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# Breakthrough for ASEAN visa

## New Thai-Cambodia visa from Feb 1

By Shekhar Niyogi

**MANADO** Thailand and Cambodia have announced they will issue a single 30-day tourist visa to non-ASEAN visitors from February 1, with Vietnam and Laos to come onboard by end-2012. With this significant move, the 10-nation bloc edges closer towards its single visa goal.

Buyers at last week's ATF welcomed the change enthusiastically. Aynur San, general manager, Turkey-based Oniva Tours, said: "It will benefit us as we will now pick destinations and products from two or more countries and not worry about itinerary changes due to unforeseen events, say the Bangkok flood."

Frauke Melchert, Germany-based Meeting Consult International, added: "This is best for bringing more MICE events to ASEAN. Now I can plan multi-country incentives and many combinations of events. I hope more countries will be added," she said.

Michael Lim, managing director of Cambodia-based Dara Hotels and Resorts, was similarly optimistic about the prospects for MICE, giving an example of how a convention in Thailand could be combined with incentives or post-tours in Cambodia.

He said: "Tourists can now come with different objectives, for instance, wellness tourism for Cambodia and beach tourism for Thailand."

Jose Henrique Goncalves, managing director, France-based Abako said: "Business travel will also benefit hugely because of the flexibility a multi-country visa offers".

Echoing their views, Virat Chatturaputpitak, vice president of the Association of Thai Travel Agents, said immediate benefits could be expected from "cross-border travel with itineraries involving destinations of both countries".

Continued on page 2



## A new resort address

Patrick Heuze, former CEO of Emaar Hospitality Group – whose brands include The Address and Armani – is on a mission to make Coco Collection the new address for owners and resort-goers. He tells Raini Hamdi how – see page 6

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### Viewpoint

#### When will ASEAN have a common visa?



"All ASEAN nations have set a deadline of 2013 for identifying, rationalising and high-

lighting areas that need to be addressed. We see the visa developing in stages, initially including a few countries and gradually, all."

**Mari Elka Pangestu**  
Minister of Tourism and Creative Economy  
Indonesia



"It is a complex task because of the diversity among ASEAN nations. It involves issues of security, immigration and tourism. (The actual implementation) will be more like 2020."

**Ng Yen Yen**  
Minister of Tourism  
Malaysia

## More Singapore-Sulawesi traffic

By Mimi Hudoyo

**MANADO** A new initiative to attract inbound traffic from Singapore to Sulawesi is in the making with a plan to sell Manado-Makassar packages riding on a codeshare agreement between SilkAir and Garuda Indonesia.

Visit Indonesia Tourism Officer (VITO) Singapore country manager, Sulaiman Shehdek, said: "SilkAir has four weekly services between Singapore and Manado (North Sulawesi), while Garuda Indonesia has a daily service between Singapore and Makassar (South Sulawesi), and a number of flights between Makassar and Manado. As such, travellers from Singapore and other countries can pick any day

of the week to visit Manado and Makassar.

"Both airlines have approached VITO Singapore to link them up with the North Sulawesi Tourism Promotion Board (NSTPB) and South Sulawesi Tourism Board to create two-city leisure traffic."

Five-day/four-night packages with two nights in Manado and two nights in Makassar are being discussed, which should be ready in time for Singapore's mid-year school holidays.

Fam trips for Singapore's travel consultants and the media to North and South Sulawesi from March 3-7 are being planned.

"Manado has been known as a diving destination. Now we need

the destination to come up with ideas on what they can offer leisure travellers in particular, but also MICE," said Sulaiman.

NSTPB executive director, Widijanto, said: "We will be responsible for the groundhandling and are working out the details with VITO Singapore."

"We are trying to expand our market, and cooperation with VITO is the way to go. (There are) VITOs in 11 destinations, and we are working with them."

One example is a partnership with VITO France, said Widijanto. "We are trying to get more of the European market, and VITO France is looking for new destinations (beyond Bali) for special interest tours."

# A repositioned DoT

Philippines' new tourism secretary goes big on marketing

By Linda Haden

**MANADO** New Philippine tourism secretary Ramon R Jimenez has instituted changes that will revitalise the destination's tourism performance, starting with a marketing strategy that relies heavily on going viral.



Jimenez: doing things differently

Speaking with *TTG Asia* at ATF, Jimenez said: "We are going to do things differently now. The Department of Tourism (DoT) is going to initiate more aggressive marketing communications and initiatives that will reinvigorate the tourism industry and shift attitudes."

DoT's first move was to unveil a new destination branding on January 6. Unlike its previous incarnations, the current campaign, *It's More Fun in the Philippines*, focuses first on the domestic market before it is launched internationally.

The secretary said it was crucial to first gain local support for any new global tourism marketing initiative, a painful lesson DoT learned from its last branding exercise, which saw the *Pilipinas Kay Ganda* campaign axed after mass criticism in 2010.

In line with this premise, DoT has introduced a social media campaign showcasing the new branding and asking Filipinos to

post what they think is fun about their country. A partner website, *itsmorefuninthe Philippines.com* supports the campaign.

Jimenez hopes the new campaign will reposition DoT's role. "Previously it was not seen as a source of inspiration, but as a source of funds. It should be perceived as the primary selling unit of a country, not just an administrative one," he said.

Marisa Nallana, chairman, Philippine Association of Convention/Exhibition Organizers and Suppliers, said the concept was great and it was "high time" Filipinos showed their expertise in customer service to the world.

Henry Lee, EDSA Shangri-La Hotel general manager, believed the new campaign would appeal to the new generation of savvy travellers who appreciate "traditional tourist attractions cap-

tured in stunning photography with modern, easily understandable copy".

Adopting a hands-on approach, DoT will evaluate packages sold by travel professionals to ensure that "they are reflective of the new branding and resonate with target markets", which means weeding out packages that are "not fun", such as overpriced, tired or inconvenient ones. Evaluations will be made through meetings and workshops with local and foreign travel experts from primary inbound sources including the US, South Korea, Japan, China and ASEAN.

As well, DoT is lobbying for a loosening of visa restrictions: for instance, extending the validity of tourist visas from 21 to 30 days in line with other ASEAN destinations and granting visas on arrival to those from the US, Japan, the UK and Australia. – *Additional reporting by Mari- anne Carandang*

## Titillate Bring on the fun

**Filipinos can add wit to their list of qualities. In the week-end following the launch of the destination's new branding campaign, meme-maker websites sprung up, allowing locals to express their own interpretations of the slogan.**

Creations include a photo of a school of fish in Palawan that came with the tagline: *Rush hour. It's more fun in the Philippines*. Another read: *Planking. It's more fun in the Philippines*, with a photo of a roasted pig on a spit, a local delicacy.



Indonesia's minister of tourism and creative economy, Mari Elka Pangestu, with ATF buyers and TTG Asia Media's Darren Ng

## Indonesia's gaps to fill

By Mimi Hudoyo

**MANADO** Limited accessibility and insufficient marketing promotions have been identified as hurdles to growing Indonesia as a tourism destination.

The comments came from buyers representing nine markets – Malaysia, India, Switzerland, Thailand, Russia, Canada, Indonesia, Singapore and the Middle East – who were engaged in a first-ever dialogue with Indonesia's Minister of Tourism and Creative Economy, Mari Elka Pangestu at ATF.

Giving an example, Aditya Dhumma, managing director of India's Classis Travels & Tours, said Manado's potential was hampered by air connectivity. Indian travellers have two route options – Singapore-Jakarta-Manado or Bangkok-Bali-Manado.

"It took me almost 24 hours to get here," Dhumma said.

Tourcan Vacations Canada president, Vivek Khanna, who used to see better volume to Indonesia 25 years ago when Garuda Indonesia operated flights to

Canada, said: "Traffic must go through Hong Kong or Seoul, but promotional seats (with Cathay Pacific and Korean Air) beyond those points are difficult to secure. You need to book at least six months ahead."

Buyers also called for stronger destination promotions. Flex Travel Zurich senior product manager Asia, Ulrike Meissner, said: "Bali is the top destination in Indonesia for the Swiss because it is so well-known. We would like to explore other destinations." She suggested that a Visit Indonesia Tourism Officer (VITO) be appointed in Switzerland or incorporated under VITO Germany.

The minister agreed to look into increasing cooperation with embassies and the presence of VITOs, as well as the lack of foreign-language-speaking guides. At a separate press conference, she also said the government would resolve connectivity issues in the next three years. An airport is planned for Bitung to draw Filipinos to North Sulawesi, as well as for northern Bali.

Continued from page 1

## Single visa to start with two countries

Cambodia's minister of tourism, Thong Khon, revealed that the next step would be "to include Laos and Vietnam, develop the road network well and offer our four countries as a package to foreign visitors, a unique concept offering in Asia".

The vision of a single visa enabling seamless travel across 10 ASEAN countries was one of the recurring topics discussed at ATF this year, with countries pledging to take serious steps in working towards its implementation.

It is easier said than done though, given the different visa policies across member states. Indonesia and Myanmar, for example, require pre-travel visas for reciprocal travel, an anomaly they wish to rectify by the end of the year.

ASEANTA's secretary general Mohd Ilyas Zainol Abidin was insistent that the kinks must be ironed out. He said: "In Schengen, they have difficulties too, but the single visa has been successful and (likewise) our benefits (of an ASEAN visa) will far outweigh the obstacles".

