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No. 1652/February 10 – 16, 2012



Theme Parks
The thrill is on
PAGE 8



China
Hainan is heating up
PAGE 10



Sri Lanka
Tourism hits new highs
PAGE 13

www.ttgasia.com

G2 Travel: not a 'me too'

New operator sees gap in groups due to consolidation, FIT commoditisation

By Raini Hamdi

SINGAPORE Whether or not the birth of G2 Travel, formed by a group of former Gullivers Travel Associates (GTA, *TTG Asia e-Daily*, February 7), is a reaction to Kuoni buying GTA is a moot point. At stake is the lucrative Asian group outbound travel market, which is being eyed by these companies as growth from Europe stagnates.

David Littlefair, who heads G2 in Hong Kong and Bangkok, said there was an opportunity to create an edge by offering creative tour design, negotiating ability, operational expertise and client service. "There has been a lot of consolidation within the tour operator business that, somewhere along the line, the service to the customer is lost," he said.

"G2 is formed by people who have been in the business for over 20 years and have immense knowledge of this particular business. We want to bring back the personalised element and create something dynamic in the



Littlefair: opportunity

into a ready programme and are escorted from the time they depart. Observed Judy Lum, group vice president sales and marketing of Tour East: "There is more room to offer innovative ideas and experiences, which is impossible for FITs, who are booking online these days.

"The clients are mostly families, middle-aged couples who have saved for long holidays or retirees who have strong disposable income and appreciate being looked after by a tour manager. Contrary to the belief group travel curtails one's freedom to explore a destination, many premier itineraries offer

marketplace."

Trade members interviewed agree the group segment offers a good yield and is cost-efficient, as clients buy

own leisure time, great selection of dine-around options for passengers to enjoy on their own or with new friends they make on the trip, and a varied choice of activities, etc."

Some, like Manuel Ferrer, managing director of Pacific World in Singapore, believe the new start-up is worth a watch. "No doubt the founder (of GTA, David Babai, who has come on board as chairman of G2) and the former staff of GTA will be a fantastic team and will be a successful one. They will need a great technological platform, but they know this already; for sure they have learnt from mistakes in the past and that experience will put them in a very good position."

Kuoni, which now owns GTA, declined to comment although Kuoni insiders acknowledged G2 would compete with it in the leisure group segment handled by GTA and Kuoni Destination Management.

Littlefair told *TTG Asia* that

G2 would cover the whole spectrum of group traffic, be it personalised full-service families or VIPs, main leisure group business or incentive groups. The majority is headed for Europe, but also Australia (where it has tied up with Jade Travel), South Africa, Asia, North America and South America.

Since October when G2 started setting up its foundation, Littlefair said it had already operated 2,000 pax. It is now fully out of the bag, with an official launch in Bangkok end-February, followed later by the other offices in Hong Kong, Jakarta, London, Rome and Bucharest.

Littlefair described how G2 came about: "A group of us got together at an event. It was conversational rather than planned. It developed further over the course of a year and became more interesting as a business proposition.

"We used G2 as the project name and it kind of stuck so we decided to adopt it."

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Indonesia trade braces for Garuda's Europe cut

By Mimi Hudoyo

JAKARTA The Indonesian trade is bracing for the impact of Garuda Indonesia's decision to reduce Europe flights, with the best-case scenario being a shift in business rather than an outright fallout.

The airline will reduce frequency on its Jakarta-Amsterdam route from daily to four-weekly from March 1 (*TTG Asia e-Daily*, January 25). It intends to restore the frequency during peak season (July 9-14), however. The move comes even as the trade is keeping up effort to ensure European business is maintained amid the current doldrums in the eurozone.

But even without the crisis, the route had not been operating at full load last year. Volume from European partners, however, has not dropped. "So what will most likely happen is a shift in destinations within Indonesia rather than a drop in volume," analysed Pacto business development director, Umberto Cadamuro. He projected a slight drop in arrivals into Java for overland tours, an increase in arrivals to Bali, and for Nusa Tenggara to benefit the most. KLM operates direct flights to Bali.

