Travel CEOs cautious, although there are bright spots

By Gracia Chiang

SINGAPORE Travel business leaders have warned that the economic woes of the US and Europe could exert a downward pressure on Asia’s industry performance, with some saying the next few months are crucial in determining whether there will be growth.

At the opening dinner of TravelRave’s Asia Travel Leaders Summit last week, responses ranged from “cautious” and “measured” to “too early to say” and “optimistic”.

Speaking to *TTG Asia*, World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) president & CEO David Scowsill said: “We’re in a very delicate phase at the moment. Asia is still steaming away in general terms, but there are real wobbles in Europe and America. Everybody is concerned about the potential of going into a double-dip recession.”

He added that with the volatility of oil prices and new taxation from the European Union (EU)



Scowsill: two budgets

Emissions Trading System, affecting flights to and from the EU, network airlines would have no choice but to pass on the increase in costs to consumers, due to razor-thin profit margins. This could further depress demand from longhaul markets, he said.

“At this point, nobody knows what 2012 is going to bring. When you have markets that are unsettled, it puts off investors. The next two months are going to be absolutely critical to see whether we will keep growing at a recession or decline again.

“When I talk to business leaders running hotels, airlines and car rental businesses...Most of them have two different budgets for 2012 – one is kind of low growth to no growth and one is a lot more optimistic,” he said.

But the WTTC is positive in its overall outlook, and is banking on growth for the market.

Brightspots in Asia are also giving hope to leaders in the region.

Azran Osman-Rani, CEO, AirAsiaX said while Europeans had become concerned about long-haul travel, other Asia-Pacific markets were still holding up. On the carrier’s flights to London and Paris, for example, there were more Australians and Chinese going to those cities instead of Europeans, he pointed out.

Similarly, William Heinecke, chairman and CEO of Minor International, said: “The slowdown in US and Europe has been compensated by emerging markets like China and India. We’re in a very strange recessionary period because a lot of markets still have cash.”

But both chiefs admitted they were wary of the looming crisis. Azran said the big worry was the state of financial institutions in Europe, source of much aviation financing. “We’re looking at alternative sources of capital in China, Malaysia and South-east Asia,” he said.

Heinecke added that he was cautious about India, China and even the Middle East, preferring to be asset-light in those regions.

‘Fitter’ comeback for Westin

By Raini Hamdi

SINGAPORE The Westin Singapore Marina Bay is banking on its location and the brand’s lifestyle proposition to compete in a market which has changed since it left a decade ago.

Westin was in Singapore until 2002, in the form of The Westin Stamford and The Westin Plaza at the Raffles City complex, now Swissotel the Stamford and Fairmont Singapore respectively.

Asked to compare the old with the new Westin, which will open in the last quarter of 2013, Vincent Ong, director brand management Asia-Pacific of Sheraton & Westin, said The Westin Stamford did not have programmes such as Superfoods menu, WestinWorkout gym, The Heavenly Spa by Westin and nature-inspired design aesthetics, all now part of the brand’s

‘wellness’ DNA. Westin, he said, was all about catering to the “I” in individuals, so that every guest would leave feeling better than when he arrived.

Starwood Hotels & Resorts had been sharpening the brand’s positioning since 2005, along with creating distinct personalities for its other brands such as Sheraton, Ong said, during a media launch of the Westin Singapore comeback last week.

The hotel will occupy the 32nd to 46th floors of Asia Square Tower 2, featuring 305 rooms and the highest hotel lobby in the city. It will also have four F&B outlets and a 480m² Banquet Hall.

The hotel is owned by an MGPA managed fund. MGPA managing director James David said Westin fitted Asia Square’s ‘Work, Play, Live, Grow’ proposition well.

Numbers that matter

3 Airline prices in Asia-Pacific are expected to rise 3.1 per cent to 3.8 per cent next year, as legacy and LCCs compete for travellers, holding down airfares in the region, according to Carlson Wagonlit Travel’s Global Travel Forecast 2012.

2 Average daily hotel rates in Asia-Pacific will range from a 1.9 per cent fall to a 2.1 per cent increase in the first half of the year, and are expected to remain flat in the second half. Car rental rates are also expected to remain relatively flat, according to the just-released report.

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How to survive Web 2.0

You should want to be a travel agent, not a tour operator. And if you can offer instant access, cheapest prices and some service – you just might be in business, says **Hans Lerch**



This keynote was delivered at TTG Travel Agent Conference last week. Don't miss *TTG Asia's* year-end issue, **December 16**, which will carry more tips, frank opinions, wisecracks and how-tos from all our speakers at the conference

Big names like TUI, Thomas Cook, JTB, Kuoni and others will be very different companies five years from now – if they still exist, that is.

Up to about 1995, travel agents had a huge information advantage. We knew the destinations, suppliers and airline fares, which were a mess already then. And the average client of 15 years ago was less travel-savvy and no digital native.

Travel agents owned the client and the CRM data. Suppliers were in no position to talk directly to consumer. These were very comfortable times for travel agents. Our service was good, bad, average or non-existent, but we always earned the same; we earned a commission.

Then we entered the Internet Phase 1, which lasted until about 2007. Clients could now access supplier information and those who were well-travelled started to book online. More powerful servers and huge databanks began to change the playing field. Sophisticated yield management systems became available real-time and enabled new business models like the LCCs, which started to push highly complex and ever-changing tariffs directly to the consumer. The expression B2C started to take hold and it included an utterly destructive meaning for the legacy structure without tour operators and travel agents paying too much attention to it. Until suppliers started to cut commissions. Airlines forced the change and others followed.

Then came Phase 2 with Web 2.0, and this added a new dimension: the wisdom of the masses with sites like TripAdvisor. In the meantime, suppliers adapted their communication tools and worked potential and existing clients directly.

The good news is that these have also posed challenges for consumers. There are millions of choices, and to find our way through the myriad of pages has often turned into a nightmare.

Moreover, many online suppliers are cutting services around the product they sell to absolutely zero. There are no detailed travel itineraries published by OTAs, and thanks to Voice over IP, call centres move to the cheapest and not always the best places in the world.

Here is where I see the opportunities

travel agencies can embrace. Find clients who want instant access, cheapest prices but some service on top of that – and you might be in business.

The legacy structure still pays 90 per cent of the salaries in big companies so it cannot be thrown out the window just like that. But it will merge with the online world and this will force, or has forced already, the first big change. Tour operators can no longer afford to protect the travel agents. Like any other supplier they have



Hans Lerch

Vice chairman & CEO, Hotelplan Switzerland; board member Abercrombie & Kent group, UK

to talk to the consumer directly. Paying for Google ad words and paying a travel agency commission of 12 per cent additionally do not work economically. And tour operators have to pay for much more. Most of them still sit on legacy IT systems which simply cannot talk to the online world. But talking to the online world is a precondition to stay in business and a lot of money is stupidly wasted on modernising these core reservation systems. Thomas Cook sank £110 (US\$160) million trying to build a modern, group-wide system. Kuoni spent and lost close to US\$100 million trying to do the same.

