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No. 1650/January 13 – 19, 2012

SELLING TRAVEL
HAS CHANGED. BE THE
CHANGE
THAT YOU
WANT TO SEE.
FLIP OVER FOR
YOUR INSPIRATION TO
CHANGE

Welcome to 2012. We know the business is changing, so we’ve devoted our first issue of the year to you – our dear travel experts. May the new year bring many new opportunities your way!

Undergoing metamo



Wee Hee Ling
CEO
CTC Travel



Michael Lee
Director
Luxury Tours & Travel



Juliana Gan
General manager, outbound travel
Dynasty Travel International



Pham Ha
CEO
Luxury Travel



Helen Xu
Managing director, sales & distribution
Panorama Tours Indonesia

Offline buying online

WHO CTC Travel, a Singapore-based travel company providing leisure and corporate services, well known for its outbound packages.

WHAT Last month, it announced that it had acquired an 80 per cent stake in Singapore-based MISA Travel, whose strength lies in online travel ticketing services. MISA's various online ticketing channels will now come under CTC, including airfares.com.sg, hotels.com.sg, cruises.com.sg, getaways.com.sg, resorts.com.sg, land-tours.com.sg and rails.com.sg.

The two companies will retain their separate brand identities, although there will be some integration in the areas of product development, marketing, human resources and finance. For instance, CTC-designed products will be sold on MISA's numerous websites, which might be enhanced with live-booking capabilities at a later stage.

WHY With technological know-how provided by MISA, CTC will now be able to tap the burgeoning online booking space, reaching out to new markets.

"MISA Travel's online portals stand to offer instant access, affordable options for travel products which will provide an opportunity to manage distressed air tickets and hotel inventory for all travellers", said CEO Wee Hee Ling. The merger marks the beginning of CTC's three-year plan, which includes expanding its corporate travel services such as MICE and inbound tours.

— Linda Haden

B2C + B2B

WHO Luxury Tours & Travel, a Singapore-based tour operator that provides a range of services from hotel reservations to seat-in coach tours.

WHAT It launched the Singapore Tripper Pass last November, a two- or three-day pass that includes entrance to 18 attractions in Singapore, while also acting as a cashcard for public transport.

Luxury is also signing white label agreements with travel companies across Asia, allowing their products to be featured on its website. A revamped site will be unveiled this year.

In addition, the company is in the process of closing its tour desks in Singapore and migrating all its products online.

WHY Director Michael Lee explained that competition was intensifying among offline and online players in Singapore, and profit margins were shrinking. Alternative sources of revenue were needed, he added.

"Travel companies that work with us through our white label agreements will have an additional means of revenue while we earn commission. Conversely, the Singapore Tripper Pass will enable us to reach out directly to consumers without alienating our existing business partners," Lee said. — Linda Haden

Moving upmarket

WHO Dynasty Travel International, a Singapore-based travel company that sells mainly outbound tours.

WHAT In 2010, it launched the Royale Dynasty brand and opened a Royale Dynasty retail outlet at Marina Bay Sands, targeting high net worth clients. The new brand caters to Singaporeans willing to spend more on top-tier experiences, as well as inbound travellers keen on local or regional sightseeing trips. Services include private jet arrangements, personal tour guides and a travel concierge who can draw up customised itineraries.

WHY "An increasing number of affluent travellers, both in Singapore and internationally," said Juliana Gan, general manager of outbound travel. The two integrated resorts offer a rich source of clients for Royale Dynasty. Singapore's upcoming International Cruise Terminal will also provide opportunities to service luxury cruise clients.

The company has seen a 20 per cent increase in luxury customers since 2010. — Brian Higgs

Reaching Down Under

WHO Headquartered in Vietnam, Luxury Travel is a tour operator focusing on high-end travellers. Top markets are Australia, the US and Singapore.

WHAT It entered into a joint-venture with Australia-based The Cape Club to form Cape Lux Travels in October 2011. The marriage brings together Luxury's expertise in Indochina with The Cape Club's client base. The top five destinations sold by The Cape Club are Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and Myanmar.

Cape Lux Travels will introduce new fully-escorted tours to wealthy clients from Australia initially, and later to those from the US, UK and Europe. Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos are its first three destinations.

WHY To widen Luxury's reach in the Australian market, one of its top markets. "The Cape Club understands Australian luxury travellers and creates beautiful niche experiences for guests," said CEO Pham Ha. The joint venture is expected to attract 500 to 700 clients in the first year of operations. — Sirima Eamtako

Beefing up FIT retail

WHO Panorama Tours Indonesia, an outbound travel company which handles the corporate, MICE and leisure markets.

WHAT With already a division dedicated to groups, it developed a strategy to target the FIT market beginning last year, creating free-and-easy packages. It has also opened one retail outlet targeting young travellers, with 10 more on the way. Products can be bought a la carte or as special deals. Examples include backpacker packages and special interest packages for those who travel to watch soccer games. Destinations sold are mostly shorthaul, such as Singapore, Malaysia and Hong Kong.

WHY Managing director, sales & distribution, Helen Xu, said: "The FIT outbound market in Indonesia is huge, but many travel companies are not interested in seriously developing it. Most of them concentrate on developing group tour programmes. We see this as an opportunity." She added that last year, retail FIT business increased by 70 per cent compared to 2010. — Mimi Hudoyo

"Instead of taking a beating from OTAs, we decided to re-invent the destination and create several products."

Debjit Dutta
Director & CEO
Impression Tourism Services (India)

SELLING TRAVEL HAS CHANGED. BE THE **CHANGE** THAT YOU WANT TO SEE.



rphosis

Whether it's discovering new revenue streams or warding off existing threats, travel companies across Asia are evolving. Take a leaf from success stories told to *TTG Asia*



Debjit Dutta
Director & CEO
Impression Tourism Services (India)



Manoj Gursahani
Chairman
Gursahani group



Jo Jo Chan
Director and general manager
Wing On Travel



Tan Sin Chong
Managing director
Reliance Travel



Vincent Liu
CEO
Star Travel Corp

Re-invent a destination

WHO Impression Tourism Services (India), a Kolkata-based B2B inbound travel company.

WHAT Developed a range of products and created a new branding for West Bengal, its primary destination. *Mountains to Mangroves – A Journey of 1,000 Kilometres* has helped to highlight the diversity within the Indian state, from the Himalayas to the Bay of Bengal. The auspicious Bengal owl was also used as a mascot for marketing the products and destination.

WHY Director and CEO Debjit Dutta said the company faced price competition for oft-trodden itineraries, while product development for West Bengal had been stagnant in 10 years. "Instead of taking a beating from OTAs, we decided to re-invent the destination and create several products." Impression is now readily identified with the destination. Once a small tour operator, it currently serves 900 B2B clients. – **Shekhar Niyogi**

Identify gaps online

WHO Gursahani group, whose diversified interests range from technology to healthcare. Its travel division Travelmartindia is said to be India's first e-commerce travel portal.