Happy Trails Indonesia managing director Gerald Van Amerongen is less optimistic. He explained: "Our Dutch clients



Cadamuro: shift, not drop

nately have an effect on the total package price to Indonesia – up to between 100 euros (US\$131) and 150 euros."

"Fewer seats and higher air fares to a destination is never going to help arrival numbers."

Still, he admitted that research showed a less-than-sanguine

have been using Garuda significantly because of its competitive prices.

"Now they will need to find other airlines and that will definitely have an effect on the total package price to Indonesia – up to between 100 euros (US\$131) and 150 euros."

European climate anyway. According to research by ANVR (a Dutch organisation for tour operators and travel consultants), longhaul travel would be down four per cent this year. "But at the moment, we are receiving more bookings than in 2011," he said.

Panorama Tours Indonesia president director, Royanto Handaya, said: "We do need Garuda to continue having a Europe reach, especially during the leisure high seasons. However, airlines also (must) see (where there are) business opportunities. They will usually put on extra flights to capture the high season demand, so I'm not too worried about this."

Given the potential impact of Garuda's flight reduction, and Europe's economic crisis, operators are hopeful the Asia-Pacific market will deliver and many are putting more focus closer to home.

Royanto said: "Asia-Pacific continues to book the highest growth. Traffic is not only accumulated during high seasons, but we are seeing growing traffic during low seasons, especially in the corporate market."

Cadamuro said Pacto had been practising a balanced market strategy which targeted different markets, so that a drop in one would not affect the company's coffers.

Philippines holds breath on tax

More airline pull-outs could hurt the destination, with European demand already a question mark

By Marianne Carandang and Sim Kok Chwee

MANILA/SINGAPORE The local travel trade is hoping that the Philippine lawmakers will approve the abolishment of an airline tax, which has been criticised for its detrimental effect on the destination.

KLM – the last carrier to operate direct flights from Europe to the Philippines – recently announced it would terminate its Amsterdam-Manila flights, choosing to launch a non-stop service to Taipei instead, which continues onwards to Manila. The new routing will commence on March 25.

This means that the number of seats from Amsterdam will be drastically reduced as capacity will be shared by both cities.

This situation is compounded by the fact that Philippine carriers are not permitted to fly to Europe due to an EU ban.

Cees Ursem, Air France-KLM

“Both taxes are a big burden because we cannot charge these to passengers. We have to pay (the taxes) three months after their outbound trips and the

“Seat capacity will be affected, and there will be a domino effect, resulting in fare increases.”

Helen Hao
President

Philippine IATA Agents Travel Association

general manager South China Sea, attributed the decision to the burden dealt by two taxes – the common carrier tax (CCT), a three per cent business tax on gross receipts, and a 2.5 per cent gross Philippine billings tax.

charges are different for each and every passenger depending on the final destination, special fares, class of travel, etc,” he explained.

Stephen Crowdey, first vice chairman of the Board of Airline

Representatives, said the “less non-stop capacity significantly reduced the appeal of the Philippines for the trade and tourists alike,” a concern shared by inbound travel companies.

Philippine Travel Agencies Association president, Aileen Clemente, explained: “The Philippines will be reliant on flights connecting through other Asian cities, which may be the deciding factor for tourists from Europe, (who may) just conclude their trip in an Asian hub of their chosen airline.”

Added Ursem: “Our crew will not stay in Manila from April. Currently, they stay in Hotel Sofitel Philippine Plaza Manila and occupy 11,000 roomnights per year.”

Speaking to *TTG Asia* dur-

ing the recent ATF, Department of Tourism secretary Ramon R Jimenez pointed out that the Department of Finance had agreed not to oppose to a revision of the laws governing the CCT. A final decision, which will be made by Congress, is expected in June.

Following a senate hearing between the finance and tourism ministries last week, senator Ralph Recto also asked president Benigno S. Aquino III to certify as “urgent” a bill that would eliminate CCT.