Tour operators who will survive do so maybe because they can leverage famous brands, have an infrastructure on the ground and know how to provide services at the destination OTAs don't provide or cannot provide or simply do not care to provide. But this alone won't do the trick. Tour operators' IT environment must enable clients to take apart packages online and source flights from anywhere, change hotels and room types and get these instantly from bed banks.

What would you want to be now, a tour operator or travel agency? You should want

to be a travel agency; your cards are much better. Whatever happens, travel agencies will always have a much better cost structure and be much closer to the client than tour operators are – unless these tour operators are highly specialised, like Abercrombie & Kent and some others.

How to survive Web 2.0:

- **Become a consultant and an information filter** Clients are drowning in information and many are looking for competent and reliable consultants.

- **Become a provider of additional services** Online suppliers will cut the little service they provide further. Fill this gap. Handle the visas, provide detailed and informative programmes and much more.

- **Become a multi-channel point of call** Physical presence alone is not good enough. It has to be combined with everything electronic: Blogging, presence on local social media platforms and so on. Also, people are used to buying anything anytime, so you must be available anytime.

- **Become a Customer Relationship Management specialist** The big guys all have elaborate CRM systems in place but don't know much, or certainly not everything, about their customers. Airlines only know what's related to flying, hotels what's related to sleeping, so to speak. Travel agents can be more holistic, know their clients' wishes and truly consult.

- **Become a fee collector because your commission will be gone one day** You cannot work for free. Ask for money and don't be afraid to turn the screen around and tell the client: These are the net rates you see at home but my work costs money. He'll agree to pay – as long as he is convinced you charge net to net and as long he is convinced you do something worth paying for.

Let me conclude by saying this: There is one thing that has not changed in the 41 years that I have been part of this industry. It's still the people. You can have the most elaborate systems but if you don't have the right people with the right skills and especially the right attitude, you will fail. And that's wonderful. Because everybody can have good technology but not everybody can manage people to be successful.

Manage and treat your people well and you'll be fine.



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Travel Hall of Fame



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What Brand Is Right for You?

By David Kong, President and CEO, Best Western International

Are brands necessary in today's Internet Age? What brand is right? While multiple factors need to be weighed before making a decision, the three most important considerations are:

- Are brands necessary?
- Benefits of a global brand compared to a regional or local brand
- Is there ROI to the brand's requirements?

Are brands necessary?

Today, with Online Travel Agents and the ease of setting up search optimized websites, some hoteliers have challenged the need to be affiliated with a brand. I suggest that brands are even more important than ever in this Internet Age. Rooms are often booked sight unseen. What would give travelers comfort and reassurance that if something goes wrong they will be taken care of? Respected global brands that have been around for a long time stand behind their brand promise. They provide the reassurance to book sight unseen.

Benefits of a global brand compared to a regional or local brand

Travelers today are global consumers. When they go to a foreign country, they want to stay at a hotel that is familiar to them. A globally respected brand, such as Best Western with over four thousand hotels, has built a trusted brand reputation through its first 65 years. Related to this point is the importance of a global loyalty program. A brand that offers earnings and redemption opportunities globally will be more preferred by travelers. These global brands have the ability to attract travelers and drive business to their hotels.

Is there ROI to the brand's requirements?

Nobody likes a cookie cutter experience. Travelers are hungry for unique experiences. It's advantageous for hotel owners or operators to choose a brand that provides them with the flexibility and freedom to design and market a hotel to reflect local standards. Best Western believes in setting minimum standards backed by a global Quality Assurance program and empowering our owners and operators to do what it takes to win business. Best Western's goal is to help each hotel effectively compete without frivolous requirements that ultimately reduce ROI.

Hoteliers need to first decide if they're going to survive as an independent property. If the decision is to join a brand, hoteliers need to ensure they're selecting the right brand, with a strong global recognition, a preferred loyalty program and sensible requirements in order to achieve the strongest ROI.



THE WORLD'S LARGEST HOTEL CHAIN®

Bernold O. Schroeder
CEO, Jin Jiang International
Hotel Management Co.

Chinese brands are virtually unknown outside the mainland, a fact that China's leading hotel group intends to change. **Xinlei Wang** gets an insight

Next stop: the world

Why does Jin Jiang want to go global?

China's domestic hotel industry has expanded so rapidly in recent years that there has been a need for a national brand to represent the country's rich culture, history and hospitality.

Moreover, we need to make our mark on the outbound Chinese market. In 2010, 55 million Chinese travelled abroad, and in 10 years this is expected to double. When the Chinese head overseas, many want to stay in a homegrown branded hotel that understands their customs and specific needs, but still meets international standards.

What does being on the international stage mean?

Well, we do have ownership interests abroad, since we own half of US-based Interstate Hotels & Resorts. But we currently have no properties outside of China carrying the Jin Jiang brand name. We want to build our own brand globally.

What brands will you be bringing overseas?

We are keen to develop four- and five-star hotels under the Jin Jiang brand.

The group is also launching a new J brand for our upcoming hotel in Pudong, Shanghai, which is expected to be ready by 2014. The hotel will occupy the 84th to 110th floors within the 121-storey Shanghai Tower, a new iconic landmark. By attracting more international guests to this hotel, Jin Jiang will elevate its global reputation.

What is your global expansion plan? Is there a target number of properties?

I don't like to discuss numbers at such

an early stage. What I can reveal is that we will venture into key destinations in the Asia-Pacific region for the Chinese outbound market as the very first step, such as some capital cities in Asia. We are also looking at resort destinations.

In order to go global, we need to head to Asia-Pacific first. From there, I foresee that we will expand quickly. But we have to be flexible because in today's world, things can change quite quickly.

What about your home market – China? What are your growth plans there?

There are huge opportunities for us to grow even further domestically. China has 2.3 million hotel rooms in operation, but the US has 4.6 million hotel rooms.

“When the Chinese head overseas, many want to stay in a homegrown branded hotel that understands their needs, but still meets international standards.”

However, only 20 per cent of the hotels in China are branded. In contrast, it is 70 per cent or so in the US.

Approximately 120,000 rooms are currently under construction in China. For the next three to five years, China will have an international hotel opening every four days on average.

How do you plan to do this?

Strategically, there are numerous options, but I prefer management contracts, as it leverages on Jin Jiang's strong expertise in managing hotels, making it a true win-win partnership between a property owner and the group.

Also, Jin Jiang will be working very closely with hotel owners from the very beginning to the end, which is the philosophy

MICE. Just like a well-arranged flower bouquet, the cooperation between Jin Jiang and its partners should be a good mix.

What is your competitive advantage compared to other international hotel chains?

First, Jin Jiang is the most established brand known to the mainland Chinese. Second, we are more culturally sensitive towards the needs of our (Chinese) customers and hotel owners. Third, we have better connections with China's second- and third-tier cities than other chains, which provides us with tremendous hotel development opportunities.