Travelmartindia is supported by an offline arm, offering airline tickets, hotels, leisure packages and MICE arrangements.

WHAT Gursahani group entered the group-buy deal space last year with vamoose.in, which is currently being integrated into Travelmartindia's website.

It also launched myairport-transfers.in last year, offering chauffeur-driven car rental services for airport and railway station transfers in all major cities in India. This operates as both a B2B and B2C model.

WHY The new ventures were in response to "dynamic changes in the marketplace" as well as "to cater to specific niches and address existing gaps", said chairman Manoj Gursahani.

– **Anand and Madhura Katti**

Harnessing technology

WHO Hong Kong's Wing On Travel is known for its premium outbound travel services. Chinese OTA Ctrip bought a majority stake in Wing On Travel's travel service segment in 2010.

WHAT Last August, it rolled out iWingon.com, an online hotel booking portal offering 17,000 hotels in 500 Chinese cities. Customers pay only upon check-in and no bank charges are incurred.

In November, the My Group concept was launched, allowing private groups (minimum 10 pax) to book Wing On's signature group tour itineraries, based on standard fares. Bigger groups have more discounts.

WHY "With Ctrip's strong back-up, we wanted to expand our business and be the market leader. Ultimately, the group wants to become a leader in Asia through product innovation and value-added services," said director and general manager Jo Jo Chan. – **Prudence Lui**

Go the franchise way

WHO Reliance Travel, a Malaysia-based outbound travel company.

WHAT Boosting business through franchising. While initial franchised outlets were concentrated in the city of Kuala Lumpur, they have spread out to the suburbs. Last August, Reliance opened its 15th franchise, some 30km away from the city.

WHY Said executive director Raymond Lee: "(The franchised outlets) increase our reach and brand presence, and collectively portray a strong brand visibility for Reliance in most key urban areas with high population bases."

Additional income is also generated. Franchised outlets currently contribute 40 per cent of Reliance's total sales compared to 20 per cent three to five years ago, Lee added. The company has plans to expand its franchise network to other big cities over the next two years.

– **N. Nithyananthan**

Cutting out the middle

WHO Star Travel Corp, a Taiwanese outbound travel company that counts Japan as its bestselling destination.

WHAT Tackling cost increases by eliminating the middle man. Taiwanese travel companies usually rely on local contacts in Japan to book hotels and on-the-ground services, "so nobody here knows what the real price is", said CEO Vincent Liu.

Last year, Star Travel decided to deal directly with Japanese suppliers. With pre-paid bookings, the company was also able to negotiate lower prices.

WHY The March 11 earthquake and tsunami resulted in Japanese companies repatriating funds from overseas, forcing the Japanese yen to strengthen. What was once Star Travel's most profitable business sector (outbound to Japan) was under threat, as the Japanese yen rose 20 per cent against the NT dollar. Going direct provided an effective hedge. – **Glenn Smith**



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Messe Berlin

Mantras for change

10 reasons to use a travel consultant (for every client who walks in)

- 1. You've googled 'Paris vacation' and come up with 17.8 million responses. Need a little help editing those choices?
- 2. Remember when you used that obscure website to book your hotel, and when you got there, spent your beach vacation overlooking a parking lot?
- 3. How many hours were you on hold with the airline when your flight was cancelled because of a storm or a volcanic eruption?
- 4. Did you really mean to spend your honeymoon at that resort whose one tiny pool was filled all day with 12 screaming children?
- 5. Who knew that when you booked that 'villa' in Tuscany, it would be a small room with a kitchenette and no air-conditioning? Funny, it looked much better on your computer screen.
- 6. No one explained to you that in July, it's winter time in Rio, and so you showed up there with nothing but five Hawaiian shirts and three pairs of swimming trunks.
- 7. How about the time you really needed a quick breakaway, and ended up on the Gold Coast during Schoolies and someone threw up on your shoes?
- 8. Yes, I guess that hotel must have used a telephoto lens when they took a picture of those guestrooms that you saw on their website. No, I wouldn't have guessed that the photo was taken in 1973.
- 9. I suppose contacting the Attorney-General to resolve the fact that the Internet site has billed your credit card three times instead of once is the only route to take at this point. Yes, of course I sympathise that the exchange rate has changed and even if they do put the money back in your account, you'll now get less.
- 10. It was definitely odd that there were no cab drivers at the airport at 3am when you finally landed in Phuket, but booking a transfer to your very remote hotel would have been a good thing to remember when you purchased your airline ticket and hotel online.

- Adrian Caruso, master business coach, TA Fastrack, Australia

Pin these up on the wall and start your journey to becoming better travel experts.* We also kick off the travel trade's very own crossword puzzle to help you gain knowledge in a fun way. Have a great start to 2012

*Taken from presentations at the first TTG Travel Agent Conference in October last year. Go to www.ttgasia.com/tac for the full speeches



To go (online) or not to go, that is the question

Here are five reasons to help you make up your mind:

- Reason 1** OTAs all IPO for millions.
Fact: Every successful online travel business has been an online 'pure-play' (e.g. Agoda, Priceline, Wego).
- Reason 2** The owner's kid wants something fun to do.
Fact: The people who set up online businesses are passionate about the online space and put everything they have into the business.
- Reason 3** My business won't survive if it's not online.
Fact: Nobody will use a Mickey Mouse website with no compelling consumer proposition.
- Reason 4** I want to dedicate resources to build a standalone, country-specific, high-quality online travel site.

Fact: Market is still wide open in several South-east Asian countries. But mind you, do it properly – or not at all. Have a dedicated team with relevant expertise and experience; invest in decent technology/design and brand; measure against different metrics to offline business; leverage existing supplier relationships; consider partnering with other local players (e.g. Raja Kamar International); partner with an overseas player (e.g. Wotif/Buffalo Tours).

Reason 5 I want to build a limited web presence to complement my existing offline business.
Fact: A chance to reduce cost/add revenue. Also, trims call times as customers know what they want. Build a simple brand site; use white label/affiliate solutions to extend product lines; deploy shopping engines for core products; retain offline fulfillment processes; offer serious service level commitments; train staff to inform customers of the website's benefits.