He cited an IATA report that said the increased tourist arrivals and passenger traffic could generate potential revenues of US\$45 million, while tourism tax revenues could reach US\$5.4 million a year. – **Additional reporting by Linda Haden**



Courtesy of Matt Burns, South East Asia Images

Thailand's report card

Held at the InterContinental Bangkok, the Thailand Tourism Forum 2012 attracted over 360 key tourism and hospitality stakeholders. The state of the industry was discussed, as well as this year's forecast. Pictured here at the Thailand Hotel Leaders Summit session are (from left) Joe Mannix of The American Chamber of Commerce in Thailand, Robert Hecker of Horwath HTL, Dillip Rajakarier of Minor Hotel Group, Chanin Donavanik of Dusit International and Peter Henley of Onyx Hospitality Group. Presentations can be found at www.amchamthailand.com.

Tracker

An update on major issues and events from the past

Firefly's life cycle

Malaysia Airlines' (MAS) subsidiary got airborne in April 2007 as the country's first no-frills community airline, starting out with two Fokker Friendship (F50) aircraft.

THEN Using Penang as its hub, Firefly served four destinations in Peninsular Malaysia and two in Thailand. In February 2011, the carrier set up hubs in Subang and Johor Bahru. Its network also expanded to more destinations in Peninsular Malaysia, as well as major urban centres in Sabah and Sarawak. Internationally, it started flights to Indonesia and Singapore.

Firefly increased its fleet to 12 ATR72-500 aircraft (while discontinuing its three F50 planes). By May 2011, it had taken delivery of three Boeing 737-800s and one Boeing 737-400.

NOW Following the comprehensive collaboration deal signed between MAS and AirAsia in August 2011, Firefly closed its Johor Bahru hub. It also terminated services to Sabah and Sarawak, while its Boeing aircraft were taken over by MAS in December 2011. Firefly is left with 12 ATR aircraft serving 11 destinations in Peninsular Malaysia, two in Thailand, four in Indonesia, and Singapore.

FUTURE Firefly will morph into a shorthaul regional premium carrier by the second quarter of this year. Led by CEO, Mohammed Rashdan Yusof, and COO, Ignatius Ong, the yet-unnamed airline will operate Firefly's ATR turboprop planes, as well as the narrow-body fleet of MAS. Routes have not been announced. – **N. Nithiyanthan**

AirAsia's Delhi exit reverberates in Thailand

BANGKOK Thai AirAsia's plans to drop international services between New Delhi and Bangkok will have a severe impact on the flow of outbound traffic from India to Thailand, according to tourism stakeholders whom *TTG Asia* spoke to.

The low-cost carrier (LCC) will cut its daily Bangkok-New Delhi flights to thrice-weekly starting February 14, and completely withdraw the service by March 24.

Chattan Kunjara Na Ayudhya, director of the Tourism Authority of Thailand's (TAT) New Delhi office (who at press time has been moved back to Bangkok as director of the international PR division), said: “LCCs are vital to a destination, especially as India is a cost-conscious market. We believe (the route withdrawal) will be a huge blow to the flow of tourist traffic from northern India to Thailand.”

Chattan added: “If the flights really do stop, TAT will likely throw our support behind LCCs and full-fare airlines still flying (the route), by means of our joint promotions, passenger incentives and facilitation with Thai government offices.”

Chattan expects that another LCC, such as IndiGo or SpiceJet, will eventually step in to replace the vacated seat capacity on the Bangkok-New Delhi route.

Indeed, AirAsia's departure has created an opening for Bangkok Airways, which is considering adding New Delhi to its fledgling international network.

“AirAsia's pull-out has brought an option to our management,” revealed the airline's regional sales director for Asia, charter and cargo sales, Varong Isarasene Na Ayudhya.

Bangkok Airways has already pounced on the opportunity created by AirAsia X's suspension

of its Mumbai-Kuala Lumpur services from this month, as it thinks demand might shift from Kuala Lumpur to Bangkok.

The airline switched from operating an Airbus A319 aircraft configured with 12 business-class and 108 economy-class seats on its daily flights to Mumbai to an all-economy Airbus A320 aircraft with 162 seats.