What major challenges lie ahead?

In a world where everything is changing faster than ever, the market has become highly unpredictable, and we have to be flexible when planning anything long-term.

There also needs to be a balance. We have to stay true to our Chinese roots even in our overseas operations. However, we have to develop products that blend perfectly into a specific location. For example, a Chinese restaurant at an international hotel without a private dining room that Chinese guests are used to shows that the product is incomplete.

Besides these challenges, hotel chains such as Starwood and Hilton are all trying to cater to the huge number of Chinese overseas travellers. Competition is tense.

What steps will be taken to help the brand meet international standards?

Manpower is key in hotel management. We are looking to hire more young, passionate Chinese employees to join our overseas operations. We intend to have them trained by experienced professionals and have the company's DNA imprinted on their minds.

Meanwhile, there is also a need to find international people who understand Jin Jiang. We envision Chinese employees working alongside foreign staff at our overseas properties.

What's more, we are investing heavily in training. Jin Jiang is one of the shareholders of the Les Roches school in China – one of the world's most reputable hotel management colleges. In addition, we recently sent several executives to the US for training and further education at Cornell.

we want to spread internationally. Plus, we have first-hand access to a fantastic outbound market.

How important are travel agents to Jin Jiang?

In order to internationalise, Jin Jiang needs to build strong relationships with domestic and foreign agencies, wholesalers, online travel agencies and consortia. However, it also needs to look into all tourism segments including corporate, leisure, high-quality groups and





Asia's biggest bargains

Yearly sale seasons are huge moneymakers for destinations when correctly capitalised on



1Malaysia Mega Sale Carnival

By N. Nithiyananthan

Major annual attraction, the 1Malaysia Mega Sale Carnival, is putting the country on the map, as far as serious shopping destinations in Asia are concerned.

Usually held around June 15 to August 31, it targets tourists from the Middle East as well as those on summer holidays.

The Mega Sale Carnival debuted in 2000, and initially focused only on the Kuala Lumpur region. Over the years, it has expanded

to cover the entire country, involving a wide range of shopping malls and centres.

Various shopping packages are promoted

in selected markets overseas through Tourism Malaysia offices, as well as airlines and tour operators. These are supported by advertising campaigns in Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines and Brunei. Fam programmes for the trade and international media have also been organised.

Prior to the organisation of the first Mega Sale Carnival, shopping only constituted 23.1 per cent of total tourist expenditure. Last year, shopping accounted for 28.7 per cent of overall tourism receipts, or RM16.2 billion (US\$5.2 billion).

Indian tourists are keen buyers of electronics such as LCD televisions, Luxury Tours Malaysia senior manager, Arokia Das Anthony, pointed out.

He said: "Malaysia has gained a strong reputation among this market as a great and competitive place for shopping... However, they (Indians) do not specifically come to Malaysia to shop during the Mega Sale Carnival. They shop whenever they come."

To enhance Malaysia's image as a luxury shopping destination, the government decided to waive import duty on about

300 goods valued at more than RM200 from January this year.

The country's other nationwide sale is the 1Malaysia Year-end Sale, which will run from November 15 until January 1.



Jakarta Great Sale Festival

By Mimi Hudoyo

The annual Jakarta Great Sale Festival (JGSF), which has largely been promoted in the domestic market for over a decade, is now being recognised as an event that needs to be highlighted among overseas tourists.

Launched in 1999, the month-long June-July festival is organised by the Indonesia Shopping Centre Association and held in conjunction with the city's anniversary celebration.

This year saw 68 major malls offering mega discounts on products ranging from household items to garments and accessories, netting a transaction value of 8.6 trillion rupiah (US\$966 million) for the entire

event. Some of the centres stayed open past midnight with even more added discounts.

JGSF committee chairman Handaka Santosa said: "The midnight sales managed to draw a 100 per cent increase in visitors compared to normal days and generate significant revenue increase for the malls."

In fact, the festival has seen an annual increase in transaction value by 20 per cent each year since 2009.

Ministry of Culture and Tourism deputy director of promotion-ASEAN region Christiastuti said: "The event has the potential to be promoted in neighbouring countries. We've had a meeting with the JGSF committee to discuss how we can help promote the event regionally, and we hope to be able to start doing it next year."

With some 170 malls in Jakarta and the surrounding area as well as bulk shopping outlets and markets, Jakarta has the potential to grow its shopping festival, said Indo Journey business development director Anthon Johannes.

"We can highlight Indonesia's Muslim fashion wear, for example, as Indonesians are quite fashionable, and there is a huge

variety of products," he said.

"As the event takes place during the summer holiday season, travellers who happen to be in Jakarta do take advantage (of the sale) to shop, but we have not packaged it to attract tourists from the Middle East and India, our key markets.

Johannes added that there should also be incentives to shop such as the chance to win gold in the Dubai Shopping Festival.



Great Singapore Sale

By Linda Haden

Singapore's country-wide sale remains popular, with agents noting a strong take-up for the Great Singapore Sale (GSS) packages among regional travellers, especially females and families.

Held annually from May to July, the GSS overlaps with not only the local school holidays and peak travel periods within



the region, but other major festivities on the city-state's event calendar, including the Singapore Arts Festival and the Singapore Food Festival.

First organised in 1994 as a four-week shopping season, the GSS was extended to eight weeks in 2004. It is organised by the Singapore Retailers Association.

Although exact figures are not yet available, SRA expects retail sales during this year's GSS to hit a high of S\$5.5 billion (US\$4.3 billion), based on the Singapore Tourism Board's tourist arrival estimates. Retail sales generated during the 2010 GSS amounted to S\$5.3 billion, a 5.5 per cent increase over the same period in 2009.

Nonetheless, according to figures released by Mastercard, a main GSS sponsor, visiting cardholders spent US\$453 million and made 2.1 million transactions during the sale, a roughly 44 per cent and 22 per cent year-on-year increase respectively. Cardholders from the US, Malaysia, Australia, Indonesia and Japan emerged as the top foreign spenders at the GSS, consistent with 2010.

Riding on such buoyant demand, agents in Singapore have developed packages incorporating the GSS, bundling them with accommodation, spas and restaurants.

Yvonne Low, executive director, The Traveller DMC, said: "Many clients from neighbouring countries always wait for this event to do their annual shopping in Singapore. Naturally, our GSS packages, which are aimed at South-east Asia travellers, are popular with the ladies and the family segment."

However, she hopes for more collaboration between retailers and agents. "Very often, shopping centres do not communicate to inbound agents about their GSS plans in order for us

to pass on the information to travellers," said Low.

Next year's GSS is scheduled to run from May 25 to July 22.



Hong Kong Summer Spectacular

By Andrew Dembina

Almost synonymous with Hong Kong's summer season, the city's popular sales from June to August are proving to be a strong pull factor, especially for shorthaul markets.