# ASEAN readies umbrella brand



**ASEAN's tourism chiefs pledge stronger ties at ATF. From left: Myanmar's U Htay Aung, Philippine's Ramon R Jimenez, Singapore's S Iswaran, Thailand's Sombat Kuruphan, Vietnam's Nyugen Van Tuan, Indonesia's Mari Elka Pangestu, Brunei's Yahya Bakar, Cambodia's Thong Khon, Laos' Bosengkham Vongdara, Malaysia's Ng Yen Yen and ASEAN Secretariat's Somsak Pipoppinyo**

**MANADO** The promotion of ASEAN under the *Southeast Asia: Feel the Warmth* branding is finally set to hit the ground running, after being plagued by disagreements over the inclusion of the 'ASEAN' word and funding issues.

A four-year marketing plan

has been outlined by the ASEAN Marketing and Communication Working Group, led by Thailand. Intra-ASEAN travel and arrivals from its dialogue partners are this year's focus; community-based tourism and nature in 2013; MICE in 2014; and long-stay senior travellers in 2015.

Tourism Authority of Thailand deputy governor Asia and South Pacific, Sansern Ngaurungs, told *TTG Asia* that the working group is hammering out an action plan, and that programmes are expected to be up and running by the first quarter.

The annual budget is US\$200,000, with US\$160,000 going to marketing and promotions and the rest to product development and research.

ASEANTA has also agreed to the new tagline and offered the use of its website, [www.southeastasia.org](http://www.southeastasia.org), for promotions.

Part of the plan is to "piggyback" on existing activities by the individual NTOs, which have been invited to recommend products to be featured.

As a start, the new logo was adopted at last week's ATF, while NTOs have already begun submitting marketing highlights to be considered under this branding.

Sansern said: "The idea is to pool common products and activities to promote under the banner of ASEAN, *Southeast Asia: Feel the Warmth*."

For instance, playing up the fact that UNESCO heritage sites can be found across ASEAN countries is one idea.

Member countries interviewed were supportive of the campaign, explaining that it enhances their marketing efforts.

Indonesia's Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy international tourism marketing director, Nia Niscaya, said: "The strategy is in line with ours. Intra-ASEAN travel is our focus, while China and India are our emerging markets. The ASEAN campaign is an extension of what Indonesia is doing."

Philippines' Department of Tourism secretary, Ramon R Jimenez, too, said the campaign resonated with the country's destination marketing, the operative word being 'warmth'.

However, Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board chairman Victor Wee cautioned that the branding should go beyond talk. "The promotional activities and delivery of the tourism products and services should fulfil the brand promise," he said. – **Mimi Hudoyo**

# Myanmar opens up

Tourism ministry signals change, 24,000 rooms to be built

By Shekhar Niyogi

**MANADO** A new government in Myanmar has revealed that it is studying the implementation of several tourist-friendly changes in the areas of hotel development, air access and visas.

Policies are in place to develop infrastructure in six regions including Yangon, Bagan, Inle and Mandalay.

U Htay Aung, deputy minister, Ministry of Hotels and Tourism, told *TTG Asia* that the country's land allocation and leasing policies are being relooked, including extending the duration of leases from two to at least five years.

He said: "There are 25 foreign investment-backed hotels here, and we may see a deluge if some of the policy changes take effect. We now charge US\$200,000 or a percentage of gross revenue as a fee, whichever is higher. We are working on a formula that will be attractive to new overseas investors."

According to U Aung Zaw



**U Aung Zaw Win:**  
max capacity

Win, director general, Ministry of Hotels and Tourism, a target to build 24,000 guestrooms in the budget, two- and three-star

categories over the next few years has been set.

Illustrating the destination's dire need for rooms, he said the country's 739 hotels were all booked out till March.

U Aung Zaw Win expects arrivals to grow 35 per cent this year to achieve 1.2 million footfalls.

This may not be out of reach, given that in just the last two months of 2011, there was a 27 per cent leap in arrivals, compared to the same period in 2010.

Aside from infrastructure, *TTG Asia* has also learned that a proposal to scrap tax on all

incoming flights has been submitted to the government. If successful, Myanmar can expect busier skies – six domestic carriers and 15 foreign airlines already serve the destination. Myanmar Airways International and Air Bagan are also slated to begin flights to new destinations soon under the ASEAN Open Sky pact, a development which is expected to augment the large volume of ASEAN tourists that Myanmar is already attracting.

Myanmar's largest ASEAN source market is Thailand (15.8 per cent), which ranks close to the destination's top traffic contributor, China (15.9 per cent).

Meanwhile, an effort to cut turnaround time for pre-arrival visa applications is also under way. Presently, the country grants visas on arrival to passengers arriving on cruises and charter flights, as well as to package tour travellers from countries where Myanmar has no diplomatic representation.

# Year of events to highlight Malaysia

By Brian Higgs

**MANADO** Tourism Malaysia will focus its global marketing efforts on promoting events and festivals taking place in the country this year, with a first-of-its-kind Malaysia International Tourism Exchange (MITE) to be a calendar heavyweight.

Speaking to *TTG Asia*, Tourism Malaysia (TM) acting director general Azizah Noordin said: "We will be concentrating on marketing the year's events under the umbrella brand of Luxury Malaysia."

"Our strategy will involve participating in international travel trade fairs and seminars, public relations and advertising activities, and organising hosted fam trips for foreign travel consultants and media."

About 40 per cent of TM's total marketing budget of RM130 million (US\$41.5 million) has been set aside to do this.

Under the initiative, Malaysia will promote events such as the Kuala Lumpur International Shoe Festival, the Rainforest World Music Festival in Sarawak and the ASEAN Food Heritage Trail. Key highlights of the year are the 61<sup>st</sup> PATA Conference from April 20-22 and MITE 2012 from May 31-June 3.

With the latter, Azizah said this would be the first time Malaysia is organising an international tourism exchange.

To be held at the Malaysia Agro Exposition Park Serdang,

the event will span five halls: an international hall, a Malaysia hall, an Asian hall, a China hall, a B2C hall and a hall featuring Asian cuisine. Up to 600,000 visitors and 1,500 exhibitors from 25 countries are expected.

Norman Kumar, group deputy CEO event organiser, My-events International, said: "The concept is a tourism exchange, not a fair. It will bring Malaysia to the world and the world to Malaysia."

He added: "It is definitely on a bigger scale compared to ATF or ITB Asia, which focuses on bringing overseas traffic to ASEAN and Asia respectively. MITE has a focus on ASEAN, with Asia as a bigger picture and the globe as the overall picture."

Azizan added that the NTO would also be promoting religious festivals and sales campaigns throughout the year, including the 1Malaysia Mega Sale Carnival and the Malaysia Year-End Sale.

Tourism Malaysia's efforts complement the Malaysia Convention and Exhibition Bureau's (MyCEB) aim to position the country as an entry point for international organisations wanting to engage with Asian businesses through events. MyCEB launched a new brand identity, Asia's Business Events Hub, last November. In 2012, Malaysia is targeting 24.5 million overseas arrivals and RM58 billion in tourism receipts.



**Kumar: new show is bigger than ATF or ITB**

# Panorama adds two hotel brands

**MANADO** Panorama Group's hotel arm, PHM Hospitality, will unveil two new brands and at least two openings by year-end.

Two new-builds in Bali would carry the new brand names, to be disclosed in February, said the group's CEO, Budi Tirtawisata, who added that one would be a mid-tier thematic hotel and the other, a budget property.

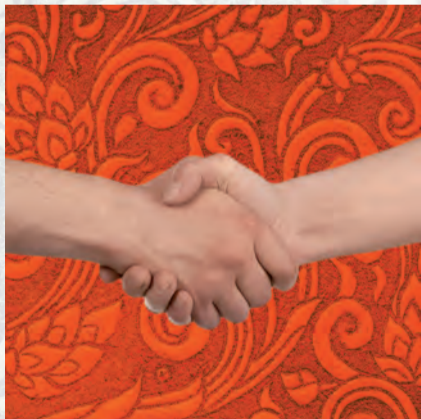
Four more hotels under the company's The IO1 label (three-star premium) are also being constructed in Jakarta, Bali, Bogor and Jogjakarta. The IO1 Dharmawangsa Jakarta will hit the market in mid-2013 with 138 rooms, while The IO1 Legian's new 106-room wing will open early 2013.

"With these four brands (the fourth being The Haven, a

four-star brand), we aim to develop 10 more hotels this year," said Budi.

PHM Hospitality's aim is to have 15 hotels by 2013 and 30 hotels by 2015. New destinations such as Medan, Surabaya and Manado, where Panorama Group has a competitive advantage, have been earmarked for future development, he added.

— Mimi Hudoyo



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Here's what you've missed

## Poll

How useful will the ASEAN visa be in selling the region?

- Very useful
- Could be useful
- Not sure
- Not much of an impact

## Hot Deals

U Paasha Seminyak Bali (below) extends introductory rates; Ascott offers complimentary upgrades in Australia; Hansar Bangkok launches first anniversary package promotion



## Hot Moves

Manfred Weber becomes GM of Shangri-La Hotel, Singapore; Yann Fruchart joins Swiss-Belhotel International as senior group director e-commerce; Absolute Hotel Services appoints Anan Phongsuriyahchote as DOS-leisure

## Sound bites



"Manado is a city of 45 minutes. A coffee takes 45

minutes, transport takes 45 minutes, ordering food takes 45 minutes."