The airline is also cooperating with tour operators to boost marketing efforts, and is pushing sales by offering value fares through Indian travel experts.

Ina Dawer, research analyst for India at Euromonitor International, said: “The elimination of (AirAsia X's) Mumbai-Kuala Lumpur route is certainly going to bring down (Indian) tourist departures to Malaysia in the coming months. A sharp drop in outbound leisure traffic to Malaysia is very likely to benefit its close competitor, Thailand.”

However, the viability of the LCC model in India is ostensibly being threatened by high operational costs such as rising fuel prices, a reason cited by AirAsia for its withdrawal from New Delhi. This may also act as a barrier to entry for Bangkok Airways on this route.

“Bangkok Airways faces the same problem (as AirAsia) and rising airport charges could be a factor that prevents us from opening the (Bangkok-New Delhi) route,” said Varong.

Despite that, he added that the airline was confident it could compete with LCCs for the price-conscious India outbound market. According to Varong, these travellers were now increasingly prepared to fork out extra cash to fly on a full-service carrier for the four-and-a-half-hour trip, especially when taking into account the ancillary charges incurred when flying with an LCC.

Yen for travel is back

Laos steps up its game

New routes to Indonesia, Brunei and Laos could revive market

By Linda Haden
MANADO Travel professionals in Indonesia, Brunei and Laos are anticipating a surge in the number of tourists from Japan, as a flurry of new routes connecting the country with the three ASEAN destinations take flight this year.

A new flight linking Tokyo Haneda to Bali is set to launch on April 28. Operated by Garuda Indonesia, this new service complements its existing daily flights from Tokyo Narita and Osaka, as well as thrice-weekly services from Nagoya.

Ippei Takahashi, director, Island Marketing Japan, said: "This new flight would certainly help bolster (Japanese) numbers to the island's resorts which have yet to return to pre-2008 levels."

He was also hopeful that the strong yen would continue to push more Japanese to Bali and other overseas destinations.

Ogata Eiji, director, ASEAN Resort Net, said the addition of the Haneda route was a coup, as the new airport provides good domestic connections for inter-



Takahashi: Bali to benefit

lining and is much closer to Tokyo's city centre.

Bali-based Sari Tour's business development manager, I B Mahatmananda Manuba, estimates that Japanese arrivals would return to levels just below that of 2008, the year before the full force of the global financial crisis struck. "To date, our booking volumes for the first quarter have hit about 80 per cent of the total received during the same period in 2008," he said.

Krish Purnawarman, sales manager, Bali-based Astina Tours & Travel, was also optimistic. "I predict that the number of arrivals from Japan could increase by as much as 50 per cent," he said.

Besides Indonesia, Brunei also seems set to receive more Japanese arrivals from August, when an entirely new air link between the two countries is scheduled to

launch, according to Japan Association of Travel Agents senior executive of the board, Tatsuro Nakamura.

"Japanese tourists tend to combine Brunei with East Malaysia. Usually, they arrive in Kota Kinabalu and then go on to Brunei," said Sugumaran Nair, inbound manager, Frema Travel Services. He added that with MASwings planning to open up flights between Kota Kinabalu and Bandar Seri Begawan, he expected Japanese booking volume to go up by at least 20 per cent.

Meanwhile, discussions are also under way at Lao Airlines to introduce four-a-month charter flights between Japan and Laos in the second half of 2012.

"The new flights are a welcome boost as we are actively targeting Japanese tourists through various consumer and B2B initiatives in Japan," said Laos' Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism tourism marketing department director general, Saly Phimphinit. He expects the number of Japanese visitors to Laos to increase by 30 per cent.

MANADO Money is being poured into infrastructure, products and marketing, as Laos suits up for an action-packed year ahead, banking on three major events to raise its profile.

Four key provinces – Luang Prabang, Vientiane, Savannakhet and Champasak – will be recipients of infrastructure investments, which include new hotels, airports, roads and bridges across the Mekong River easing travel to neighbouring countries.