The Hong Kong Tourism Board (HKTb) introduced the first-ever Hong Kong Shopping Festival in 2002. In 2009, it was incorporated into a signature mega event known as the Hong Kong Summer Spectacular. In the last two years, the NTO also jointly rolled out the Visa Go Hong Kong Super Shopper contest, offering extra benefits to cardholders.

According to HKTb's statistics, between June and August, visitor arrivals from shorthaul markets, including the mainland, shot up by 22 per cent year-on-year.

Also on the rise is visitor spending in general. In the first half of this year, the per capita spending of overnight visitors amounted to HK\$7,178 (US\$923), at least 10 per cent higher than what was recorded in the same period last year.

"Approximately 50 to 60 per cent of overnight visitor spending was on shopping," said HKTb executive director Anthony Lau.

China Travel Service (HK) supervisor, Hong Kong and Macau sales centre administration, Jay Wang, noted that his mainland

"Repeat customers focus on shopping areas, some taking our packages twice a year for the seasonal clearance sales."

Jay Wang

Supervisor, Hong Kong and Macau sales centre administration China Travel Service (HK)



clients often booked packages during the summer and winter sales in Hong Kong.

"Repeat customers focus on shopping areas, some taking our packages twice a year for the seasonal clearance sales. They are attracted by Hong Kong's duty-free prices and non-fake goods."

"We also have a number of high-end customers who we get special rates for in top hotels; they go to Hong Kong specifically for high-end shopping," he said.

However, the sales are just one of the draws, Wang pointed out. The first-time mainland visitors to Hong Kong, for example, split their trip equally between sightseeing and shopping.

Richard Woss, managing director, ATI Travel (Hong Kong) added that when it came to European clientele, the Summer Spectacular was also not as important.

"(Summer) is our low season...For us the biggest events are the Wine & Dine, Winter Fest and Chinese New Year."



Amazing Thailand Grand Sale

By Sirima Eamtako

Thailand's biggest shopping extravaganza, the annual Amazing Thailand Grand Sale,

had its most successful run this year, said Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) governor Suraphon Svetasreni. The two-month sale was credited for boosting the economic recovery of post-recession Thailand.

Running from June 15 to August 15, the sale was first held in 1998 to stimulate the Thai economy, which was hit by the financial crisis the year before. It was also introduced to coincide with the country's then newly-launched tourism campaign, *Amazing Thailand*.

According to the sale's preferred partner Visa, foreign cardholders spent 27.4 billion baht (US\$886.75 million) during this year's sale, representing a 34 per cent year-on-year increase.

Visa country manager, Thailand, Somboon Krobteeran, said the results showed that "Thailand is regarded as a premier shopping destination in Asia".

Spending by Asia-Pacific travellers featured strongly in this year's sale, with Australia, Japan and Singapore among the top 10 markets. The others were the US, the UK, Norway, France, the UAE, Sweden and Germany, with the last bouncing back with increased spending.

The top-spend categories, excluding airfare and accommodation, were jewellery, hospitals and duty-free.

Visa attributed the healthy results to its joint roadshows with TAT ahead of the sale period in key source markets, Visa-led marketing campaigns, as well as related activities organised in conjunction with client banks and merchants.

It said these helped encourage greater spending from key markets, including Singapore, Vietnam, the Philippines, China, Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, Oman, the UAE, Bahrain and Qatar.

The Amazing Thailand Grand Sale is expected to be continued next year during the usual two-month period.

Asians are top spenders globally, with China leading the charge

Travellers from China generated the most Tax Free Shopping (TFS) sales worldwide in 2010, according to financial services company Global Blue, best known for its VAT/GST refund service.

This is the first time that China has topped the survey, beating

Russia, Japan, the US and Indonesia, in order of importance.

Chinese travellers spent 1.3 billion euros (US\$1.8 billion) in 2010, a significant 95 per cent jump from 2009.

Amounts spent on destination shopping grew strongly last year, particularly among travellers from Brazil, China, Indonesia and Russia, noted Global Blue.

Its 2010 data also showed that the top five destinations for TFS sales were France, the UK, Italy, Singapore and Germany.

In Singapore, the total number of transactions grew by 26 per cent compared to 2009, with Indonesians recording the highest total spending, followed by China, Malaysia, India and Australia. Watch and jewellery were the

most sought-after items.

Global Blue Singapore country manager Doreen Tan explained that although Indonesians were currently the forerunners, "the average spend by Indonesians seemed to be dropping by the year".

Based on last year's performance, Indonesian travellers spent an average of S\$909 (US\$716), compared to S\$1,929 by Chinese travellers.

Recognising the importance of Asian shoppers, Tan pointed out that Global Blue was stepping up its collaboration with travel agencies in the key markets of China, Russia and Japan.

Its in-agency kiosks are used

for direct promotions such as custom catalogues, shopping guides and VIP invites, allowing brands to reach out to potential customers even at the trip planning stage. It partners some 114 travel agents in China, 23 in Russia and three in Japan.

Global Blue, which was rebranded from Global Refund last February, now also offers a suite of other non-refund-related products and services, including advertising, promotions, market intelligence and education.

It works with over 27,000 retailers, shopping brands and hotels in more than 40 countries, and serves over 60,000 travellers daily. - Gracia Chiang



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Courtesy of Sala Samui

Samui gets a bump up

Trade is banking on new, direct regional routes to stimulate business, writes **Sirima Eamtako**

Arrivals Data from the Ministry of Tourism and Sports showed that Koh Samui recorded 785,281 visitors last year, a 12.6 per cent drop from 2009, and generated a 9.2 billion baht (US\$296.3 million) revenue, a 60.5 per cent drop, as visitors' average length of stay dipped from 8.3 days to 3.8 days. Year-to-date figures were not available.

However, Bangkok Airways, which operates the majority of flights to and from Koh Samui, reported that it handled 581,910 passengers on 7,057 flights between the island and Singapore, Bangkok and Hong Kong from January to June. Last year's figure was 1.1 million passengers on 13,960 flights for those routes.

Airlines Koh Samui, which generates the bulk of its traffic from Bangkok, now has more direct regional flights. Silkair plans to increase the frequency of its new Singapore-Samui route, from three to five flights per week before year-end, just three months after it launched the service on September 27. Bangkok Airways is its codeshare partner on those flights. Silkair also codeshares on

Bangkok Airways' Singapore-Samui, Bangkok-Samui, Samui-Phuket and Chiang Mai-Samui routes.

Next summer, Bangkok Airways will launch a daily Samui-Kuala Lumpur service and increase Samui-Hong Kong service from one to two flights daily.

Bangkok Airways operates 30 flights daily from domestic and regional destinations, while Thai Airways International has two flights daily from Bangkok. Weekly, from Kuala Lumpur, Firefly operates four flights and Berjaya Air, two.

As for infrastructure, Samui Airport plans to spend 50 million baht next year to expand its terminal facilities.

NTO Saiphayom Somsuk, chief of Koh Samui Tourism Coordination Centre, Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), said its continued focus would be upmarket tourists from Europe and Asia, with emphasis on honeymooners, weddings and families. Europeans account for 60 per cent of overall visitors, she added.