TTG Travel Pursuits

Compiled by The Fox

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DOWN 1. Strand 3. China 4. ROH 5. AirAsia 6. AZ 7. AOT 8. Conrad 9. Hainan 10. DOM ACROSS 1. PanAm 3. Sheraton 5. Sands 6 (Z). CA 7. Rayong 8. AM 9. Hainan 10. DOM

DOWN

- 1. Colonial-style hotel in Yangon
- 3. Asia's biggest outbound travel market
- 4. Abbreviation for Thai Airways International's holiday programme
- 5. Low-cost airline in Asia
- 6. Two-letter IATA code for Alitalia
- 7. Abbreviation for Thailand's airport organisation
- 8. First name of the founder of Hilton

ACROSS

- 1. Airline company that founded InterContinental Hotels
- 3. One of Starwood's brand names
- 5. US owning company of Venetian Macao and MBS Singapore
- 6. Two-letter IATA code for Air China
- 7. Thai province next to Pattaya
- 8. Morning
- 9. Tourist island in southern China
- 10. Head of marketing

The seven deadly sins

Want to win customers from the Internet right now? Avoid these seven things that consumers complain most about travel consultants:



- 1. Phone calls/emails not returned
- 2. Customers ignored
- 3. Mistakes in bookings/itineraries
- 4. Documents not ready for collection
- 5. Being treated as just another booking, not as a valued customer
- 6. Basic travel and destination information not provided
- 7. Not communicating with customers enough

- Adrian Caruso, master business coach, TA Fastrack, Australia

How to lose clients & win complaints

Six tips to follow if you want to lose clients to the Internet right now. Guaranteed to achieve no loyalty:



- Tip #1 When in doubt, just wing it.
- Tip #2 Over promise, under deliver.
- Tip #3 Sell cheap, charge optionals later!
- Tip #4 Hard sell! Pressure reaps results.
- Tip #5 Refund? What refund?
- Tip #6 Fine print! What a customer doesn't know...

- Sheldon Hee, former general manager of Tradewinds Tours & Travel in Singapore, who urged travel experts to drop the above practices and instead build trust, invest in professionalism and hone their customer service to be in the right club of winning clients and losing complaints, not the other way round



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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.

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Travel professionals turn up in force at their conference. Patrick Tan snaps away



Speakers/moderators include Singapore Airlines' Sheldon Hee, Dreamscape Journeys' John Sutherland, Tour East Group's Judy Lum, Travelport's Hui-Wan Chua, Hotelplan AG's Hans Lerch and TTG Asia's Raini Hamdi



TTG Asia's Michael Chow, Hertz Asia-Pacific's Wong Soon Hwa with South Beach's Karen Lau and Aloysius Lee



Honey Holidays' Bobby Eng and Diners World Travel (Malaysia)'s Catherine Wong



Singapore Tourism Board's Gabriel Tseng, ID Travel Group's Shiela Gomez and Singapore HealthPartners' Gilbert Madhavan



Truisty Travel & Tours' Punch Jose and Price-Breaker's Adeline Woon



ACE Insurance's Tricia Lim with Tausia Hotel Management's Betty Chee



American Express Business Travel's Loh Yuet Cheng and Sim Chwee Sean with Urbane Nomads' Pamela Sect



National Association of Travel Agents Singapore's (NATAS) Robert Khoo and Robin Yap listening intently



Trump Travel Service's Peter Lawrence and May Hu



Golden State Travel & Services' Safia and Morli Musa



The conference is editorial-led, with the content designed by group editor Raini Hamdi. It was hosted by editorial's future leaders (left) Karen Yue and Gracia Chiang, and moderated by online editor Brian Higgs and assistant editor Linda Haden

NATAS' Ram Samtani, Royal Caribbean Cruises' Jocelyn Kan, Thomas Tour-Golf's Rosalinda Thomas and Singapore Airlines' Lim Meow Seng



Jason Peck
CEO, Furama Hotels
International, Singapore

Our first View From the Top in 2012 is a feel-good story of how a director of sales rose to become the CEO of a growing Asian hotel chain based in Singapore. **Raini Hamdi** finds out how Peck did it

Pecking order

We always ask women CEOs how they cope, so, for a change – what's it like to be a CEO of an expanding chain, at just 43 years old and with a wife and two kids?

Quite frankly, in the last two years, I neglected my family a lot. The company expanded from four hotels five years ago to 43 hotels today, even though many of the hotels are in Thailand and China, the latter under FX, which is a no-frills, easy-to-manage brand. Still, that's a lot of growth in five years.

How do you juggle career and family commitments?

I'm lucky I have a supportive wife. As you know, I rose from a director of sales (DOS) position (within eight years) to become a CEO and it has not been easy, frankly. Given my age, the job, the industry, you need an understanding and independent wife – imagine, your husband is always out. My two kids, one 19 years old and the other 12 years old, are also pretty independent and my wife is a businesswoman herself, working for her dad, so that helps a lot.

We try and schedule our lives – if I'm away, she will try her best to be at home; if I travel, I will always plan to be away Monday to Friday, so I can be with the family during weekends.

It is common for a DOS to rise to become a GM. Few, if any, rise to become a CEO. How did that happen?

Actually, when FHI was set up (as the management company of Furama Singapore, now Furama City Centre; the other property, previously a Novotel, is now Furama RiverFront), the owner did not have any plans to manage anybody's hotels, only its own.

I joined Furama Singapore as DOS in 2003 during the SARS crisis, when the occupancy was five to 10 per cent. I had left my job at Mandarin Oriental Hotel Group when it decided to cease the regional office – as no one knew how long SARS was going to last – and asked staff to take six months no-pay leave.

I brought in strong results at Furama Singapore. This got me and Kevin (Ng, son of Ng Kim Suan, chairman and substantial shareholder of Furama Limited, the owning company) thinking: why can't we manage hotels ourselves? Kevin was then business development manager for

Furama Limited. At the same time, the management contract with Accor (for the Novotel) was ending. I also had an offer from Hilton International – a VP position in the regional office here – and I told Kevin, if I'm going to oversee just one hotel, it would not be suitable for me. And Kevin himself was young and aggressive (in wanting to grow the company).

But during that time, the other hotel, a Novotel at the time, had 480 rooms (today, it has 605 rooms), which were still a lot of rooms to fill and Singapore was not as vibrant as it is now. While we had stabilised and strengthened Furama Singapore, we had to be sure if we could manage the other hotel. We looked at the GOP and did our sums, and we were confident we could do it.

I'll never forget what our chairman said. He was very sup-

portive. He said, Jason, you don't have to do much better than Novotel. If you can do the same, I have 100 per cent control, I save on the management fee and most of all, I can put my Furama brand back on the hotel.

But why a homegrown brand – patriotism?

In my heart, if I work for an international chain, no matter how hard I try, at best I will be a regional head or a VP, not an MD or a CEO. It's not discrimination. Its HQ is not in Singapore.

And why would I settle as regional head of an international chain, or a VP, if I can head the company myself?

So you envisioned being a CEO?

I know I would be because the owner empowered the division

Why do some owners choose new chains such as Furama over the internationals?

Various factors. An individual Thai owner, for example, may insist that the international chain employ his financial controller – and this could be his daughter or brother – and that's something the international chain usually will not accept.

The international chains on the other hand may insist that the owners spend X million dollars to bring the property up to their brand

standards, but the management contract starts right now. They also subject projections to 10,000 items that any

bank which wants to lend owners money to build or renovate will lack the confidence to when they see there is no real guarantee with all the subject-tos.