**Dennis Law**, managing director of Singapore's Star Holiday Mart on the challenges faced by ATF delegates in Manado, Indonesia

# Brunei's trajectory

A slew of new products and partnerships aims to double arrivals by 2016

By Shekhar Niyogi

**MANADO** Brunei Tourism has lined up some 69 projects from this year – including strategic marketing tie-ups with the trade and the introduction of new attractions and tour packages – even as its long-serving chief, Sheikh Jamaluddin Sheikh Mohamed prepares for his swansong.

Four new ecotourism resorts, five detox spas, a reinvented diving package that offers shipwreck exploration and farmstays will be rolled out progressively. Also on offer is a three-night Islamic heritage tour package that showcases the sultan's collection of miniature Quran, 300 rare *mushaf* or religious scrolls, and 60 kinds of prayer beads among other treasures.

Brunei, a popular destination for golf enthusiasts and the host

## Brunei's sources

# 50

Travellers from ASEAN made up a little more than 50 per cent of Brunei's total arrivals last year. China, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan contributed 17.2 per cent of arrivals.

of major tournaments including the Brunei Open and Aberdeen Brunei Senior Masters, will also court new professional golf tournaments, said Brunei Tourism CEO, Sheikh Jamaluddin, who will be retiring in 2013.

He also revealed to *TTG Asia* that a joint marketing campaign with AirAsia was being developed. The LCC has twice-weekly flights linking Kuala Lumpur and Brunei.

Although air links to Brunei suffered a setback with flag carrier Royal Brunei Airlines (RBA) withdrawing flights from East Malaysia's Kuching last August and Australia and New Zealand last October, Sheikh Jamaluddin said the destination still has good partnerships with other feeder airlines.

Japan would also join Brunei Tourism's list of target source

markets should RBA commence flights to Tokyo, as there has been talk of new services between the two countries, said Sheikh Jamaluddin. *TTG Asia* has learnt from sources that the air link is scheduled to be up and running by August.

He added that the NTO would focus on the China, Hong Kong and Singapore markets for growth, cheekily pointing out that the destination's competitive advantage was that it offered an escape "from urban jungle to real jungle".

Arrivals are targeted to grow by 15 per cent this year, up from 209,720 in 2011.

Looking back to his appointment in 1996, Sheikh Jamaluddin recounted: "No one wanted to work in hotels or tour companies. Today, these are the careers people aspire for."

# India's NTO takes giant steps forward

**MANADO** The India Development Corporation (ITDC) is entering new territory with never-before initiatives that aim to bolster tourism infrastructure, attract more hotel investment, strengthen product development and train up human resources.

Revealing that plans would only be formally announced this month, ITDC chairman and managing director Dr Lalit K Panwar said the Indian NTO would set up a joint venture company called Ashok Infra, in collaboration with Infrastructure Leasing & Financial Services.

Explaining that India's tourism infrastructure was still underdeveloped in comparison to other Asian countries, Panwar said the new company would be in charge of road expansions, beachfront facilities, places of interest and more. Funded by the

Ministry of Tourism, state governments would also be active participants.

In another first, ITDC will enter into three-way equity ventures with state governments and hospitality companies to develop hotels. Having owned and ran its hotels independently with limited success, the NTO now wants states to identify suitable land sites and provide them at low prices to invite private investment.

Said Panwar: "We want professional hospitality companies to run these hotels profitably."

Two projects are underway, with one in Agartala, capital of Tripura, and the other in Anandpur Sahib, near Amritsar in Punjab.

Said Fortune Select Loudon hotel general manager Amitava Guha Thakurta: "It is a welcome



**Panwar: building up the industry**

move because we will have access to viable building sites and no search process is involved. Infrastructure development will be minimal as the states will ensure that aspect is taken care of. NTO and state tourism involvement will also help bring more tourist traffic as they will showcase the property apart from our own marketing efforts."

Added Punjab Heritage and Tourism Promotion Board executive director Vidya B Kumar: "This new initiative works well, as it gives incentives to the private sector to invest, backed by infrastructure and support pro-

vided by the government."

On the product front, ITDC will launch the first Incredible India Forum in mid-February, bringing together state tourism chiefs who will collaborate on "multi-state destination packages for tourists", said Panwar. This will help to increase the length of stay and spend by tourists. Seeing opportunities in rail tourism, ITDC will also partner the Indian Railway Catering & Tourism Corporation to create packages and upgrade trains and rail facilities.

To supply the growing tourism industry with manpower, Panwar also shared that ITDC plans to start a university for hospitality and tourism studies in five years' time, converting all 16 Ashok hotels that it currently runs into hotel schools. – **Shekhar Niyogi**

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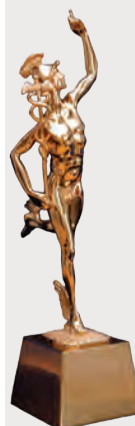
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**Patrick Heuze**  
CEO, Sunland Hotels and  
Coco Collection Resorts

The former CEO of Emaar Hospitality Group – whose hotels brands include The Address and Armani – is on a mission to make Coco the new resort address for owners and well-heeled clients. He tells **Raini Hamdi** how

# A new resort address

**You're about a month into your new role. Why the move from Emaar to Sunland?**

It's an opportunity to rejoin a group I had previously worked with for eight years, this time as CEO and equity partner in Coco Collection (a division of Sunland, an established family-owned company in the Maldives). Ultimately, a lot of people at my level will want to have their own business at one point or another, so this gives me the chance to start out.

**So you're a familiar face at Sunland after all.**

Yes, I first came to the Maldives in 1997, opening the Hilton Rangali, then went to Japan with Hilton in Nagoya before returning to the Maldives and opened the Coco Palm Dhuni Kolhu (in 1998) and later, as group GM, overseeing Coco Palm Bodu Hithi (opened in 2006, see *Luxury Travel*, page 12).

Once we get these two properties, and a third – a small, exclusive five-villa island (near Coco Palm Bodu Hithi) which we are developing – on the right platform and confident we have the right product to showcase the brand, we can start expanding Coco outside the Maldives.

**That will make Sunland the first homegrown Maldivian hotel company to venture out of its home base. Are you doing another Address?**

(Laughs) Kind of, but only limited to resorts, boutiques and retreats, not cities.

**What is your structure for the overseas expansion?**

We're establishing a registered company in Dubai, which will be the head office for Coco Collection, and the normal corporate structure is being established; we're hiring a director of sales and marketing, HR, training and development, finance and I've already recruited a director of technical services.

While the core activity is currently concentrated in the Maldives, it is important we display our commitment that we want to be a regional or global brand by having a head office in Dubai or Singapore. We picked Dubai as I'm familiar with Dubai and it has more fiscal incentives than Singapore.

It is important we demonstrate to owners that we are putting in a professional structure

for future development, that we are not a local Maldivian company only.

**So how different is Coco to, say, One&Only?**

If we were to draw any parallel between the two, I would say they (One&Only) are 'luxurious' luxury. We want to make it 'simple' luxury, 'natural' luxury, where people will really feel the beauty of the island or destination they are in, as well as the local experience and interaction.

One&Only (Reethi Rah, Maldives) is very beautiful but, for me, clinical. It is not ostentatious, but too luxurious vis a vis the experience one would expect when visiting the Maldives.

**Which resort brand do you admire the most?**

I admire Six Senses for its environmental leadership, Amanresorts for its simple but exclusive luxury, and W Hotels for its de-

– we set the standards but give them the freedom to interact with guests, so that the guest, and not policies and procedures, becomes the priority. As well, the F&B concepts became the talking point in Dubai and helped position the brand.

**What does Coco Palm Bodu Hithi, already a superb product, need in order for it to be the launchpad of the brand to the world?**

We need to bring more life to the resort. We need to bring in an interior designer to give us some new ideas to uplift the product. It is good, but there is room for improvement, especially when I'll be using it as the showcase to owners. So we'll be spending some US\$2-US\$4 million to upgrade the product this year.

**What do luxury resort travellers today want?**

Customers are looking for value and a different form of holiday,

They feel the rapport and relationship, there is better chemistry, and they are more comfortable. In my previous employment as CEO, I would go and communicate with developers and owners to show that I was really interested in getting their business, while the established chains would send someone else.

So the owners feel they are not given the importance they deserve. They feel as well that the big chains are only keen on signing management agreements but not servicing them, and that they are not interested in small units. They want critical mass, 250 or 300 plus rooms, while operators like us, or even Emaar, are willing to take on small resorts of 50, 60, 80 rooms which might not be as profitable as the larger units but give us the opportunity to grow and wave our flags in different cities or secondary cities.

**So your target will be small resorts and there's plenty in this part of the world?**

Yes, plenty, plenty. I would say 50 to 150 rooms. And I don't have the ambition to be a global company. I think there is a lot to be done in this part of the world, which has gone through the economic crisis but is still thriving with not just foreign tourists but its own domestic population. Take Indonesia, for example, where there is limited hospitality infrastructure for the locals. Or untapped markets like Vietnam, Cambodia or Myanmar, which represent opportunities for us.

There are opportunities as well in North Africa, like Morocco, but I don't want to over-spread ourselves because I want to be able to service our customers. So I don't want to go to North America or the Caribbean or West Africa. Geographically we should limit ourselves to a particular region and I think that region stretches from East Africa to Indonesia.