"We are looking at increasing the numbers from China, India and Russia, but with caution,



"The codeshare on Silkair's Singapore-Samui service will allow us to drive more traffic from Singapore and longhaul markets connecting from Changi Airport."

Puttipong Prasarttong-Osoth
President
Bangkok Airways

as Koh Samui is suitable for the high-end FIT market and not mainstream," she said.

Koh Samui was also recently selected by TAT to be promoted as one of four green tourism destinations within the country to high-end visitors.

Hotels Average occupancy rate (AOR) for hotels in Koh Samui was 62 per cent in the first eight months, up from 50 per cent during the same period last year, according to Bannasat Ruangjan, president of the Tourism Association of Koh Samui. He expects an "island-wide AOR of 60 per cent for the entire year".

Koh Samui has about 17,000 rooms, with more than 4,000 of them in the four- and five-star categories.

Bannasat said the four- and five-star hotels run at an average room rate of 7,000 baht to 8,000 baht a night. "Top-end and international-branded properties are fetching above 10,000 baht a night," he added.

Hotel openings in the first nine months were the 144-room Nora Buri Resort & Spa, 81-room Outrigger Koh Samui Resort and Spa, 61-room Akira Chura Samui, 80-room Conrad

Koh Samui and 77-room Le Meridien Koh Samui Resort & Spa.

In the pipeline are the 77-room rebranded Intercontinental Samui Baan Taling Ngam Resort, 81-room Mövenpick Resort & Spa Mae Nam Beach, 180-room Vana Belle Samui Resort & Spa and 220-room Ozo Samui.

MICE The prospect of better MICE business has prompted Bangkok-based DMC, Oriental Events, to open a Koh Samui branch in December. CEO and managing director Worapot Srabua said the company saw increased MICE demand for Koh Samui, due to the growth in the number of luxury hotel brands and regional flights.

Vorasit Pongkumpunt, business development and marketing vice president of Nora Resorts and Hotels, said improved air links from Singapore would attract MICE groups of around 50 to 100 delegates. "This was not possible in the past due to limited air seats," he said.

Singapore-based Fortune Travel manager Gwen Ong similarly expects more MICE enquiries with Silkair's new Samui service and its codeshare flights with Bangkok Airways.

A happy outlook

Airline to add new routes, planes and a subsidiary

By Sirima Eamtako

Thai Airways International (THAI) is pushing through with plans to expand its route network, upgrade its fleet and launch a light-premium subsidiary, THAI Smile Air, next year.

For starters, the national carrier will launch a direct, thrice-weekly Bangkok-Brussels service from November 17 (*TTG Asia e-Daily*, June 28).

THAI president Piyasvasti Amranand said the airline would become the only South-east Asian carrier to operate non-stop flights on the route, targeting outbound traffic from South-east Asia to Europe and vice versa.

The new route will coincide with a special, direct thrice-weekly Phuket-Copenhagen route from November 11 for the winter timetable.

THAI is also implementing a modernisation programme for its fleet, aiming to reduce the average age of its aircraft from 11.7 years now to 8.5 years in 2017 and eight years by 2024, decommissioning about 21 ageing planes in the process.

It is set to receive seven Airbus A330-300s and eight Boeing 777-300ERs between this year and 2013, while six A380-800s will be added to the fleet within the next two years.

Fleet upgrade

37

Number of new aircraft that THAI will order in 2011-2017

In addition, the airline has been given the green light to order 37 new aircraft between this year and 2017, including six B777-300ERs, eight B787s, 11 A320s and 12 A350s. It is also planning the second phase of its acquisition of 38 new aircraft between 2018 and 2022.

Meanwhile, THAI's plan to launch a light-premium airline, THAI Smile Air, is progressing, with 40 pilots expected to be recruited in October and 100 female cabin crew in November.

THAI Smile Air managing director Woranate Laprabang said the carrier was established in response to high demand for a more price-sensitive product in shorthaul sectors.

"Think of (THAI Smile Air) as a competitive hybrid between premium THAI flights and ultra-cheap, low-cost carriers like Airasia and Tiger Airways," he said.

THAI Smile Air will offer complimentary meal and drink service, free passenger seat selection, fast check-in procedures, 15-20kg of baggage allowance and accrual of frequent flyer mileage on both THAI and the Star Alliance network.

The airline will have a fleet of 11 174-seat A320s, with the first aircraft delivery expected in June 2012 and the rest between August 2012 and March 2013. The carrier is scheduled to operate flights to five domestic destinations from July 1.

It also expects to operate flights to India, China and most South-east Asian countries in its second year of operation.

To drum up demand, THAI Smile Air plans to launch promotional campaigns early next year through the Internet, including Facebook, as well as on mobile phone applications. It will also offer membership cards and discount coupons.



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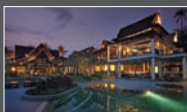
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My choices

Koh Samui

Compiled by Sirima Eamtako



Marvin Tan
Chief executive
Silkair

What is your biggest challenge now?

I do not see any major challenges at this point. As for natural disasters, we must all learn to deal with crisis. The economic situation in Europe is a concern, but hopefully it will be resolved soon.

What needs to be done?

The Tourism Authority of Thailand and Koh Samui's local authorities are already very aggressive in promoting the island. But we are hoping to cooperate more for joint promotions in overseas markets.

What do you want from...

the local authorities? We would like to do joint promotions in overseas markets. We are looking at Singapore, Australia and Japan as main markets. Europe will still remain as the traditional market despite worries over the current economic situation.

What are the prospects for the rest of the year?

We expect to operate our new Singapore-Samui service at a high load factor due to strong demand. We are hoping to increase our frequency from three to five flights per week by year-end.



Bannasat Ruangjan
President
Tourism Association of Koh Samui

Limited direct air access versus oversupply of hotel rooms. China is a new market, but we are still working on building it up, as they normally travel in groups and current air seat capacity is not favourable for this.

All concerned stakeholders are already working together to address problems hindering tourism growth. But we need to push further through limitations such as high airfares, especially in attracting the local market.

airlines? We would like to attract more domestic travellers during the low seasons, in May-June and October-November, and lower airfares will be the key factor for Thai travellers. Through collaboration with Bangkok Airways, we are seeing some results.

During the current low season, we hope to get traffic from regional markets. We expect better business for this year and the next, as we are seeing new markets and more regional flights.



Ramnate Chaikwang
Mayor
Koh Samui municipality

The imbalance between Koh Samui's oversupply of hotel rooms and the number of direct flights. Flying to Surat Thani then taking a ferry is inconvenient. The island's infrastructure also needs improvement.

We need to work together to address the issues of limited flights and room oversupply. For infrastructure, we received 800 million baht (US\$25.8 million) after the flood in end-March and have been investing in prevention systems for many areas on the island.

hotel developers? We would suggest that they carry out a proper feasibility study before deciding to build another hotel on Koh Samui. We do not want more hotels.