A new convention centre is also under construction in Vientiane, targeted for completion before the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) in November, as 3,000 delegates from 46 countries are scheduled to arrive, Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism tourism development department director general, Sounh Manivong, said at ATF.

Hotel supply in Vientiane is also being beefed up, with several to open this year, adding to 14 upscale hotels, according to Lao Hotel and Restaurant Association president, Oudet Souvanavong.

Other developments are afoot in the capital city, including an expansion project for the airport in order for it to handle 1,000 passengers daily. It currently serves 500 people a day.

Elsewhere in Laos, land for three new airports that will cater to medium-size aircraft has also been earmarked.

Manivong revealed that airlines had expressed interest in launching flights to Vientiane, such as German charter carrier Condor and Jin Air, which already operates charters from South Korea but is intending to mount regular services.

National carrier Lao Airlines has also deployed its new Airbus A320s on its thrice-weekly Singapore-Vientiane flights launched last November, opening a window of opportunity for travellers to arrive via Changi. Guangzhou, Seoul and Tokyo are next destinations on the radar.

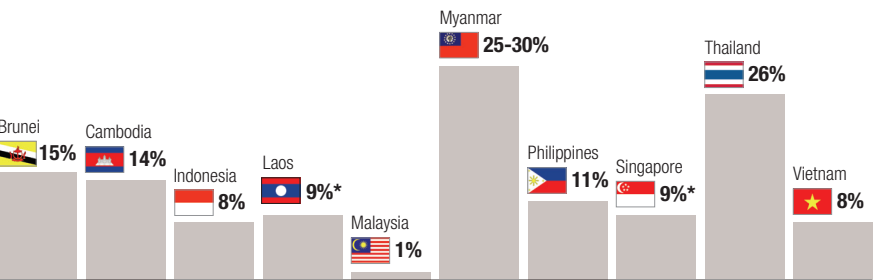
Manivong said: "We are developing products like homestays, ecotourism, and cultural and soft adventure tours that will appeal to our primary source markets."

Saly Phimphinit, director general, tourism marketing department, Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism, said: "ASEM and the ASEAN University Games in 2012, and ATF in 2013 will showcase Laos like never before." – **Shekhar Niyogi**

TTG Intelligence

Analysis by Murray Bailey

Growth forecasts for visitor arrivals in 2012 across ASEAN countries



* Travel Business Analyst (TBA) estimates. Source: NTOs and TBA

Air passenger traffic between Australia and Asia, Jan-Sep 2011

The big movers in air passenger markets between Australia and Asia in 2011 (for the first three quarters) were routes between Australia and China (+42%) and Indonesia (+23%). The big fall was, not surprisingly, Japan (-28%). The big disappointment must have been India (-8%). For China, routes to and from Guangzhou (+100%) produced most of the increase. And for Indonesia, most of the increase came on routes to Bali (+18%).

Source: Department of Transport and Communications (Australia)

Routes	No.,x1000	Growth,%	Share,%
China	872	41.9	4.2
Hong Kong	1,514	-0.2	7.3
India	7.9	-7.9	0.04
Indonesia	1,483	23.4	7.2
Japan	545	-27.6	2.6
South Korea	334	-8.5	1.6
Malaysia	1,450	11.2	7.0
Philippines	188	13.9	0.9
Singapore	3,123	5.8	15.1
Taiwan	148	-15.8	0.7
Thailand	1,075	7.4	5.2
Vietnam	208	11.2	1.0
Total	20,683	5.6	100.0

South Korea's outbound travel market in 2011



Its outbound travel market, after a strong 2010 (+32%), lost speed in 2011 (an estimated +2% to 12.7 million). This seems related to the March 2011 disasters in Japan – an important destination for South Korean travellers, representing about 35% of the total. If that supposition is correct, it could mean that no destination is notably gaining from travellers diverted from Japan.