**"It is important we demonstrate to owners that we are putting in a professional structure..."**

sign, even if it's a little too minimalistic. So it's a combination of the three and we have to create our own identity, not copy or align ourselves with any of those concepts.

**What does it take to create a brand like The Address or Armani and what lessons might there be from your experiences there for Coco?**

When we developed The Address, we did not try to copy anyone but looked at what our customers would be tempted to patronise. We all came from different origins; there were people from Hyatt, Ritz-Carlton, Hilton, etc, and the last thing we wanted to do was to recreate something we had been working with in the past, but to take the best practices of these companies. So the service of Ritz-Carlton – but we didn't want anything too traditional. Or the design of W – but we didn't want something overly-designed without warmth. The Address has a residential feel and that is also through how our associates engage the guests

one which provides an experience, not where they will only return with a sun tan. They want a relaxing holiday, not in the sense of being pampered, rather, engaging and hassle-free.

**Having played a big role in development at Emaar, what gap do you think Coco can fill for owners?**

What I've seen is that new owners or developers are a bit tired of the big brands.

They feel they are a small fish in a big pond. With small operators like us, they are a big fish in a small pond.



**Where do you think the first Coco property outside the Maldives will be?**

I am negotiating something for 2013 in Indonesia. Lombok, for example, is an emerging destination. Bali is a bit saturated.

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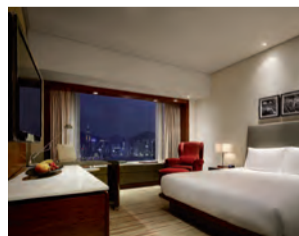
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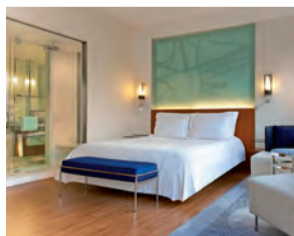
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# Fleeting fancy in Asian skies



By the end of November 2011, a total of 1,745 aircraft were operated by airlines in China, 148 more than the previous year.

Air China is one of the three major Chinese airlines, the other two being China Eastern Airlines and China Southern Airlines. Air China currently operates 297 aircraft and has outstanding orders for another 129 aircraft.

Of its current fleet, 120 aircraft are based at Beijing Capital Airport, 27 at Tianjin Binhai Airport, nine at Hohhot Baita Airport, 66 at Chengdu Shuangliu International Airport, 30 at Chongqing Jiangbei International Airport, 24 at Hangzhou Airport, six at Wuhan Airport, three at Shanghai Hongqiao Airport and one at Tianjin Airport.

Air China also established a joint venture in August 2010 with Dalian Airlines, operating two B737-800s based at Dalian International Airport. Another subsidiary operating 10 business jets of various types was recently re-branded as Beijing Airlines. These aircraft are offered for charter.

## Air China: 297 aircraft, 129 on order

Type	Current	Order	Remarks
B737-300	24		
B737-700	20		
B737-800	80	43	To be delivered between 2012 and 2015
B747-400	4		
B747-400 Combi	5		
B747-400 Freighter	10		
B747-8 Intercontinental		5	To be delivered between 2014 and 2015
B757-200	8		Based at Chengdu
B767-300ER	3		Progressively being retired
B777-200	10		
B777-300ER	4	15	To be delivered between 2012 and 2015
A319	33		
A320	19	21	To be delivered between 2012 and 2014
A321	33	8	To be delivered between 2012 and 2014
A330-200	22	10	To be delivered between 2012 and 2015
A330-300	6	17	To be delivered between 2012 and 2015
A340-300	6		
A350-900		10	To be delivered between 2018 and 2020
Business jets operated by Beijing Airlines	10		Five Gulfstream 450 and one each of Airbus A318, Falcon 7X, CL605, Gulfstream G200 and BD-700 Global Express
TOTAL	297	129	



Cathay Pacific Airways has thus far refrained from joining its competitors in ordering very large aircraft (VLAs) such as the Airbus A380 or Boeing 747

Intercontinental even as home-grown competitor Hong Kong Airlines – with the backing of the Hainan Airlines group – has ordered 10 A380s valued at USD3.8 billion.

Cathay Pacific's CEO John Slosar said: "Both the 777-300ERs and A350s will form the backbone of our long and ultra-longhaul fleet, enabling Cathay Pacific to replace older, less fuel-efficient aircraft progressively. We will continue to evaluate all available aircraft models for our fleet needs beyond this decade but for now the fleet mix suits our business model perfectly."

The retirement of the aging B747-400 and A340-300 fleet will pick up pace as more B777-300ERs are delivered. Cathay

## Cathay Pacific Airways: No to very large aircraft

Type	Current	Order	Remarks
B747-400	21		Four of these are slated for freighter conversion
B747-400F	20		
B747-800F	3	5	
B777-200	5		
B777-200F		8	
B777-300	12		
B777-300ER	24	26	The backbone of the longhaul fleet
A330-300	36	3	
A340-300	11		Gradual retirement of this fleet
A350-900		3	

expects to fully retire the former by the end of the decade.

From January to November 2011, combined report by Cathay and subsidiary Dragonair shows strong growth on flights to North America and South-east Asia – 14.5 and 11.8 per cent respectively. A new air services agreement between

Hong Kong and Taiwan has boosted expectations of more flights between the two. Cathay now operates 108 weekly services to Taipei and hopes to add frequencies to Taipei and inaugurate services to other Taiwanese cities. Dragonair runs thrice-daily to Taipei and six-daily flights to Kaohsiung.



The make-up of Air India's existing domestic and regional fleet is very much the product of its merger with Indian Airlines, while its order

frenzy in the last few years has resulted in a flurry of wide-body aircraft deliveries that seem to surpass its needs.

With a fleet of B787-8 Dreamliners on the verge of being delivered – one each in January, March and April and two each in May and June – Air India has decided to sell some of these and lease them back, a move that will ease its cashflow. It has also issued a tender to lease out five B777-200LRs for a period of eight to 10 years as well as a pair of B747-400s.

Air India's fully-owned LCC subsidiary, Air India Express, operates a fleet of 21 B737-800s.

Meanwhile, the Reserve Bank of India has approved Air India's restructuring plans, a move that paves the way for the airline to access government funding of up to Rs30,000 crore (about US\$5.6 billion) over a 10-year period.

## Air India: Sober after the shopping binge

Type	Current	Order	Remarks
B747-400	5		Two earmarked for leasing out to other airlines
B777-200LR	8		Five earmarked for leasing out to other airlines
B777-300ER	12	3	
B787-8		27	
A319	24		
A320	18		
A321	20		
A330-200	2		
CRJ-700	4		
ATR 42	7		

Last year, Air India terminated its practice of operating flights from various Indian cities to Frankfurt, where passengers transferred onto various Air India flights heading to destinations in North America. Such transfers now take place at New Delhi. During the year, Air India's preparation for entry into Star Alliance was terminated as a result of the airline's failure to meet some of the alliance's stringent

entry requirements. Recent press reports suggested that representatives from Air India and Star Alliance were back at the negotiation table.

Air India's domestic operation accounts for 17.4 per cent of the domestic aviation market, third after the Jet Air group (Jet Airways and Jetlite) and IndiGo Airlines with a marketshare of 27.1 and 19.8 per cent respectively.

The ailing economies of Europe and the US notwithstanding, Asian airlines continue to grow and upgrade their fleet in anticipation of a stronger performance in the second half of 2012 and beyond. Many of Asia’s airlines have garnered top accolades around the world and, apart from inflight service and food, a key contributor to this trend is their younger fleet of more fuel-efficient aircraft, which also helps reduce

downtime and the cost of maintenance. Not surprisingly, Asian carriers are the first to operate new aircraft types such as the Airbus A380 (Singapore Airlines) and the B787 Dreamliner (All Nippon Airways) and feature strongly in the order books of the B747-8 Intercontinental and A350XWBs. *TTG Asia’s* aviation correspondent **Sim Kok Chwee** charts a guide to the fleet of the key airlines in the region



This year marks the 60th anniversary of All Nippon Airways (ANA), a milestone which traditionally is referred to as *kanreki*, a return to second infancy and one’s birth sign.

The airline triumphed the negative effects of the Japan earthquake of March 2011. It also ended the year with three Boeing 787-8 Dreamliners – the first airline in the world to operate this technologically-superior airplane. Over the past few years, ANA, like many other Asian carriers, has been replacing its B747-400 fleet with more fuel-efficient B777-300ERs. Today, a handful of B747-400Ds are operated exclusively on domestic routes. ANA has committed itself to a total of 55 B787 Dreamliners and continues to eye the Airbus A350 XWB with strong interest. A plan announced in April 2008 to acquire the Airbus A380 was shelved later that year. Vice president for the Americas Satoru Fujiki said: “We are evaluating both the B747-8 Intercontinental and the A380 but we do not have any plans to introduce these big aircraft until we are more confident about stability and growth of the world economy and how these planes fit into the Japanese market.” ANA continues to tap into the new opportunities offered by Haneda Airport. Services through this airport are reportedly

All Nippon Airways: A second infancy

Type	Current	Order	Remarks
B737-500	17		
B737-700	16		
B737-700ER	2		
B737-800		10	
B747-400D	9		
B767-300	32		
B767-300ER	24	3	To be delivered in 2012
B767-300F	9		
B777-200	16		
B777-200ER	7	5	To be delivered from 2012 to 2014
B777-300	7		
B777-300ER	19		
B787-8	3	37	To be delivered from 2012 to 2016
B787-9		15	To be delivered from 2016 to 2017
Bombardier DHC-8-314	4		
Bombardier DHC-8-402	18	3	To be delivered in 2012
Mitsubishi MRJ90		15	To be delivered from 2014 to 2017

popular due to its location nearer downtown Tokyo and convenient rail links. The dual-hub strategy resulted in a 31.1 per cent growth in international revenue during the fiscal year ending March 31, 2011. Going forward, ANA faces greater

competition not only from a growing number of international airlines, including those from the Middle East, but from Japan Airlines, which has emerged from its re-organisation a stronger, leaner and profitable airline.