Infrastructure improvements will continue until next year. In terms of visitor numbers, the economic situation in Europe is a worry, but we hope the impact would not be severe. Silkair's new flight will help us.



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Perak's Temenggor Lake is one of the state's best-kept secrets

N. Nithiyananthan



Undiscovered beauty

Low-profile state is seeking more foreigners with Visit Perak Year 2012, says **N. Nithiyananthan**

Arrivals Sandwiched between Selangor and Penang, Perak currently draws mostly domestic tourists. Of its three million visitors in 2010, about 95 per cent were domestic. Singaporeans are the state's main source of international tourists.

Perak Chief Minister, Dr Zambry Abdul Kadir, said: "We are still working on the target for 2012. However, of the increase in the number of tourists that we are aiming for, we want at least 40 per cent of them to be international visitors, with Singaporeans as our main target."

NTO To boost its image as a tourism destination, the state government declared 2012 as Visit Perak Year, dividing Perak into five clusters for easier packaging.

"The five clusters are Belum and Lenggong; Taiping; Kuala Kangsar; Ipoh; and Pangkor," said Hamidah Osman, chairman of the state committee responsible for tourism. "From the clusters, three-day, two-night packages will be developed."

Perak's capital Ipoh, as well as Taiping and Kuala Kangsar are urban centres rich in history and

heritage. Pangkor is a popular beach resort, Belum has one of the oldest rainforests in the world and Lenggong is an archaeologically-rich area.

Products In addition to the development of the five clusters, a history and heritage trail as well as a food trail are being packaged.

"The food trail is especially targeted at Singaporeans," Zambry said.

Ipoh-based Syuen Tours Travel & Leisure general manager May Wong thinks the food trail will do well. "I already have customers from Singapore who regularly visit Ipoh just to try out the food," she said.

Singapore-based Citiskies Travel Mart customer service manager Liyana Ahmad Kamal added: "Having visited Belum and Lenggong, I know that such a package is sellable to adventurous travellers. I'm not sure about heritage though. It will be hard for Ipoh to compete with Malacca, which is well established."

On that front, the state government is working with the Ministry of Information, Communication and Culture to get a Unesco World Heritage Site



"Of the increase in the number of tourists that we are aiming for, we want at least 40 per cent of them to be international visitors, with Singaporeans as our main target."

Dr Zambry Abdul Kadir
Chief Minister
Perak

listing for the archaeological site at Lenggong, where the remains of the ancient Perak Man were found, said to date back to 11,000 years ago.

Hotels The number of hotel guests in 2010 declined by 12 per cent compared to 2009, from 2.5 million to 2.2 million. Despite the trend, Ipoh theme park Lost World of Tambun is confident that increasing the inventory of its Lost World Hotel will help it to take on bigger groups and push up its occupancy rate.

Having opened in May with 96 rooms, it will add another 78 on December 1. The park also recently opened its latest attraction, the Lost World Tin Valley, in August (see page 18).

Lost World of Tambun general manager Calvin Ho said: "The new block is to cater to families wanting a longer stay at the park. We expect an occupancy rate of 60 to 70 per cent with the increased inventory."

While consistently running at 100 per cent occupancy during weekends, the hotel currently averages a 50 per cent occupancy.

Iwan Yang, head of Singapore-based agency Lokopoko Travel,

was also optimistic that the Lost World of Tambun packages would be popular among Singaporeans.

As for other developments, the five-star Ipoh Riverside Hotel and serviced apartment complex is expected to open next year.

Access Firefly, which operates the Ipoh-Singapore route twice daily, provides the only scheduled flight service to the state. This route reportedly generates the best load factor for the airline.

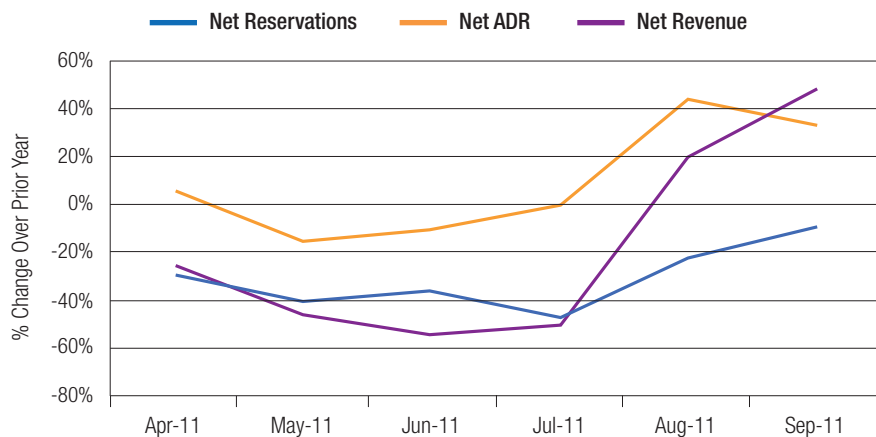
According to Zambry, the government is expecting other carriers to have direct flights to Ipoh next year. While details are not available yet, the trade expects at least one airline to be from Medan in neighbouring Sumatra.

Ipoh's Sultan Azlan Shah Airport is currently undergoing refurbishment work in anticipation of more airlines and bigger aircraft.

Served by six electric train services daily, land transfers to Ipoh from Kuala Lumpur are also being promoted. The journey is two hours' long. Alternatively, visitors can get to Perak using the highway that connects Selangor and Penang.

Malaysia's improving leisure arrivals

Leisure-focused ADS channel results



	Sep 2011	Sep 2010	% change
Net average length of stay (nights)	3.03	2.59	16.8
Net average booking lead time (days)	49.16	38.45	27.8

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.

The immediate impact of Japan's March disaster on arrivals to Malaysia has lessened. As seen in the graph, leisure reservations from the alternative distribution channel (ADS) for the month of September are within 10 per cent of reservations made for September last year.

Average daily rate (ADR) has fared better than bookings, rising back to prior-year levels in July and surpassing the prior year by double-digit percentage margins in August and September. It is the upswing in ADR growth, combined with improved booking performance, which has driven the strong revenue gains over the prior year seen in August and September.

Japan arrivals are not back to levels prior to the crisis, but they are improving. Financial market stress placed on the global economy, however, is taking its toll on arrivals from Europe and the US. Malaysia also faces competition from neighbouring destinations like Singapore.

One positive attribute that bodes well for Malaysia's ongoing performance is the average number of nights per trip or

length of stay (LOS). Malaysia's average leisure LOS in September of 3.03 nights is greater than the global average of 1.97 nights and the 1.98 average outside North America. What's most notable is that while the global average number of nights has trended approximately the same as last year, Malaysia's has increased.

Another optimistic sign is its average booking lead time of 49.16 days in September, exceeding the global average of 16.43 days and the average outside North America of 25.64 days. Average booking lead time also grew by 27.8 per cent over last September, a dramatically greater margin than the global average increase of 3.2 per cent.