Source: Pacific Asia Travel Association and Travel Business Analyst

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Here's what you've missed

Tourism Data



Japan registers 27.8 per cent arrivals drop due to 2011 earthquake; international tourist arrivals grew 4.4 per cent in 2011; Trafalgar records a two-fold jump in 2012 forward bookings out of Asia

Tip Sheet



TAT offers certification programme for India travel trade; PATA starts webinar series tackling topics such as crisis management; Chapman Freeborn and Aqua Voyage create private jet/helicopter and luxury yacht travel experiences (above)

Hot Moves

Former Etihad Airways regional general manager Asia-Pacific South and Australasia, Cramer Ball, joins Air Seychelles as its chief executive; Marriott International appoints Paul Rushton as its regional director of MICE sales, Asia-Pacific

Hot Deals

Grand Hyatt Hong Kong offers commissionable rates for MICE groups, starting from US\$270 per night; 137 Pillars House Chiang Mai (below) introduces private Heritage Discovery excursions



ATF and its hosting woes

SURPRISE, surprise: Despite the trials and tribulations that many delegates were subjected to at this year's ATF in Manado, Indonesia, most were still supportive of secondary destinations hosting the annual conference and mart.

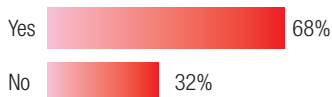
Perhaps then the right question should be: Should a second-tier city with inadequate hardware and software bid for hosting rights?

The nature of ATF, which member countries take turns to host, means that buyers, especially those from longhaul markets less familiar with the region, get to experience the good, bad and ugly of an array of destinations. It also ensures that cities other than the Balis, Bangkoks and Kuala Lumpurs of ASEAN stand a fighting chance of opening their doors to tourism.

Like its host predecessors, Manado had every opportunity to showcase its strengths both as a leisure and fledgling MICE destination. A pity it did not.

The lack of international hotel brands, air access, facilities and post-event entertainment options were jarring gaps throughout the week the 1,000-plus guests were in town. Further, the transportation debacle, one of the biggest beefs of attendees, left

Should the ASEAN Tourism Forum (ATF) be held in a secondary city?



many high and dry due to what was understood to be a drivers' strike of sorts (see story below).

It would not have been such an issue if Manado had a well-developed public transport network that could have functioned as an alternative, or if the exhibition hall (apparently built to be a shopping mall, but roped in to double up as the mart venue)

was located a stone's throw from the hotels guests were being put up in. Not to mention that delegates were already grappling with fatigue from a 30-hour flight for some as a result of multiple flight connections, as well as unsatisfactory hospitality standards at the start/end of a workday with cold food being served, wrong food being served or no food being served. Worse, about 30 delegates had to cancel their participation at the last minute due to flight issues.

It should be emphasised that emerging destinations must continue to be encouraged to be ATF hosts in the spirit of tourism's democratising power. In fact, according to a poll conducted on www.ttgasia.com, most of the 40 respondents felt that ATF should be held in a secondary city (see chart on left).

It was commendable that the ATF closing ceremony saw government acknowledgements of how Manado could have fared much better, a move that sof-

tened many hearts. There were also other good points – the warmth of Indonesian hospitality was undeniable, while the city's melange of cultures and religions was intriguing.

Having said that, the host country should also ascertain that certain criteria are met in the run-up to the show. For example, ATF 2011 host Phnom Penh was not exactly what you would call a mainstream tourist favourite, but it boasts upscale brands like Sofitel that could guarantee a minimum standard of service, in addition to more direct international flights. Every where the official ATF buses went, we were also escorted by security vehicles, which meant that land transfers were efficient.

Countries should remember that (a) the desire of wanting to promote a lesser-known destination should be balanced with ATF's need of a conducive business venue and (b) having no publicity is better than getting bad publicity.

Wasted opportunity for Indonesia: delegates

SINGAPORE A snap poll conducted among 16 buyers and sellers who attended the ASEAN Tourism Forum (ATF) in Manado revealed that this year's edition was a logistical nightmare for the majority, although they were fairly positive about the business outcomes.