With over four years of A380 operation under its belt, Singapore Airlines adds this month Frankfurt and New York-John F. Kennedy Airport to the list of destinations served by this super jumbo. With this, another two B747-400s were decommissioned, sold to Transaero Airlines. Melbourne will be the final destination served by the B747-400 until the A380 takes over in late March. This will bring to an end 38 years of B747 passenger service since 1973. Barring any delay, the final five of SIA’s fleet of 19 A380s will be delivered by the third quarter and it holds an option for another six. SIA’s nonstop flights to Los Angeles and New York continue to be the world’s longest commercial air routes. These use the Airbus A340-500 in an all business-class 100-seat configuration. As SIA’s fleet of B777-200s shrinks further – and as many as 10 of these aircraft are earmarked for its LCC subsidiary Scoot, the A330-300s becomes the backbone of its short- and medium-haul fleet.

Singapore Airlines: End of the B747 era

Type	Current	Order	Remarks
A380-800	14	5	All remaining five A380s to be delivered by 3Q12
A330-300	19	15	
A340-500	5		
A350-900XWB		20	Options for another 20 aircraft
B747-400	1		
B777-200	26		
B777-200ER	9		
B777-300	8		
B777-300ER	19	8	
B787-9		20	Options for another 20 aircraft

SIA’s alliance with Virgin Australia has given it an all-important and much sought-after foothold in the Australian market. SIA and fully-owned subsidiary SilkAir have also beefed up their operation to Greater China with SIA now operating 70 weekly services to mainland China and 49

weekly services to Hong Kong, and SilkAir operating a further 27 weekly services to six second-tier Chinese cities. SIA has also steadily added flights to India, now operating 51 weekly services to six Indian destinations while SilkAir operates a further 34 weekly services to seven Indian cities.



Thai Airways International (THAI) will join the A380 club in September when it receives its first 507-seat A380. This will

initially be deployed on regional flights to Hong Kong before eventually serving the Bangkok-Frankfurt route. Subsequent deliveries will allow for A380 operation to London-Heathrow and Sydney. The injection of capacity by the A380 may be untimely as the airline is reportedly already struggling to fill the B747-400s presently deployed on these routes. THAI’s new regional airline, Thai Smile, will operate the A320 aircraft. The airline decided to call off an LCC cooperation with Tiger Airways, confirming what has been speculated for months. Like most of its Asian counterparts, THAI is facing multiple challenges posed by high fuel prices, reduced demand from Europe and North America, and increased competition from Middle Eastern carriers which have deployed larger aircraft on the Bangkok route. After braving the negative impact of political riots in recent years, THAI’s hopes of turning its fortunes were dented by floods in and around Bangkok last year.

Thai Airways International: Joining the A380 club

Type	Current	Order	Remarks
B737-400	9		Include three aircraft leased to Nok Air
B747-400	18		
B777-200	8		
B777-200ER	6		
B777-300	6		
B777-300ER	5	6	Existing five aircraft leased from Jet Airways (India)
B787-8		6	To be leased from ILFC for 12 years with deliveries in 2014/15
B787-9		2	To be leased from ILFC for 12 years with deliveries in 2017
A300-600R	11		
A320-200		5	Delivery in 2014 and 2015
A330-300	22	2	
A340-500	4		
A340-600	6		
A350-900		10	Four purchased for delivery in 2016/17 and six to be leased in 2017
A380-800		5	First delivery in September 2012

# Australian luxury defined

Luxury travel planners could be forgiven if they found the experience of searching for luxurious places in Australia akin to the proverbial needle in a haystack.

To begin with, these resorts were few and far between a few years ago – literally, too, considering the vast distances in the continent. An idea of what constitutes luxury travel in Australia, therefore, was as remote as its outback.

But all that has changed as unique, high-end independent properties started popping up, their critical mass and defining traits helping to shape a firm idea of Australian luxury tourism. And in a move designed to make themselves more known and accessible to luxury travel planners, the owners of 16 such resorts have come together under a new grouping, Luxury Lodges of Australia (albeit the only thing that is a ‘lodge’ about them is their small roomcount).

The portfolio of Luxury Lodges of Australia throws up the Who’s Who of Down Under properties whose name on their own whispers a certain cache at



Rafferty: Australia’s changed

home. The Louise, for example, has etched its mark as a vineyard retreat in the Barossa Valley, its restaurant Appellation a gourmand’s best-kept secret. Or take the Southern Ocean Lodge in Kangaroo Island – dramatic architecture springing out of the wilderness.

Or the Wolgan Valley Resort & Spa bordering the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage region, sister to Emirates Hotels & Resorts’ conservation-inspired Al Maha Desert Resort & Spa in Dubai. Or the Lake House, a country garden accommodation in Daylesford that serves haute cuisine.

No two properties are alike, yet each is so alike in one huge area: a special location or setting that, combined, documents Australia’s rich and diverse natural attractions – the outback, desert, mountain ranges, ocean reefs, vineyards, etc – and its ability



to deliver the experiential and extraordinary to a discerning clientele.

“Australia has changed in the last eight years,” explained Penny Rafferty, former general manager of The Louise who now heads Luxury Lodges of Australia as its executive officer. “Half of these properties did not exist eight years ago.”

“The presence of innovative

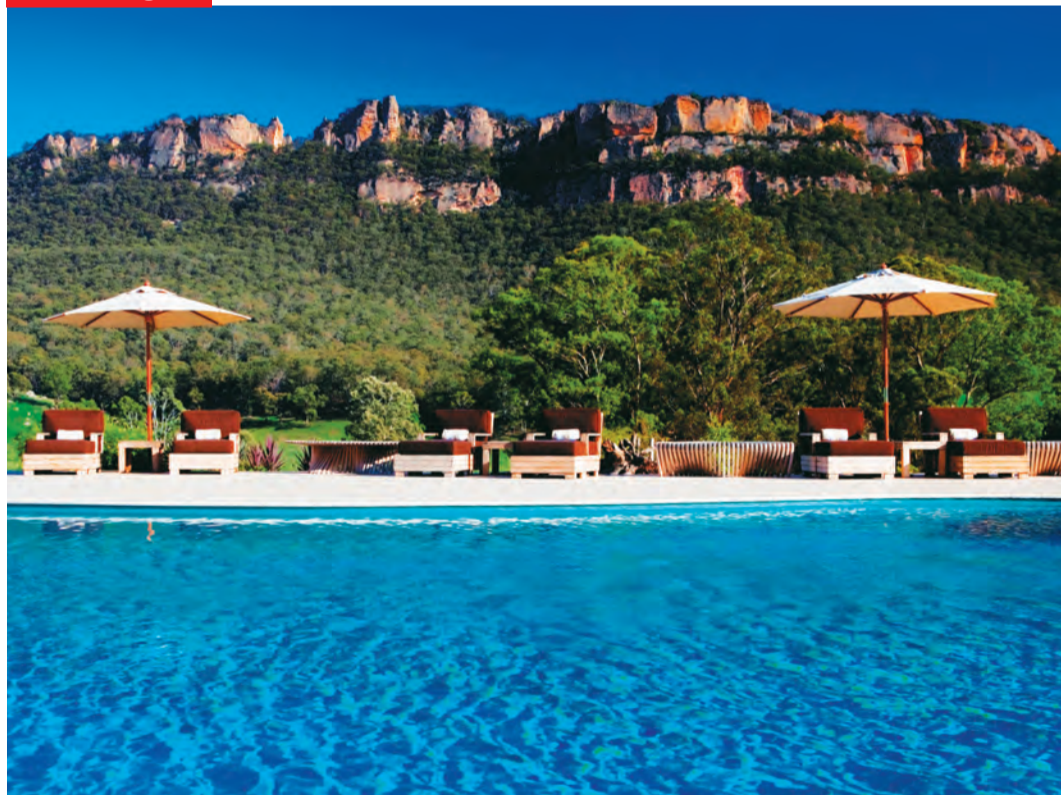
entrepreneurs who are seriously passionate for the region they are in is what drove the change,” she said.

American Jim and Helen Carreker, owners of The Louise, for instance, transplanted the European model of destination dining – memorable food and wine experience complemented by luxurious accommodation – into the Barossa Valley, while owners

such as James and Hayley Baillie of the Southern Ocean Lodge are passionate about creating luxury icons in places of unique natural significance.

“The one thing they have in common is their individual passion, and recognising how special each region is and the appeal it would have for platinum nomads. And they put their money where their mouth is.