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. For regional trends, visit www.pegs.com/thepegasusview.

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Hotels, resorts jump on high-end bandwagon

By N. Nithiyananthan

Malaysia's goal of becoming a high-income nation by 2020 – with the help of tourism – is seeing hotels and resorts taking steps to move up the value chain.

Tourism Minister, Dr Ng Yen Yen, said: "Tourism Malaysia has set its sights on the target of receiving 36 million tourist arrivals by the year 2020 and RM168 billion (US\$55 billion) in tourism (earnings).

"This means the industry will grow by three times and tourism will contribute RM3 billion in receipts per week to the country in 2020."

Of the 12 initiatives identified to achieve this target, one of them involves improving the rates, mix and quality of hotels. In response, hotels are also pulling out the stops to attract higher-spending clientele.

With the recently completed rebranding of the Genting Hotel to Maxims Genting, Resorts World Genting (RWG) is now gearing towards the luxury market. RWG marketing manager Andrew Leong said: "We run at an average occupancy rate of 95 per cent year round. With demand

outstripping supply, the natural trend was to go upmarket."

Rates start from RM500 and RM900 a night depending on the season, compared to RM280 and RM480 previously.

The property's pride is the Royal Suite. "As the most exclusive of all our suites and residences, the Royal Suite has five bedrooms, which make up a total of (1,207m²)," said Leong.

"This suite also has an outdoor garden where private functions can be hosted. It even has its own helipad for guests to arrive and leave in style – weather permitting – with the guarantee of privacy," he added.

Singapore, China, India and the Middle East continue to be Maxims Genting's core markets.

Near Ipoh, The Banjaran Hotsprings Retreat opened last year as a five-star sanctuary consisting of 25 luxury villas. Located in a valley and spanning more than six hectares, it has gained a reputation for programmes based on Malay, Chinese and Indian spa and wellness traditions, espe-



Luxury touches at the Maxims Genting

cially with its own hot springs.

"Rates for a villa start from RM1,800," said Carl Selvarajah, spokesperson for The Banjaran. "Our target markets include Singapore, Japan, India, China and more recently, the Middle East," he added.

The property is also hosting French celebrity chef and owner of Pousse Pousse restaurant in Paris, Lawrence Aboucaya, for two weeks in October to introduce organic vegetarian cuisine to customers,

said Selvarajah.

Meanwhile, the premier Datai Langkawi, which is now managed by Archipelago Hotels and Resorts, is adding 14 beach villas to its property. Construction, which started in July, is scheduled for completion in November 2012.

Berjaya Hotels & Resorts also rebranded Berjaya Redang Resort as the Taaras Beach & Spa Resort in July and handed over management to the Taaras Luxury Group.

"As a result of this transition, rates have gone up," said Mayflower Acme Tours head-inbound division, international sales, Andy Soo. "The facilities are also different, as they have moved into making the resort a spa destination."

Soo said most of the recent developments involved smaller properties catering to a niche market.

"They are in line with the government's ETP (economic transformation programme). While they are expensive, the pick-up rate is not too bad. We have takers," he added.

Test drive

Lost World of Tambun

 **N. Nithiyananthan** experiences first-hand one of Perak's most-visited theme parks – and vows to come back for more

WHY The Lost World of Tambun in Ipoh is easily one of Perak's biggest tourist attractions, drawing 600,000 visitors yearly. A visit to this Malaysian state is not considered complete without this experience. Set against an impressive backdrop of lush limestone hills, it is apparent that the theme park was created with the natural eco-system in mind, which was definitely a plus in my book.

WHAT While the theme park features six main areas – water park, amusement park, tiger valley, hot springs, petting zoo and tin valley – I was especially interested in the last three. After all, water parks and amusements parks are more common elsewhere, and I unfor-

tunately was not able to include the tiger-feeding session during my visit due to timing issues.

HOW Due to the park's sheer size of over 16 hectares, I decided to visit the park twice, over the course of an afternoon and the next morning.

The hot springs area features a variety of pools, with temperatures ranging from 28 degree Celsius to 42 degree Celsius, not unlike the *bains* (baths) in Switzerland.

To get to the Top of the World – a Jacuzzi pool complete with water jets providing hydro-massage reportedly good for soothing muscles, joints and pressure points – one must navigate other pools in the lower levels via a 'foot spa' pool with reflexology pebbles fitted to the floor.

If taking a dip at the Top of the World is not enough, one can head to the Crystal Spa for more pampering.

Capitalising on the tin mine that was previously located here, the park incorporated this into the latest product it launched



Lost World Tin Valley

Courtesy of Lost World of Tambun

in August – the Lost World Tin Valley. Visitors learn how to be a *dulang* washer (tin panner) and experience *dulang* washing in a pond that still contains tin, under the guidance of former tin miners. A life-sized *palung* (sluice box) and original gravel pump monitor are available for the activity.

For me, however, the highlight of the park was the petting zoo, an area spanning 10,000m² framed by the rainforest back-

drop. Animals of various shapes, species and colours, from raccoons to peacocks and macaws, freely roamed the area and shared space with visitors, in a setting reminiscent of the movie *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective*.

The more daring, with the assistance of park staff, could try to hold a badger or lift a python onto their shoulders.

VERDICT I am keen on returning in November, when the Lost

Name Lost World of Tambun
Rate RM45 (US\$15) for adults and RM38 for children
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www.sunway.com.my/lostworldoftambun

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An invitation **THAI** *temple fair*

After a long and productive day at IT&CMA and CTW 2011, delegates had their chance to relax and enjoy a night of Thai partying at Courtyard by Marriott Bangkok. A Thai Temple Fair materialized within Courtyard by Marriott Bangkok, bringing with it traditional food, drinks, games, and even Birthday Buddhas for delegates to wish upon. Topped off with a jazz band, the fun-filled event had delegates dancing late into the night.

The hosts of the evening, Courtyard by Bangkok Marriott and TTG Asia Media, ham it up for the camera. ➤



Courtyard by Marriott's Salisa Sangyimphan (left) and Executive PA's James Brome share a toast.



From Left: Marriott Hotels' Apiradee Ramdit, ASK Marketing & Sales' Jesse Koh, Classic Travel Co., Ltd's Elena Grigoryeva, and Anthony Tours' Anthony Lim and Sherlyn Liu.



Marriott's Linyakorn Sae-Tae (centre) with TATA Capital Limited's A V N Rao (left) and Prasad M V B V.



From Left: Ultimate Copier Sdn Bhd's Tan Kok Soon, Marriott's Kewalin Sukumjittanon and Stephanie Anantachotkakul, and Chem-Fil Laundry Services' Freddy Loh.



TTG Asia Media's Karen Cheung (second left) and Linda Haden (right) with Mekong Tourism's Mason Florence (left) and PATA's Alexander Rayner.



From Left: Classis Travels & Tours' Rajendra Dhumma, Movenpick's Adisorn Srisophon, All Seasons Chiang Mai Hotel's Nerisa Wangkarat and IMR Group's BP Tan.