Flight accessibility was cited repeatedly as the biggest gripe, with respondents pointing out that ample seat capacity into the destination should have been a requirement of being a host city.

Gilbert Whelan, president, ATM Travel Marketing, said he took 31.5 hours to get from San Francisco to Manado, and he could only leave two days after the conference ended due to limited and expensive flights.

Christoph Mueller, managing director, Go Vacation Thailand, suggested that host committees should "always stick to main

tourist destinations or capitals with sufficient flight accessibility and international hotels".

Official bus transfers within Manado proved to be another excruciating experience, as buses were often late and overcrowded or were no-shows.

Roman Davydov, director of Ukraine-based Advanced Executive, said frequent changes in venues should have been minimised, especially when "proper and air-conditioned transfers" were unavailable. "People come to the show to work and not to ride in the bus," he said.

Added UK-based Andrea Loddio, lead regional product manager, Far East, Africa, Indian Ocean and South America, Hayes & Jarvis/Thomson Tailormade: "I didn't attend the evening functions due to the difficulty of getting a taxi and the distance from my hotel (to the event ven-

ues). On top of it, my hotel was of two-star-plus standards and had dirty and noisy rooms."

Hotels received their fair share of complaints as well. Two buyers said the quality of accommodation did not correspond to the star-rating advertised, while one seller said hotels used the opportunity to jack up their prices, with delegates paying five times the usual room rates.

"It seems that this region (in Indonesia) isn't ready for MICE tourism. Hotels, food, transfers and knowledge of an international language needs to be improved first," said Karl Hellgren, managing director of Belgium-

based Business Events Incentives.

Several also felt that Manado could have been offered as a post-tour option instead, making it easier to travel to the city via domestic connections.

On a brighter note, most buyers were pleased with their business meetings.

"It is always good to meet all our resort partners in one place to exchange the latest news and develop new ideas," said Germany-based Meier's Weltreisen supervisor, product management team, Asia, Nicole Dieckmann.

Zuzana Simek, destination manager of Bono Travel Centre in Hungary, added that travel trade shows should continue to be held in secondary cities as "buyers can discover a new destination" and the "destination can earn income and learn a lot from organising the event".

– Linda Haden



Whelan: flight access is crucial



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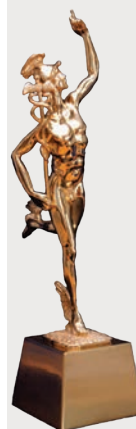
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PREMIER

Journey through the Canadian Rockies

Rocky Mountaineer courts Asian luxury travellers to Western Canada, with the appointment of a GSA here

SINGAPORE Travel consultancies in Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia looking to diversify their North American offerings should consider the award-winning Rocky Mountaineer, which offers a series of train journeys through the spectacular mountain ridges of British Columbia during the warmer months of April through October.

Scenic Travel, which became the Vancouver-based train operator's GSA in January, is marketing the line's 45 packages spread over five iconic routes – First Passage to the West, Journey through the Clouds, Rainforest to Gold Rush, Coastal Passage and Whistler Sea to Sky Climb.

Simon Er, general manager, Scenic Travel, said: "Rocky Mountaineer is a unique, high-end niche product that would appeal mainly to PMEBs, as well as baby boomers and the silver generation who have tried coach tours and are looking for something different or desire an unforgettable, once-in-a-lifetime experience."

He added that the product's



Rocky Mountaineer whisks passengers across plunging gorges, passing through the Jasper and Banff National Parks and more

main selling points were its ability to cater to all budgets and the fact that it could be slotted easily into existing itineraries for British Columbia.

Journeys run from as short as three-and-a-half hours to 19 days, and prices start from C\$149 (US\$146) for an adult, one-way. With the exception of the Whistler Sea to Sky Climb, all ticket prices include overnights in tourist-class or Fairmont luxury hotels and resorts.

Rail-only packages, rail-cruise packages offered in conjunction with Holland America Line and rail-car hire packages developed in partnership with Avis are also available.