## Checking in



## Wolgan Valley Resort & Spa



A stay at Al Maha Desert Resort & Spa in Dubai years ago left a lasting impression

on **Raini Hamdi**, who checks into its sister property, Wolgan Valley Resort & Spa in the Blue Mountains region, with much anticipation – and in memory of Hans Haensel

**LOCATION** A 3.5-hour nondescript drive from Sydney changes to a dramatic landscape as I arrive in Wolgan Valley, nestled between two national parks and bordering the Blue Mountains World Heritage Area. The location is spectacular, to say the least. Nature really is a master architect, creating such beautiful rock formations. Like the Al Maha concept, the resort occu-

pies just a fraction (two per cent) of a 4,000-acre conservancy reserve.

**ROOMS** Luxurious and authentic. The 40 suites here have been designed in the country homestead style, although I must say their zinc roofing does spoil a little the quality feel of the whole development. But I love my suite – it is so homely and com-

fortable, with generous living, sleeping and bath areas and such quality linen, modern technology and thoughtful amenities, including binoculars and two mountain bicycles.

**FACILITIES** The main pool with panoramic views of the ranges is so inviting, and so is the spa. But time is short, so I jump onto my bike and cycle into the valley.

Gazelles and oryxes may roam about freely in the protected area of Al Maha – here, the kangaroos rule. It is ever-delightful to see them in the open at close range.

I also appreciate the resort’s eagerness to ensure guests are in touch with the surroundings, with two nature-based activities included per day. The field guides are diligent in offering advice and assistance. Activities include guided four-wheel drives, wildlife safaris, nature walks, mountain bike tours, horse riding, heritage tours, even star gazing, painting and photography.

I cycle to Point Haensel, chuffed that he is remembered by the resort who has named a lookout after him. Haensel, the late SVP of Emirates destination and leisure management division, was not only instrumental in the resort’s development but in getting the word out about it. He had urged me to visit; sadly, I never got round to it while he was still around.

**F&B** Lunch in The Country Kitchen is thoroughly enjoyable.

Simple and light fare – lobster spring rolls, crisp salads, etc – everything fresh and refreshing, including the chilled Chardonnay from the local area and the beautiful cool weather.

Dinner is served in the Wolgan Dining Room, a stylish restaurant reminiscent of the Federation era. It is a gorgeous room, alas, the six-course menu is not the haute cuisine it appears to be and leaves me hungry at the end. Or could it be the fresh air of the surroundings that is boosting my appetite?

**SERVICE** This resort is very well-managed and blessed with staff who have a way about them with guests. I’ll never forget Scott McLeod’s warm welcome, or Shane, who is elderly but whose pride in his job is heartwarming. Or the refined service of Jared. Or gentle and caring Nathan. They are so individual; together, they create a memorable service.

**VERDICT** R.E.S.P.E.C.T. – for the environment and guests.

**Name** Wolgan Valley Resort & Spa, Australia

**No. of suites** 40

**Rate** A\$1,950 (US\$2,008) for two in a Heritage Suite, including full meal plan daily and two nature-based activities per person per day

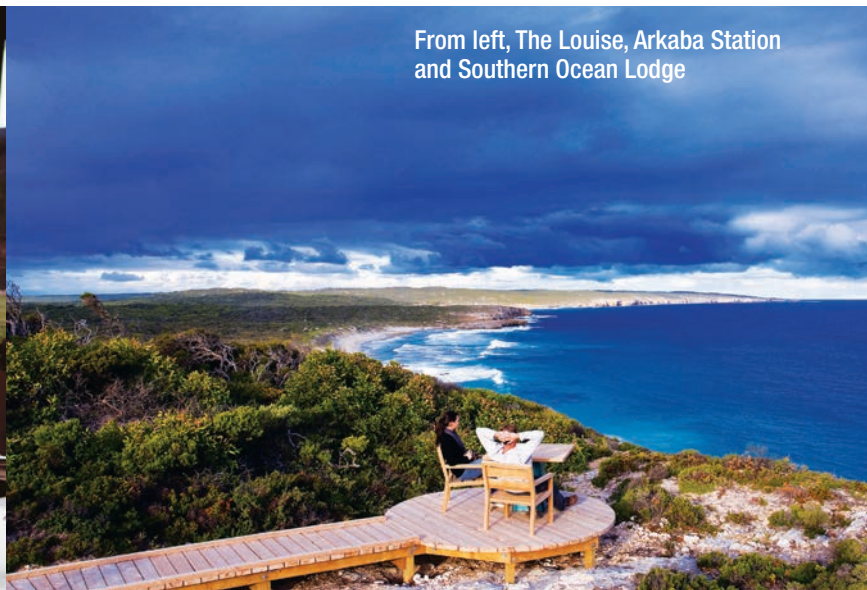
**Contact details**

Tel: (61-2) 65501800

Email: [info@wolganvalley.com](mailto:info@wolganvalley.com)

Website: [emirateshotelsresorts.com](http://emirateshotelsresorts.com)

## The presence of passionate and innovative entrepreneurs is helping to define luxury travel in Australia, opening a whole new world for platinum nomads to romp-and-roll, says **Raini Hamdi**



From left, The Louise, Arkaba Station and Southern Ocean Lodge

“Australia has never had this critical mass of unique products before and that’s why we’re able to create Luxury Lodges of Australia,” said Rafferty.

The alliance is funded by the owners to serve as the central point of reference for travel planners selling Australia, not as a booking engine.

A suite of tools on the website ([www.luxurylodgesofaustralia.com.au](http://www.luxurylodgesofaustralia.com.au)) helps travel planners connect the dots, and even the seasoned ones would appreciate

the immediate answers to mind-boggling distances, destination experiences and other details, given the diversity and remote regions each property is located.

Tools include eBrochures of the members in seven languages, narrated videos, hi-res images, property fact sheets, getting between lodges and family-friendly lodges.

“Australia is enormous; the scale takes one by surprise. But with tools like Plan Your Trip, we’ve done all the hard work to

make sure your planning will be easy and seamless,” Rafferty said.

Last month, Luxury Lodges of Australia made its first overseas debut in Singapore, holding a training day for staff of luxury travel companies in the city, a session that followed an earlier visit by several of the owners with the bosses of the agencies.

The alliance will also be present at key luxury travel trade shows this year.

“If you’re a 10-room property in a glob-

al market, you can’t change the perception. Australia has always been perceived as a fantastic product, mainstream, safe; and majority of people don’t get past the east coast, except the really intrepid travellers and backpackers.

“But these properties are changing all that and, with Tourism Australia’s focus on the high-end in 2012, we should be able to bring the perception of Australia in line with the product,” Rafferty said.

## Well-wheeled with Hertz

Luxury clients travelling in Australia can do it in style with Hertz, which has introduced the Prestige Collection at key destinations in the country. The collection is already operating successfully in the US and Europe.

In Australia, the rental fleet comprises Mercedes Benz and Lexus vehicles, including the RX350 SUV for those seeking luxury on a larger scale.

The six-cylinder Lexus affords passengers greater leather-accented interior and generous storage space, with a 446-litre rear cargo area.

It also has a six-stack CD audio system with iPod and Bluetooth capability, along with reversing camera, satellite navigation, climate control and the unique Lexus remote touch navigation system.

“The car rental market is very competitive and success relies upon continually offering new and different vehicles, value for money and excellent customer

service and product support,” said Wong Soon-Hwa, vice president, Asia & Japan of Hertz Asia.

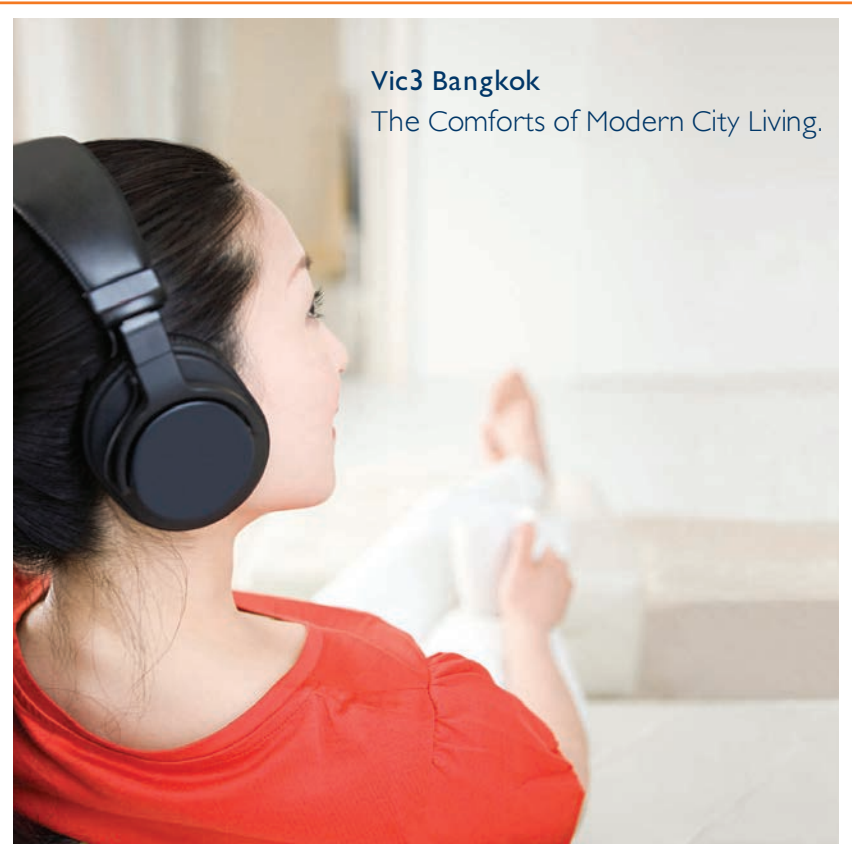
The ease of driving in Australia’s well-maintained roads and highways, coupled with Hertz NeverLost in-car navigation system and 24-hour Roadside Assistance, gives clients the peace of mind – and with it the freedom – to continue their journeys in style.