Best Travel Deal's Patrick Lee (left) and Leisure Travels' Rajiv Gupta with TTG Asia Media's Karen Yue.



Dove Travels's Ashwani K. Gupta (left) and CF Public Relations's Cristina Figueira.



TTG Asia Media's Michael Chow (left) and Marwintours Thailand's Yupha Moonsarn.



Lic. Gustavo Schwindt of Viajes Memorables shows off his tattoo and a rakish grin.

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Continued from page 1

Meetings being moved

“We heard some news about the flood when it first happened, but have received no updates since,” Owens explained. “Because of a lack of media coverage and updates, most people don’t know if the situation has recovered or what’s being done to fix it.”

Ewan Gray, director Asia Pacific, Skyscanner, reported a 19 per cent dip in the number of searches via its websites for international flights into Thailand over a period of five days in mid-October, compared to the same period in September.

Patrick Lee, regional director, Best Travel Deals Singapore, had to relocate four incentive and meeting groups, scheduled for Bangkok over the next three months, to Jakarta, Bandung and Bali. “The news is not helping, and clients would rather be safe than sorry. At least business is still there and you don’t lose the groups entirely,” he said.



Lee: had to relocate groups

‘It’s a monopoly’

Sabah, Sarawak trade concerned Firefly’s exit will push up prices

By Brian Higgs

SINGAPORE The travel trade in Sabah and Sarawak believes that Firefly’s impending discontinuation of flights from Kuala Lumpur to Kuching and Sibu in Sarawak, and to Kota Kinabalu and Sandakan in Sabah will create a monopoly, push up prices and curtail short- and longhaul traffic into the region.

Coming on the heels of the decision to shut Firefly’s Johor hub offering direct flights to Kuching and Kota Kinabalu, Kevin Nila, regional marketing manager, Malaysia & Singapore, Sarawak Tourism Board, said the twin exits would only benefit AirAsia, Firefly’s only other budget competitor on the routes.

“It’s a monopoly now,” he said. “There’s no more freedom to choose your own airline. It’s like having a single telco with full control over the entire region.”

Noredah Othman, senior marketing manager, Sabah Tourism Board, agreed with her Sarawak



Noredah: no competition

counterpart, saying although Malaysia Airlines (MAS) offered a deluge of flights into both state capitals, they were premium category, and Firefly’s exit had removed the only barrier discouraging AirAsia from raising its fares.

She said: “Firefly provided good competition for AirAsia. Travellers are very price-conscious nowadays, and there are never enough flights into Kota Kinabalu.”

“Previously we had 80 MAS, 63 AirAsia and 42 Firefly flights from Kuala Lumpur per week. Some 8,000 weekly seats will no longer be available once Firefly pulls out.

“My main concern is Sandakan, which receives a lot of longhaul from Australia through Kuala Lumpur.”

Charlie Chan, director-operations & sales, Kota Kinabalu-based Borneo Passages, was another who predicted that AirAsia fares to East Malaysia would see a subsequent increase.

“AirAsia rates will go up for sure. For MAS and AirAsia, their rate is always ‘right’; their attitude is that ‘it’s my rate, not your rate,’” he said.

Noraini Ahmad, sales manager, Peninsular Malaysia, Borneo Convention Centre Kuching, said rates on AirAsia’s flights from Kuala Lumpur to Kuching were already increasing at an alarming rate. “During peak season, they are even more expensive than MAS tickets,” she said.

Yip Lai Pheng, director of sales & marketing, Pullman Kuching, said she was worried the reduction of capacity into Kuching would affect the hotel’s business from West Malaysia.

“Our main market is West Malaysia, especially from Kuala Lumpur and Johor Bahru. If you don’t have flights, you don’t have business. There’s no other way to get into Kuching,” she said. “Firefly had an average of five to seven flights a day into Kuching. Can you imagine how this reduces the number of people? This dampens the flow not only into Pullman, but other hotels.”

Firefly to manage a premium airline

LOWER-than-expected load factors had been the rationale to cut Firefly’s low-cost jet operations, consistent with MAS Group’s plans to consolidate operations after its cooperative agreement with AirAsia earlier this year.

According to a source in the travel trade, additional plans for the group’s Project Sapphire initiative would see the launch in third quarter next year of a new regional premium airline, using a fleet of B737-800s and B737-400s with seats configured in two classes. To be managed by Firefly, the name for the new carrier has yet to be decided.

Firefly’s turboprop operations, also due to be reconfigured into two classes, will be utilised for the shorthaul premium segment, while MAS will serve the medium and longhaul premium sectors.

AirAsia and AirAsiaX will target budget shorthaul and budget longhaul routes, respectively. — Brian Higgs



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Wacik out, Dr Marie in

By Mimi Hudoyo

SINGAPORE As part of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono’s Cabinet reshuffle, Dr Marie Eka Pangestu has been named Minister of Tourism and Creative Economy.

She was formerly Minister of Trade.

Her predecessor, Jero Wacik, who held the position of Minister of Culture and Tourism, is now Minister of Energy and Mineral Resources.

Dr Sapta Nurwandar, who was director-general of tourism marketing, is now vice minister of the new tourism ministry.

The trade hails the combination of tourism with ‘creative economy’.

Hotel Santika Jogjakarta general manager Ari Respati said: “I think Ibu Marie and Pak Sapta make a good combination. Both are professionals with good track record in their capacities. If they can work together, it will be positive for tourism.”

Sintesa Peninsula Manado executive assistant manager Jonathan Moku said: “Marie Pangestu recently held a conference in Manado to promote investment in Indonesia to international buyers. The feedback was positive.”

Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy director of international promotions Nia Niscaya said: “Ibu Marie has very good relations with China. We hope she will repeat her success in bringing business from China with tourism, and also bring tourists from other parts of the world, of course.”

She added: “Creative economy development has been her baby and this will help strengthen the tourism sector. In the meantime, Pak Sapta is the right man in tourism.”

“The way I see it, it’s two positive energies combined and we are just waiting for the positive boom in the sector.”

Continued from page 1

Young, design-led brand appeals to son

open in Bangkok early next year. A So in Mumbai will also open in 2015.

So pitches itself as an edgy, trendy, technology-savvy brand, with a “big personality” in design, art or culture providing the final touch, creating a “signature” logo and decorative piece to give the property its designer feel. Kenzo Takada did it for So Mauritius, while in Bangkok, it was Christian Lacroix. The personality for So Singapore will be announced within three months.



Asok Kumar Hiranandani (left) and son Bobby

Hiranandani said he left it to his son, Bobby, to pick “the tender, price and brand”. Bobby said: “Going forward, you need something more young, more design – that’s what attracted me to So primarily.”

RGH was formed in 2010, after Hiranandani split with his brother. They led the then Royal Brothers.

So Sofitel Singapore marks Bobby’s leadership at RGH, which is also announcing next week the operator for its boutique hotel in Chinatown.