I'm just speaking in very general terms to demonstrate that there has to be flexibility and a real win-win. We at Furama, too, have brand standards but, instead of subjecting projections to 10,000 items, we only subject them to maybe eight to 10 items. We promise owners, even if they don't ask, that within a certain kilometre radius, we will not

manage another hotel, regardless of the brand, and we have three (Furama, FuramaXclusive and FX).

We don't ever want to put ourselves in a situation when the owner turns to us and say, would you, as an owner yourself, do that to your hotel?

“Why would I settle as regional head of an international chain, or a VP, if I can head the company myself?”

portive. He said, Jason, you don't have to do much better than Novotel. If you can do the same, I have 100 per cent control, I save on the management fee and most of all, I can put my Furama brand back on the hotel.

I suppose that's why we are seeing the rise of more Asian management chains – hungry, young Asian owners and managers, and the fact that one hotel does not cut it to draw talent?

You can't attract talent if you have only one hotel. People want to grow. There is only one GM for one hotel and one DOS – after you've promoted him to corporate director of sales within six months, what then?

Was it tough for you to choose between staying with Furama and joining Hilton?

Not at all. I had been with Banyan Tree and I've always had the vision to be with a Singapore homegrown brand. My first hotel was Equatorial Singapore; I was one of the youngest DOS

to me when I turned around the business. The chairman, too, shared he wanted to focus on the shipping company and needed someone to head the hotel division.

Why not his son, Kevin?

Kevin has always wanted to be the owner, he wants to invest. Kevin worked in a bank for a long time and he never was into operations. He always says we're a tac (tactical) team: Jay, I will go and enquire about a hotel, you handle the management. We work very well together.

What lessons do you learn from this, as to why some Asian brands succeed and others don't?

I have the hotel knowledge but I really need someone like Kevin who has the legal and finance knowledge. And this is a strong good match. Without Kevin, you can indeed hire a finance and legal guy or set up the department, but it is different because it is his, he can make decisions, and he is young, aggressive and takes calculated risks.



Ready to set sail

Asia’s waters will see even more cruise activity in 2012. *TTG Asia* examines several expansion plans*

* Interviews in Singapore when the inaugural Cruise Shipping Asia dropped anchor last November



Michael Bayley
Executive vice president
Royal Caribbean Cruises (RCC)



Gianni Onorato
President
Costa Crociere



Steve Odell
Senior vice president, UK, Europe & Asia-Pacific
Silversea Cruises

Homeporting, deployment plans in Asia

The regional capacity of Royal Caribbean International will more than double with the *Voyager of the Seas* joining the *Legend of the Seas* in Asia. It will be the largest ship to homeport at Singapore’s new cruise terminal, commencing a series of South-east Asian cruises in May. The ship will then move to China and offer North Asian cruises from June to October. Premium brand Celebrity Cruises will also introduce *Celebrity Millennium* in Asia with cruises between Singapore and Hong Kong.

We are deploying a bigger ship to Asia for our 2012 South-east Asian and China-South Korea-Japan itineraries in view of the robust demand. *Costa Victoria* has 40 per cent more capacity than *Costa Classica*, the existing ship plying Asian waters. *Costa Victoria* arrives in late May. This year, Costa will introduce a wider choice of cruises lasting seven nights or less, which Asian passengers often prefer owing to their lack of generous leave compared to their European counterparts.

We deploy the *Silver Shadow* (382 guests) here for seven months of the year, and that pattern will stay. One way we could increase capacity is move one of our bigger ships here. As a company, we are looking at a new build that would likely be of the same size as the *Silver Spirit*, 540 guests. A year-round ship in Asia is also something we should consider. Our development in the region is two-fold: create itineraries of different durations and find small ports. We tested shorter, seven-day cruises to Bali last year.

Asia as a source market

Around half of RCC’s customers are from North America, with the rest coming from Europe (30 per cent), Asia (10 per cent) and Latin America (10 per cent). We have about 200,000 to 250,000 Asian customers a year. The Asian market is growing in double, triple digits every year, from a very small base. This year, the Chinese market will grow around 160 per cent because of the *Voyager of the Seas*. I predict the number of people cruising in Asia-Pacific will go up to 11 million by 2030, up from over one million now.

Currently, less than 10 per cent of Costa Crociere’s business is derived from Asia. However, we would like to grow this to 15 to 20 per cent in the long run. The Asian market definitely has a lot of room for growth, and we expect this growth to be driven by Greater China. However, we are also looking at Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia as source markets.

Asia-Pacific accounts for almost 20 per cent of Silversea’s business (the luxury cruise operator carries some 65,000 passengers a year). Within Asia-Pacific, Asian markets represent 25 per cent. Japan and China deliver the biggest volumes, but we’re also building business in the smaller, sophisticated markets of Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan. Singapore grew by 50 per cent this year compared to the previous year and Hong Kong recorded about 25 to 30 per cent year-on-year growth.

Investment on marketing, training

We’ve invested disproportionately in the Asian market, opening five sales and marketing offices in China, Singapore and Australia over the last three to four years. We are investing in sales teams, training, collateral, communication, advertising and brochures. We also have an online training portal. We have to work hard to explain to travel professionals what cruising is and how to sell it. Travel consultants have always been the core of our success. In North America, they account for the lion’s share of our distribution.

We will work closely with local tourism organisations to combat the challenges of marketing cruises to Asians. We want to develop both the Aida and Costa brands in Asia, and ensure their marketing strategies complement one another. Costa has developed online training websites for both Japanese and South Korean travel professionals. Our website is also accessible in a variety of Asian languages including Mandarin, Japanese and South Korean.

We really have to address education and training. As an industry, we do this collectively through the Asia Cruise Association. Silversea will also launch our online academy in Asia by mid-year. Certificates will be awarded at each stage and incentives will be offered. We are also working on rolling out a Mandarin version of our website this year. In addition, we conduct training seminars in the region almost every month; use our ship for travel specialist showcases and pay for them to host their clients; and organise fam trips.

Challenges

The lack of knowledge in developing markets. People either have no perception or the wrong perception of what cruising is all about. They believe it’s for old people, that there’s nothing to do, that it’s very expensive. This year is looking relatively positive despite the uncertainty in Europe. All our research confirms that during difficult times, people will give away other things but want to protect their vacation. We’ve always been quite happy because cruise stacks up as the top option against land-based vacations when you add up the costs. – **Gracia Chiang**

The biggest issue to date is definitely distribution – it is simply not mature enough. The trade’s knowledge and experience in selling cruises is lacking, and this has a strong impact on how fast the cruise market in Asia develops. Marketing directly to customers is a possibility but this is very expensive and difficult due to the geographic spread of the region. Moreover, as the cruise industry in Asia is still in its infancy, a lot of time has to be spent educating consumers and convincing them to take a cruise. – **Linda Haden**

We don’t have any increases in capacity in 2012, so passenger numbers will remain quite static. The airlines are also charging a premium for business-class services from North America and Europe. When the ship comes in February, we’ll likely see a higher percentage of Australians and Asians because of the air situation and the slowdown in Europe. However, cruising is still in its infancy here. There are a lot of distribution issues, and not many travel professionals specialise in luxury travel. The mentality in Asia is volume and price. – **Gracia Chiang**



From left: *Celebrity Millennium*, *Costa neoRomantica*, *Silver Shadow*, *Seabourn Pride*



Richard Meadows

President of Seabourn and executive vice president, marketing, sales & guest programmes of Holland America Line (HAL)

HAL's three ships deployed in Asia – *Volendam*, *Amsterdam* and *Rotterdam* – will have six itineraries and 10 departures this year, up from three departures in 2011. In 2013, HAL will offer seven itineraries and 11 departures. Seabourn – which deploys *Seabourn Pride*, *Seabourn Legend* and *Seabourn Odyssey* here – will include more Asian destinations for 2012/2013. Cambodia has been added, while those to Indonesia go beyond Bali to places like Sumba. There are eight itineraries, two world cruises and 24 departures.