Hertz has more than 200 locations in Australia and travel consultants are able to secure a rental car for their clients before their departure.

In the US, Hertz has just added the Cadillac CTS, an award-winning vehicle, to the Prestige rental fleet.

The company also launched its largest-ever global sale discounts of up to 33 per cent on international car rental in 111 countries post-Christmas.

The promotion runs till January 31 for rental pick-ups between January 3 and June 30.



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\*Terms and conditions This promotion is valid until 31 March 2012. Rates are subject to 10% service charge and 7% VAT. Advance reservation required and rooms are subject to availability. No-show charges apply for cancellations within 48 hours prior to arrival. Rates are subject to change without prior notice. A valid credit card is required to guarantee bookings.

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The Lexus RX350 SUV



Checking in

# Coco Palm Bodu Hithi

 Sunland Hotels is using this resort to launch Coco Collection outside the Maldives (see View From the Top, page 6). **Raini Hamdi** checks in and says, competitors watch out – Coco Palm Bodu Hithi does a lot of things right

**LOCATION** North Male atoll, 40 minutes from Male International Airport by speedboat. I had been to the Maldives several times before, but this was a first to a local resort. I knew I would be comfortable – after all, could a 188m<sup>2</sup> Island Villa, the accommodation I had booked, be *uncomfortable*? Beyond that, I did not have high expectations. Within the first 30 minutes of my arrival, I knew I had grossly underestimated a local player. As crystal-clear as the waters surrounding Coco Palm Bodu Hithi, this was an exclusive development. It comprised a main island with 44 Island Villas and two clusters of over-water villas, one fielding 16 Water Villas (109m<sup>2</sup>) and the other a Club concept with 24 Club Coco Palm Villas (184m<sup>2</sup>), its own reception, restaurants and generous Club benefits.

I was whisked in a club car to the Club – a surprise upgrade – only to be met by another delightful surprise: Club staffers standing in a long line waiting to welcome me with huge smiles and a chilled tulip of champagne.

**ROOMS** My villa gave a clear idea of what Coco luxury was about: No expenses spared for guest comfort, and sensible design and decor, which ensured sense of place and further enhanced guest comfort. In space and quality, it matched that of the ultra-luxurious One&Only Reethi Rah, where I stayed a few years ago. Its amenities went into fine details, such as providing a wine fridge with two different temperatures for white and red, and even a cigar humidor.

**FACILITIES** I loved the gym over water – I saw a stingray and a family of squids while jogging on the treadmill. I loved the lap pool by the ocean on the main island. The large spa was always full (what spa ban?). But the best facility for me was the abundance of nature – herons, baby sharks chasing shoals of tiny fish near the shore, bonitos in action, over-fed jackfish, I even saw a moray eel while I was walking to my villa. The waters were so clear and teeming with marine life

it was like having an aquarium under your feet. It sure made me want to jump in and snorkel, and when I did, the house reefs did not disappoint. Although the resort was full during my stay, I felt I had the whole place to myself all the time. It was gloriously private.

**F&B** The buffet at the main restaurant was great, while the pastry chef made it impossible not to load desserts. But its two signature restaurants, despite their stunning settings, could do with more life and distinctive themes.

**SERVICE** Motivated staff who were hardworking, conscientious and willing to go the extra mile. I was very well taken care of by my housekeeper Sobrie, butler Maud and the Coco Club team.

**VERDICT** We need more Coco resorts!

**Name** Coco Palm Bodu Hithi  
**No. of villas** 84  
**Rate** US\$1,052++ per day, valid until April 14, 2012  
**Contact details**  
Tel: (960) 6641122  
Email: boduhithi@cocopalm.com.mv  
Website: [www.cococollection.com.mv](http://www.cococollection.com.mv)





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# Taking an active stance

Kerala is initiating a multi-faceted tourism strategy to trump its competitors, says **Shekhar Niyogi**

**Arrivals** According to Kerala's Department of Tourism, the state saw an 18.3 per cent year-on-year increase in international tourist arrivals to 659,265 in 2010. This was expected to rise by 20 per cent last year. In 2010, 11.8 per cent of all foreign tourists to India visited Kerala.

The state's primary inbound source markets are the UK, US, nations within the European Union, Russia and the CIS countries. Australia is an emerging market with 36,854 arrivals in 2010, garnering a 5.6 per cent share of total foreign arrivals.

Foreign arrivals spend about US\$80 per day and stay an average of 16 days.

The number of domestic tourists is also growing. The state experienced an 8.6 per cent increase in Indian visitors in 2010 to 8.6 million. They stay six days on average.

"Kerala is evolving and growing into a desirable destination. Tourists are seeking Kerala as it is lifestyle-oriented.

"I foresee at least 20 per cent growth year-on-year in 2012 and beyond," said Jai Sreedhar, general manager-leisure sales & marketing, Leela Palaces, Hotels and Resorts.

**NTO** The state is being promoted as an exclusive, value-for-money and quality destination. Kerala's spas, spice routes and wildlife are among products highlighted.

A new campaign to help Kerala secure environmental sustainability, Kerala Waste Free Destination, will be launched soon. No further details were released at press time.

Tourism authorities are wooing Australian and Scandinavian tourists with roadshows and a new promotional film entitled *Your Moment is Waiting*. Roadshows were held in Sydney and Melbourne last October, and in Oslo, Copenhagen, Helsinki and Stockholm the next month.

Kerala's tourism organisation is also a fixture at major trade events such as WTM, ITB, PATA and FITUR.

**Hotels** According to hoteliers, Kerala's average room rate (ARR) during the high season (November to April) ranges between Rs8,000 (US\$162) and Rs12,000 per night for beach hotels and Rs9,000 to Rs13,000 per night in backwater resorts. Average occupancy in high sea-



"Tourism in Kerala will grow as the state is creating new products like homestays while promoting alternatives such as the beaches and backwaters in the north."

**Johny Abraham**

Chairman and managing director  
Intersight Tours and Travels

son varies from 75-80 per cent. Outside the peak period, it drops to around 50-65 per cent.

A hike in the tax levied on room rates from 10 per cent to 17.5 per cent last year has upped ARR and the cost of packages in Kerala.

New additions to Kerala include The Raviz, a 96-room resort in Kollam which opened last May. The beaches north of Kerala such as Bekal are also being developed. Banyan Tree is purportedly planning to build a property there and ATE Hospitality is constructing a 160-room deluxe resort.

**Access** Kerala is requesting that the Indian government allow visas on arrival for citizens of most countries at its airports and for its cruise passengers. The state is served by three international airports: Cochin (Kochi), Thiruvananthapuram (Trivandrum) and Calicut. The bulk of its international flights head to and from the Middle East, Maldives and Colombo.

Traffic at Cochin International Airport (CIA) grew by 10.1 per cent over 2010-11 to 4.4 million passengers, around half of which were international

travellers. Over 2009-10, some four million passengers passed through Cochin, according to CIA traffic statistics.

Last October, Jet Airways commenced daily non-stop flights from Sharjah to Thiruvananthapuram. A month later, Condor introduced direct flights between Cochin and Frankfurt.

CIA is trying to persuade foreign carriers including Lufthansa and Cathay Pacific Airways to start direct flights between Europe and Kerala. Lufthansa will reportedly make a decision after it completes a feasibility study.

The state government has also announced plans to build a new US\$84 million international terminal at CIA by 2014, capable of handling 10 million passengers annually.

Aerotropolis, a large-scale aviation city project, is set to become a reality by 2020. The facility will house a convention centre, an amusement park, aircraft maintenance facility, an aviation training academy, five-star hotels and a golf course.

On the cruise front, Amet Cruises and Louis Cruises India have introduced itineraries from Kochi to Colombo, Maldives, the Lakshwadeep Islands and to the high seas.

# Widening Kerala's product offerings

New tourism sites have been earmarked

**NEW DELHI** Aiming for a 10 per cent tourism growth this year, Kerala's Department of Tourism is working hard to expand the range of tourist destinations within the state.

Dr Rathan Kelkar, additional director, Department of Tourism, told *TTG Asia*: "We are developing coastal Bekal in northern Kerala, which can be served by the Calicut airport. InterContinental Hotels & Resorts and ITC Hotels are already there. In Muziris, an old Portuguese port, is being primed as a new destination too."

Also in the works are waterway routes from Alleppey to Kottayam, while travel experts are encouraged to devise short-stay homestay, pilgrimage and Ayurveda packages.

A sub-committee comprising ministers of all relevant depart-



**Kelkar: responsible growth**

ments has been set up to ensure the tourism development efforts are coordinated.

"Our main aim is to promote Kerala as a unique holiday experience rather than a destination with numerous tourist attractions.

Kerala's rich culture, cuisine, Ayurveda, spas, cruises, spice routes, wildlife, history and architecture are all being highlighted in our destination branding," said Kelkar.