I am unable to provide details of existing business figures and projections in Asia, but we understand the value and importance of the Asian market. We are extremely optimistic that this sector will continue to evolve and grow. Both HAL and Seabourn attract guests from Asian markets that have sizeable affluent populations who speak English such as Japan, Hong Kong, South Korea, Singapore and Thailand, as well as China.

HAL's online academy for travel consultants has seen about 13,000 graduates to date. Seabourn will be rolling out an online academy over the next few months. We have to do a better job of helping the trade to understand the USPs of our brands. It is very difficult for a travel consultant to discover what sets apart the different products without proper training. We will also continue with our marketing efforts through our GSAs, as well as through direct mailers to clients. There will also be fam trips.

While there may be a global recession, people still view travelling as a right. They are not going to give up on their dream vacation. Instead, they are going to go on high-value vacations – value does not equate to price – something that matches what the consumer wants. Hence, there is a need to provide the proper education and training for travel consultants, so that they are able to sell better, articulate the difference between our various cruise products, and interpret and communicate value to a customer in a way that is compelling. – **Brian Higgs**



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Korea gets cruise-friendly

Initiatives in store as international terminal opens in Yeosu. By **Karen Yue** and **Linda Haden**

SOUTH Korea's policymakers are lining up several initiatives that will boost the country's cruise industry, even as a new international cruise terminal in Yeosu

City puts the finishing touches for a March opening.

Among the initiatives is a plan to waive visas for foreign visitors who arrive by

cruises; build piers exclusively for cruise ships and other supporting infrastructure; and lower port charges, all in a bid to lure more cruise lines to South Korea.

The government also harbours hopes of nurturing a homegrown cruise operator, as demand for cruise travel is projected to rise, particularly from neighbouring China.

"The Korean Ministry of Land and Marine Transport has debated over this issue (visa waiver) for awhile, and this, alongside the various port developments, will certainly help to put (South) Korea on the cruise map," said Jong Woo Lim, manager-strategic tourism product team, Korea Tourism Organization.

The new international cruise terminal is located in Yeosu New Port, at the heart of the World Expo 2012 site. Called the Expo Site Terminal, it boasts three separate sections. An International Passenger Terminal and International Ferry Terminal, spread over a combined 3,274m² of floor space, can handle up to 80,000 tonnes and 15,000 tonnes of ship hardware, respectively. A Costa Ferry Terminal, meanwhile, will be able to cater to three to four ships of 300-2,500 tonnes each.

According to Kang Seung-won, director of tourism, Yeosu City, the Expo Site Terminal has already attracted attention from several cruise operators.

"Although Yeosu is a maritime city, with many islands (317 islands) and a national marine park, its cruise industry is not yet well developed," he said.

"The good news is, Star Cruises and Royal Caribbean, as well as five cruise companies in China and Japan, have shown interest in making Yeosu one of the ports of call in their itineraries this year.

"We expect international arrivals to grow substantially once cruises start calling at Yeosu," Kang added.

During the Expo season from May 12 to August 12, the new cruise terminal is expected to handle 50,000 arrivals from China, 10,000 from Japan and the rest of Asia, and 10,000 from the US and Europe.

Kang noted that these inbound cruise arrivals would be able to avail of convenient connections to the rest of the country, such as the KTX rail transportation system. The KTX system links the cruise terminal to Seoul in about three hours, while a ride to Yeosu Airport takes 30 minutes.

To raise awareness of Yeosu as a potential destination for cruises, Yeosu City tourism representatives, in partnership with Korea Tourism Organization, participated in the inaugural Cruise Shipping Asia trade show and conference in Singapore last November.

Presently, only two ports in the country, Jeju and Busan, are able to accommodate large cruise ships.

Other government measures in the pipeline are to allow local cruise ship operators to open on-board casinos to foreigners, introduce a tonnage tax system for cruise operators – similar to what is already in existence for cargo ships – and provide education programmes for service staff and maritime-related workers.

Wook-Kyun Kim, vice chairman and co-founder, AJU Incentive Tours, told *TTG Asia*: "Without a doubt, the cruise market in North-east Asia is set to benefit from the positive developments in South Korea." – **Additional reporting by Brian Higgs**



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A performance at the Thai Alangkarn Theater, which can host business functions

Courtesy of the Thai Alangkarn Theater

Pattaya shows promise

Resort city banks on growth as it focuses on family and events, writes **Sirima Eamtako**

Arrivals

According to data by the Ministry of Tourism and Sports (MoTS), Pattaya attracted 8.3 million visitors in 2010, a staggering 93.1 per cent jump over 2009. Of the total, 5.4 million were foreign visitors. Visitors stayed, on average, 3.2 days in Pattaya, down from 3.4 days in 2009, but they contributed 73 million baht (US\$2.4 million) in tourism revenue, up 65 per cent. MoTS data for guest arrivals at accommodation establishments showed that the top five overseas markets were Russia, China, Germany, Taiwan and India.

Pattaya's number of visitors in 2011 was expected to grow by 15 per cent, according to the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT). However, growth might be even higher, judging from the influx of evacuees seeking shelter from the floods that ravaged parts of Bangkok and some central Thai provinces last year.

Thailand attracted 15.8 million foreign visitors between January and October last year, up 25 per cent year-on-year.

NTO

Pattaya's tourism industry is striving to put the destination's past unsavoury reputa-

tion behind it, as it now focuses on drawing business from the family and business event markets. Locally and internationally-managed hotels have begun highlighting products suitable for the two segments.

The city is investing in infrastructure improvements such as two mega developments – a 6.5km monorail circling Pattaya and a new marina.

Efforts by the local authorities to introduce better zoning have also helped to push up real estate prices and attract more internationally-branded restaurants and hotels.

TAT said it would continue its marketing efforts in key European and emerging markets in Asia and the Middle East.

Hotels

MoTS' data showed the city had 49,348 rooms in 2010 (up 28 per cent over 2009), running at 46.3 per cent occupancy (up from 33.2 per cent in 2009). Last October, when the floods worsened, hotels in Pattaya were running at 70 per cent occupancy, an increase from 56 per cent during the corresponding month in 2010.

The destination is also receiving more investment. Centara



"Pattaya has tremendous tourism growth potential for us, and we are very confident about the future of our two newly-developed properties (under Centara Hotels and Resorts)."

Suthikiati Chirathivat
Chairman of the executive board
Central Plaza Hotel

Hotels and Resorts is scheduled to open a five-star resort and a four-star hotel this year, hot on the heels of the 2011 openings of the four-star, 79-room Nova Hotel and Spa Pattaya, part of the Centara Boutique Collection, and the mid-range, 152-room Centra Pattaya Resort. The five-star Centara Grand Mirage Beach Resort Pattaya opened in late 2009.

Sukosol Hotels, rebranded from Siam Hotels and Resorts, is developing the 400 million baht, Miami-inspired Wave, a 21-room boutique hotel in central Pattaya. The Sukosol group is also renovating Siam Bayview, which will be rebranded The Bayview in July after a 90 million baht investment. The upgrade saw the completion of the View meeting room and eight suites in 2011, and will involve an overhaul of the lobby and some deluxe rooms between April and June this year. A further 50 million baht will be spent on the refurbishment of the Siam Bayshore Resort & Spa.

The group's executive vice president Marisa Sukosol-Nunbhakdi said: "We have been seeing growing numbers from Russia, China and India, on top of visitors from the traditional sources of Europe and Japan."

Rates

According to Thai Hotels Association president Prakrit Chinamourphong, hotels in all Thai destinations, including Pattaya, should be able to post a five to 10 per cent increase in room rates for new contracts starting in October.

"Hotels in Thailand have not raised rates for the last four years," he said.

Room rates for five-star hotels are anticipated to rise to between 4,500 baht and 5,000 baht from the current 3,500 to 4,500 baht.

Access

The Royal Thai Navy's U-Tapao Pattaya International Airport, about 30 minutes south of Pattaya by car, is being expanded. Work on the new passenger terminal begun last July, and is slated to be completed within 15 months.

The new building will be able to handle 1,500 passengers an hour, up from 400 now. The expansion also involves upgrading of the airport systems.

After the expansion, U-Tapao expects to attract direct international scheduled flights, in addition to the current seasonal charter flights – mainly from Russia during the winter.

Silver Spoon

Zuma Bangkok



Raini Hamdi is jealous that Zuma is now in Bangkok, not her home base Singapore, but happy that the city has something other than the floods that gets it talking – a celebrated restaurant whose opening about a month ago is a lifter of sorts

MENU My first Zuma experience was in London many years ago and, even today, I'll never forget my first taste of Zuma – ordinary edamame that became extraordinary when sprinkled with rock salt and chilli, something so seemingly simple, yet could not be recreated at home no matter how hard I've tried. Or those juicy, perfectly-grilled slices of beef with garlic crisps, which when dipped in wafu butter – a sauce whose consistency and taste were heavenly – made my head shake in wonder. Or the dynamite spider maki roll...I could go on.

Zuma's menu is modern Japanese with flavours that are unique to it, and I was thrilled to find these dishes in Bangkok and grateful that they tasted as good. I even had a new find: poached pear with tiny forest berries that burst in the mouth.

AMBIENCE My Zuma experiences – the one in London, and in Hong Kong a year ago – sealed my impression of the restaurants as sexy and glamorous, with strong client support from their home base and the jet set. They both had an enviable energy about them, being packed with diners, filled with happy chatter and the clinking of glasses, with piped-in music turning the heat up a notch higher. The one in Bangkok, though, has yet to gain that sort of buzz, probably as it's still in the soft-opening stage and, besides, business is only just starting to return after the floods, as some of my restaurateur friends said. Still, on the night I was there, a Tuesday, it was doing very well, even though it wasn't running full.



The decor remains true to Zuma's concept of embracing Japanese and local cultures. Apparently, the interior designer, Noriyoshi Muramatsu of Studio Glitt, who was involved with the first Zuma in London in 2002, himself had handpicked each of the natural granite that formed the backdrop of the open kitchen, robata and sushi counters. Wood was also taken from old railway sleepers and traditional Thai-styled houses. The result is a spacious, pleasing and contemporary-designed restaurant that matches the cuisine. **SERVICE** One of Zuma's hallmarks is service with a great deal

of flair and friendliness. It will be hard for other Zumas (there are six now) to beat the friendliness levels of the staff in Bangkok, even though they may not score as well yet in flair and confidence. However, given only a month of operation, I was amazed how well the Thai staff had grasped Zuma's interactive, casual-yet-professional style of service, and were obviously on their way to delivering it to the fullest. **PRICING** For the quality, taste and the experience, the menu is fairly priced. My beef, for example, set me back 1,480 baht (US\$48), while the Alaskan crab was 1,520 baht. Each dish was

Name Zuma Bangkok
No. of seats 189
Where 159 Ratchadamri Road (ground floor of The St. Regis)
Contact Tel: (66-2) 252-4707
Email: reservations@zumarestaurant.co.th
Verdict Legend: must recommend to clients
 good
 recommend @ your own risk
enough for two people. The concept of sharing made it fun and enabled us to order a wider variety of dishes. The list of wine, champagne and sake is extensive, and does not start at elevated levels going into the unreasonable. We had a bottle of New Zealand Pinot Noir for US\$70 – although you could also have a Haut-Brion for many multiples more.

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My choices

Thailand

Compiled by Sirima Eamtako



Kongkrit Hirunyakit
President-policy and planning
Tourism Council of Thailand

What is your biggest challenge now?

Maintaining the country's tourism competitiveness and managing risks while growing tourist numbers and revenue. We have lost market share to other South-east Asian countries over the years due to the several crises we faced.

What needs to be done?

A reform of the country's tourism structure and policies to strengthen our competitiveness and address risks is much needed if Thailand wants to protect its position as the gateway to ASEAN countries, especially as we enter the ASEAN Economic Community in 2015.

What do you want from...

the government? A proper policy in managing risks, such as setting up a funding system to address any crises through a travel insurance scheme. The hotel oversupply situation in Thailand also needs to be managed.

What are the prospects for 2012?

According to PATA, tourism to ASEAN countries is expected to grow by eight per cent in 2012. I believe Thailand will see a higher growth than that, but we should not rest on our laurels and only count on numbers. We must look into the entire structure of our tourism industry for sustainable growth.



Oswald Pichler
Vice president of operations
Accor-Thailand, Cambodia and Laos

We have two priorities at the moment: first, to look after the staff affected by the flood and help them to get back on their feet as soon as possible; and second, to increase traffic and bookings to our Bangkok hotels to ensure that the remaining high season performs well.