Sustainable growth is also high on the agenda. For example, all tourism stakeholders are to be instilled with the knowledge to carry out eco-friendly practices and waste disposal.

Kelkar added: "We want to grow tourism in a responsible manner, securing higher yields for all stakeholders, while ensuring visitors receive value-for-money." – **Shekhar Niyogi**

Our main aim is to promote Kerala as a unique holiday experience rather than a destination with numerous tourist attractions.



Fort Cochin



The Leela Kovalam

## Private retreats, seaf

**The Leela Kovalam**  
Nestled on a rock face in Kovalam beach near Thiruvananthapuram, this five-star resort comprises several wings spread over 17 hectares, offering 182 rooms and suites. There are five F&B outlets serving Kerala and international cuisine with a distinct leaning towards fresh seafood. The Sky Bar has stunning views of the sea. Ayurveda treatments are found in its 743m² spa. The Rajiv Gandhi convention centre on

the resort's premises is among the largest in India, boasting a maximum capacity of 1,500 pax.  
**Contact**  
Tel: (91-471) 305-1234  
Email: [reservations.kovalam@theleela.com](mailto:reservations.kovalam@theleela.com)  
Website: [www.theleela.com/hotel-kovalam.html](http://www.theleela.com/hotel-kovalam.html)

**Chittoor Kottaram**  
A unique experience awaits travellers at this three-bedroom retreat located in Cheranelloor, 45 minutes away from

Ernakulam. It was constructed in 1898 for the Rajah of Kochi. As only one booking at a time is accepted, guests have the whole property to themselves. Ayurveda treatments are available upon request and guests can savour traditional vegetarian cuisine served in silverware or on banana leaves. Chittoor is ideal for honeymooners as well as families who value complete privacy. The room tariff includes accommodation (maximum six guests), all

### My choices

## Kerala

Compiled by Shekhar Niyogi



**George Dominic**  
Director  
CGH Earth

What is your biggest challenge right now?

Last summer was a disaster for our traditional West European and UK markets. Fortunately, some of the shortfall was made up by the sudden jump in visitors from Arab markets. We are hoping to plug the gap this winter.

What must be done?

Travelling to India for leisure is becoming cumbersome due to tighter visa regulations and the non-availability of direct flights to Kerala from source markets. These remain unresolved but we need to have a dialogue.

What do you need...

**from the government?** A combined effort by all tourism stakeholders and not just the government to simplify processes while highlighting the benefits of tourism is key. Issues such as road rehabilitation and waste disposal also need to be addressed.

What are your predictions for 2012?

The prospects for this year are not very different from 2011. We must make a concerted marketing effort, simplify visa processes and attract airlines to fly directly from European cities if Kerala is to become a sought-after destination.



**Joy Peter**  
Director  
Intersight Tours and Travels

A shortage of room inventory and disproportionately high room rates are our main gripes alongside the sudden five per cent increase in state tax. It will be a tussle to hike rates due to the increase in tax.

Hotel rates must be kept steady and yield growth spread out over the low and high season. The state government must provide incentives for building more hotels so that availability and room rates are rationalised.

**from the government?** Policymakers should project demand-supply bottlenecks and create policies that will ensure demand-price parity. The government should offer subsidies for special products such as houseboats.

Prospects are good and I foresee growth of 15 per cent year-on-year. Nonetheless I hope that there are no major economic debacles and natural disasters or calamities worldwide.



**Shelley Thayil**  
Director-operations  
The Paul Hotels & Resorts

There is a dire need to develop infrastructure and better roads for improved connectivity. At the same time, we should develop waterways and water routes that will not only facilitate transportation but create new and novel tourism products.

There's one flight a day to Thiruvananthapuram from Delhi. We need more flights connecting Kerala with the rest of the world. There should be bigger airports in Kerala and more international airlines.

**from the government?** The Department of Tourism in Kerala has marketed the state well and because of its positioning and the quality of our resorts, we draw high-end guests. However, we need eco-friendly infrastructure development.

We expect at least 10 per cent growth this year over 2011. Kerala is widely recognised as a destination and it has received numerous accolades from which potential business can be generated.



Spice Coast Cruises



Chittoor Kottaram

## ood restaurants, shopping discounts and more

meals, dedicated staff, village walks, temple visits and sunset cruises.

### Contact

Tel: (91-484) 266-8221  
Email: [contact@cghearth.com](mailto:contact@cghearth.com)  
Website: [www.cghearth.com](http://www.cghearth.com)

### Grand Kerala Shopping Festival

This annual event showcases local products and handicraft, and was last held from December 1, 2011 to January 15, 2012. A bevy of



discounts and special hotel are offered during the festival period. Immigrants from Kerala residing abroad are exempted from paying Value Added Tax (VAT) on all purchases. Shoppers from

outside the state will also be given a 100 per cent VAT refund when they use their credit cards. Visitors can participate in lucky draws to win gold and either free or discounted air tickets.

### Contact

Tel: (91-471) 406-4020  
Email: [gksf@keralatourism.org](mailto:gksf@keralatourism.org)  
Website: [www.shoppingfestival.in](http://www.shoppingfestival.in)

### Spice Coast Cruises

Cruising down Lake Vembanad in the backwaters of Kerala in

*kettuvalloms*, or cane and rope houseboats, is a must. Operated by CGH Earth, the *kettuvalloms* manned by three crew members come in one- and two-bedroom configurations and are fitted with en suite bathrooms, lounges and sun decks. Passengers can dine onboard as the houseboats are equipped with a galley.

### Contact

Tel: (91-484) 301-1711  
Email: [contact@cghearth.com](mailto:contact@cghearth.com)  
Website: [www.cghearth.com](http://www.cghearth.com)

### Fort Cochin

Housed in the historic Casino Hotel on Willingdon Island in Kochi, this rustic 40-seat seafood and coastal cuisine restaurant serves the day's most succulent catches from fishing nets in the vicinity. Seafood is displayed on a cart that is wheeled around for diners to make their selections. Chefs cook dishes on open grills in the dining area.

### Contact

Tel: (91-484) 266-8421

### Checking in

## The Brunton Boatyard Hotel



**Shekhar Niyogi** falls for the colonial charms of this unique boutique hotel located by Fort Cochin's tranquil bay

**LOCATION** Nestled in historic Fort Cochin, Brunton Boatyard rests on the site of the first European boat building yard in south Asia. Kochi's prime attractions such as Santa Cruz Cathedral, St. Francis Church, Mattancherry Palace and the quaint Jew Town are found nearby.

The transfer car whizzed smoothly past the lush green foliage of coconut palms.

An air-conditioned, chauffeured car charges between Rs1,200 (US\$24) and Rs2,000, depending on the model of the vehicle. Taxis (non-airconditioned) cost Rs500.

The 42km drive to and from the hotel to Cochin International Airport takes approximately 90 minutes, although this varies with traffic conditions.

There is also a jetty where guests can set off on short cruises in the bay.

Monsoon season in Kochi starts in June and ends in September. As such, visitors should avoid visiting the region during this time. Outside the monsoon season, Kochi is a green and tranquil haven.

**ROOMS** Kochi's Dutch-Portuguese-British colonial heritage is accentuated throughout the property through the extensive use of antique wooden furniture and fixtures.

An ancient cannon rests in the main gateway to the hotel while an anchor, a vestige of Kochi's maritime roots, sits proudly on the lawn of an inner courtyard, reminiscent of voyages untold and forgotten. Lithographic prints of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Kochi adorn walls.

Natural light streams through every corner and a sense of calm pervades every nook and cranny.

All 22 of the individually designed air-conditioned rooms face the harbour. From my room, I watched sailing vessels glide past, the sun shining brightly on a lazy afternoon.

Free Wi-Fi and complimentary airport transfers are offered to all hotel guests.



**F&B** The Armoury is an all-day dining outlet featuring typical Kerala cuisine as well as a Mediterranean menu. Its bar is particularly well-stocked.

Traditional dishes of the Malabar Coast, a fusion of British, Dutch, Portuguese and Jewish cuisine, is served with aplomb at History, the hotel's fine-dining restaurant. The Vattalappam with fresh pineapple slices and the Pathani murg (chicken) were simply delectable.

Guests can savour the outdoors at the Terrace Grill which specialises in fresh seafood cooked to perfection in whatever style desired.

Fish at the restaurant is sourced from the Chinese fish-

ing nets that dot the waters surrounding Kochi.

**FACILITIES** The hotel's inviting swimming pool is open all year-round.

**SERVICE** I have no qualms in extolling the exceptional service found at this hotel. Brunton excels in catering to the demands of the discerning leisure traveller.

On the whole, staff seemed happy and everyone spoke excellent English.

My check-in proceeded without a hitch and it was over in less than four minutes. The guest relations executive took my signature, swiped my credit card,

**Name** The Brunton Boatyard Hotel  
**No. of rooms** 22

**Rates** About US\$ 360+ per night

**Contact details**

Tel: (91-484) 301-1711

Email: [contact@cghearth.com](mailto:contact@cghearth.com)

Website: [www.cghearth.com](http://www.cghearth.com)

handed me my key, and assured me that I had a double instead of twin beds before escorting me to my room.

Housekeeping was attentive while the concierge acceded to all requests without batting an eyelid.

**VERDICT** One-of-a-kind, strategically-located boutique hotel oozing charm and character.



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