Hotels are pushing room and F&B promotions. Accor has launched several marketing campaigns, such as the 3-Day Super Sales, Stay 3 Pay 2 Promotion, etc. We have also partnered airlines to arrange media fam trips, to spread the word that Bangkok is up and running.

the industry partners? It is of utmost importance to restore confidence among travellers in order for trips to resume. All the different sectors must work hand in hand to market the destination while enhancing supply and services to meet the returning demand.

Despite the flooding in parts of Bangkok, this year's overall performance of Accor has surpassed that of the past three years. Now that the water has receded, travellers are returning to Thailand and business is rising back to normal. If the trend does not change and there are no hiccups in 2012, we foresee a very bright year ahead.

First person

Sirima Eamtako does her bit in the big clean-up

Ayutthaya, after floods



Courtesy of the Tourism Authority of Thailand

State of Wat Lokkayasutha, picture taken in early December

I was heartbroken to see images of the magnificent ruins of Ayutthaya submerged by the recent floods. The ancient city was the Thai capital for 417 years, and is one of the kingdom's major tourist attractions.

According to the Ministry of Culture's Fine Arts Department (FAD), the entire historic island and surrounds were flooded for more than a month from early October, and in some areas, the waters reached a height of 3m.

The waters lapping at the 100-plus historic monuments in and around the Ayutthaya Historical Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, receded in the second week of November and tourists returned the following week.

In early December, I joined more than a thousand of volunteers to help out with the Tourism Authority of Thailand's (TAT) Ayutthaya Cleaning Day. I was thrilled to see that the major attractions were dry despite the stains, trash and withered vegetation left behind by the floods.

Anyone would have been moved by the scene as tourism industry executives, TAT officials, the media and tourists united for the clean-up. We collected gar-

bage, planted trees, and painted and repaired buildings, wearing 'Beautiful Thailand' shirts.

I could see that business was back, although the number of tourists visiting Ayutthaya was still few at the time of writing.

At Wat Mahathat – famous for the relic of a Buddha's head within a tree trunk – there were a handful of FITs and a small group of tourists. I bought a handicraft from a local merchant who told me he had not had any business in nearly two months.

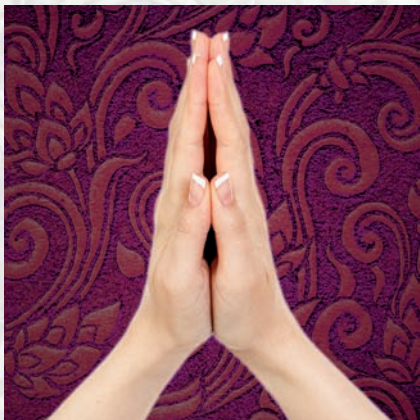
At other key attractions, including Wat Lokkayasutha – one of the most photographed sites during the floods – Wat Phra Si Sanphet, Wat Ratchaburana and Wat Yai Chai Mongkol, the situation seemed to be near-normal.

Supot Prommanot, director of the FAD's Third Regional Office of Fine Arts, said restoration of the historical sites would start as soon as a survey was completed.

Thailand's tourism industry has again proved its resiliency.



Sirima Eamtako
Editor – Thailand,
Vietnam, Cambodia,
Myanmar and Laos



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Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion, one of the highlights in the UNESCO World Heritage Site of George Town



Courtesy of Tourism Malaysia

Penang pushing ahead

Major investment takes in hotels, roads and convention centres, says **N. Nithiyanathan**

Arrivals

Arrivals to Penang, based on hotel stays, were about six million in 2010, evenly divided between international and domestic tourists. The state's top five overseas markets were Indonesia, Singapore, China, Japan and the US.

"Based on Malaysian Association of Hotels figures, hotel stays increased by six per cent in 2010 over 2009 and by a further nine per cent in 2011," said Penang's state minister for tourism development and culture, Danny Law.

He added that Penang would continue to participate under the banner of Tourism Malaysia in major tradeshows worldwide.

Products

Boutique hotels have received much interest of late. "In 2011, Hotel Penaga opened at a cost of RM30 million (US\$9.4 million)," Law said. Other upcoming projects include a four-star hotel in the heart of the city and a hotel in the UNESCO World Heritage Site area of George Town.

"The World Heritage Site listing (in 2008) has certainly helped raise Penang's profile. However, one issue that needs to be addressed is the shortage of

premium five-star hotels in the beach area," said Asian Overland Services Tours & Travel director of sales, Andy Muniandy.

Law added: "The number of people visiting the World Heritage Site increased from 3.5 million in 2009 to 4.1 million in 2010 and 4.4 million in 2011."

Medical tourism has also been a driver of demand from Indonesia, especially Sumatra. Penang's medical tourism receipts were RM220 million in 2010, and were set to rise by 15 per cent in 2011. Law pointed out that Penang accounted for approximately 65 per cent of Malaysia's medical tourism.

He said: "We have seven international-class private hospitals with modern facilities and well-qualified specialists. And our cost of living is lower than Singapore, Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur."

MICE

The state government has approved the development of the subterranean Penang International Convention and Exhibition Centre (sPICE). It will be built partially below ground at the existing Penang International Sports Arena (PISA) and Aquatic Centre. Chief minister Lim Guan Eng said the RM300



"The state government undertook individual missions to China and Indonesia in 2011. This year, we are planning to go to India, China, South Korea, Japan and Australia."

Danny Law

State minister for tourism development and culture
Penang

million project would include the upgrading of PISA.

"With a capacity of 6,503m² the sPICE centre is being specifically designed for MICE. When completed, it will be able to accommodate 10,000 people and 600 dinner tables," Law said. A four-star hotel will also be part of the complex.

Another MICE-related development, the Straits Quay Convention Centre, opened last November. This conference venue can accommodate 3,500 pax for conventions and 2,000 pax for banquets.

These developments would further boost Penang's appeal for MICE, said Apxara travel & events managing director, Francis Cheong. "Most of the five-star hotels and resorts have excellent meeting and conference facilities," he added.

Aviation

Airport arrivals increased by 25 per cent in 2010 over the previous year. Twelve airlines provide direct links between Penang and 10 international destinations in Indonesia, Thailand, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore.

Over the last two years, Cathay Pacific Airways increased its

flights from four times a week to daily while China Southern Airlines raised capacity from 120 seats to 156 seats.

Renovations at Penang Airport will be completed this year. "The arrival hall and departure lounges are being expanded. A multi-storey car park is also being built," Law said.

Access

To address traffic congestion, especially during the school holidays, Law said the government would build an underground route from Tanjung Tokong to the Lim Chong Eu Expressway, providing a link from the beach to the airport.

A call for tender has also been made for the construction of a tunnel from the island to the mainland to complement the Penang Bridge and ferry service, and take pressure off the island's main roads.

Earlier last year, a bigger and faster train to the top of Penang Hill replaced the funicular railway. "Capacity was increased to 100 people per ride. A non-stop service, the train journey now takes only 10 minutes and runs until 9pm," Law said.

A free shuttle bus service is also available within George Town.

A burst of new inventory

Kuala Lumpur is main beneficiary, while the rest are in Malacca and Sabah, says **N. Nithiyananthan**

The Malaysian capital will witness the opening of five new properties (2,119 rooms) this year, widening the choice of hotels for travellers, especially for those seeking more economical options.

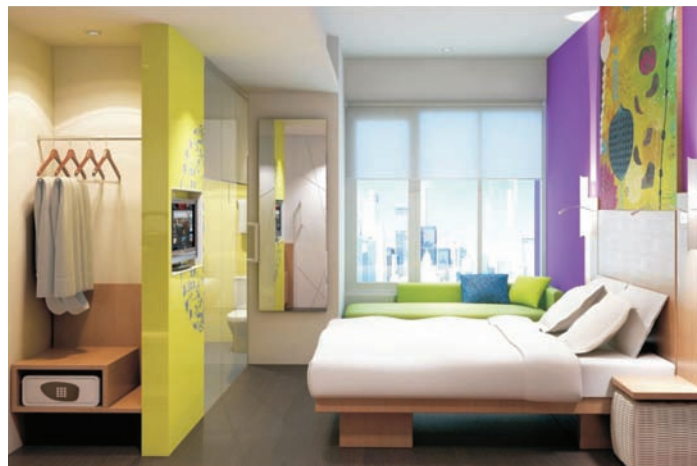
Leading the pack is Accor, with an ambitious plan to open 10 more hotels by 2014, adding a total of 1,224 rooms. It currently has four properties in Malaysia. More significantly, the hotel group will enter the economy segment in Malaysia this year, with the introduction of the Ibis brand.

Vice president of Accor-Malaysia, Indonesia & Singapore, Gerard Guillouet, said the company aimed to be the leading international hotel operator in Malaysia by 2015.

"These 10 new properties bear testimony to Accor's belief that Malaysia is set to be among the leaders within the tourism and hospitality industries in the region," he added.

The first of these properties will be the 513-room Pullman Kuala Lumpur Bangsar, due to open by mid-2012.

Two Ibis Styles properties will also come onstream this year, located in the Frasers Business



Artist's impression of Ibis Styles Fraser Business Park Kuala Lumpur

Park (500 rooms) and Cheras (156 rooms).

Other hotels making their way to Kuala Lumpur are the D'Tiara Amanah Raya Hotel Suites in the transport hub of Sentral (507 rooms) and the Park Regis in the city centre (443 rooms). In the satellite town of Petaling Jaya, the Royal Bintang Surian is slated to open with 300 rooms.

Luxury Tours Malaysia senior manager Arokia Das Anthony said the developments would expand available options for travel professionals, pointing out that the arrival of Ibis Styles was es-

pecially noteworthy.

"There are not many international three-star hotel brands in the city. It will definitely have an impact," he added.

Mayflower Acme Tours head-inbound division, international sales, Andy Soo, said: "Looking at their locations in the golden triangle (CBD), they will be targeting corporate and business travellers. Having more international brand names is always a winner. More is better."

Anthony said Luxury Tours had benefitted from the three hotels which opened in 2011 –



Artist's impression of Pullman Kuala Lumpur Bangsar

Furama, Pudu Central and My Hotel.

"They were excellent additions to the city and offered excellent rates," he said.

However, rates were not expected to soften with the arrival of new properties despite an oversupply in the city, said the two travel experts.

"Online bookings have changed the name of the game. Rates are going to be standard from about RM150 (US\$50) for a three-star hotel to RM300 upwards for a five-star hotel," Anthony explained.

Outside of Kuala Lumpur, the rest of the new openings for 2012 will be in the highly popular tourist destinations of Sabah and Malacca.

In Malacca, the Best Western Plus Riverside Hotel (170 rooms) and Hatten Hotel (700 rooms) are due to open.

And in Sabah, the following openings are anticipated: Best Western Sandakan Hotel and Residence (170 rooms); Grand Uno Hotel & Residence, South China Sea Place, Kota Kinabalu (167 rooms); and Gaya Island Resort, Borneo (121 rooms).

Checking in

Hotel Penaga, Penang



This labour of love provides a truly unique boutique experience within

George Town's shophouses, says **N. Nithiyananthan**

LOCATION In the heart of George Town, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It is also walking distance from the iconic KOM-TAR, which serves as a focal point and a hub for public buses on the island.

The hotel offers a street-level view of Penang's living heritage. It bridges the present with the past, co-existing with long-standing bakeries and owner-occupied coffee shops in the neighbouring shophouses.

AMBIENCE As this boutique hotel was built by renowned Malaysian architect Hijas Kasturi and his environmentalist wife Angela, I knew the experience would be special. From the moment I entered the lobby, it felt like a trip back in time but in an ultramodern setting.

Design and decor were reminiscent of the past, albeit with

the highest-quality finishes. You could call it an art hotel, given the array of paintings by Malaysia's finest artists – taken from the owners' private collection – adorning the walls of every corridor and room.

ROOMS Converted from a cluster of 15 pre-war terraces and shophouses on Hutton Road, Clarke Lane and Transfer Road, the hotel offers 32 deluxe rooms, eight suites and five terraces spread over two floors. No two rooms look the same.

I had high expectations of my room, and I was not disappointed. With a four-poster bed complemented by antique cabinets, benches and chairs sourced from across South-east Asia, the space was a visual delight. I particularly liked the inclined, ergonomically-designed chair.

The bathroom was equally impressive with its gadget-heavy Jacuzzi spa bath and separate walk-in shower.

Standard amenities were offered: a 40-inch LCD TV, electronic safe and coffee- and tea-making facilities. The complimentary Internet access was also a winner.

F&B The hotel has only one restaurant, The Cinnamon. As Penang is renowned for its food, guests are encouraged to head out and enjoy the wide variety of cuisines. Some of George Town's famous dishes and eateries are just a stone's throw away. Having said that, The Cinnamon offers its own take on fusion cuisine. It is also a good place to meet other guests during breakfast.

There is also the Tanglung Bar, which serves snacks.

FACILITIES The hotel's function space can be used as a small meeting room or for private dining. There is also a cosy business centre and reading room with a collection of books.

The main facility is the Penaga Spa, which uses ancient remedies and treatments to rejuvenate the body based on the benefits of the Penaga tree. Three double rooms are available.

One of my favourite areas is the lush garden created between the back lanes of the buildings which make up the hotel. While it is a public access lane, it also serves as a place to relax in the evenings or after a swim in the lap pool.



Courtesy of Hotel Penaga



SERVICE Service was of a high standard, as expected from a boutique hotel. From the first time I called to enquire to my visit itself, I found the staff attentive, courteous and proactive.

VERDICT A stay here provides a unique experience on many levels.

Name Hotel Penaga

No. of rooms 45

Rate Published rate from RM450 (US\$150) for a deluxe room with breakfast, excluding taxes

Contact details

Tel: (60-4) 261-1891

Email: info@penaga.com

Website: www.hotelpenaga.com



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