Passengers can choose from three service categories: the premier GoldLeaf where passengers are housed in two-storey dome coaches; the new, single-level dome SilverLeaf coaches; and the entry-level RedLeaf, which features single-level carriages lined



with picture windows. All three classes offer meals, beverages and full commentaries narrated by on-board attendants.

Marketing initiatives in the pipeline include advertorials, while training sessions will be organised for travel professionals. Scenic Travel is also in the midst of creating marketing collateral in Bahasa Indonesia and is considering changing some tour elements to suit respective markets. The GSA is also seeking partners

in Indonesia and Malaysia to run training and marketing programmes on its behalf.

Consultants will be offered a tiered commission structure, with individual terms varying according to conditions set out by Rocky Mountaineer. There is also an early booking bonus if a qualifying package of seven nights or more is paid in full before April 15, with savings up to C\$1,150 per couple. – **Linda Haden**

Khiri Travel guns for millionaires



Clients get to travel in a Cessna Citation private jet (left), as well as interact with wildlife (right)

BANGKOK Khiri Travel has launched a four-day, three-night 'millionaires' tour targeted at action-seeking, high-end clients who want to experience central Myanmar in luxurious comfort – a six-seat Cessna Citation CJ3 private jet to be precise.

A six-person party costs US\$8,500 per pax and includes visas on arrival, transfers, deluxe accommodation and most meals. The fee increases to US\$11,350 per pax if only four are travelling and US\$22,000 per pax for a pair.

"This is an exceptional trip for people who want a very distinctive, active and culturally reward-

ing holiday with the convenience of starting and finishing in Bangkok," said Edwin Briels, general manager of Khiri Travel Myanmar, adding that this was a "hands-on" holiday.

Beginning from Bagan, guests ride on bicycles, viewing remote ancient temples and later hopping onto a boat along the Irrawaddy River.

They then fly to Heho near Inle Lake in the Shan hill country. There, they enter a hardwood forest, visiting an elephant and wildlife sanctuary where they can ride on and wash elephants.

The trip then moves to Inle

Lake, where guests take a boat ride to see the floating gardens and 'pagoda forest' of Indein, as well as colourful markets frequented by Shan and Pa-O tribes. There are also opportunities to see the legendary leg rowers of Inle Lake.

This is followed by a bicycle ride through Shan and Intha villages, which allows guests to stop and chat with locals. After having lunch on a rice barge, there will be a private jet transfer back to Bangkok.

Khiri Travel is offering this itinerary between May 1 and September 30, 2012.

Is this your agency?

TTG Asia calls Kerala Travels Interserve (KTI) for a polar excursion



TTG Hello! I am interested in a trip to the poles.

KTI Can I have your name and phone number? I'll have someone call you back in 10 minutes. (Promptly, there was a call in 10 minutes and I was addressed by my name.)

KTI Which pole would you like to visit?

TTG What do you suggest?

KTI It depends on when you want to travel. We have Antarctic expeditions in January, February and March, and Arctic expeditions in June, July and August. The length of tours varies from seven to 12 nights.

TTG Tell me more about the Arctic expedition apart from the details shown on your website.

KTI These are seven-night and nine-night tours. Do you have any particular interests?

TTG I'm interested in photography and polar animals.

KTI That's possible. I'll send suitable itineraries to your email. (The e-mail arrived in two

hours. Three tours were given along with their costs: US\$8,376 for the nine-night tour and US\$7,390 for the seven-night tour with accommodation in a quadruple porthole cabin on the *Plancius*. Vital statistics of the ship were provided, and they were comfortable for such

a journey through the ice. Two of the tours included a free photography workshop by an expert and the other was a polar bear special.

TTG (calls KTI two hours later) What other activities do the tours offer?

KTI One of the tours includes scuba diving, trekking and snorkelling, depending on weather conditions. You'll have to get your own scuba suit but scuba equipment will be provided.

There are also lectures by experts and camping in the Arctic for one night is possible. You'll have to indicate your preferences when booking.

TTG Which airline will we be flying on?

KTI We have previously booked our guests on Qatar Airways. If you have an airline in mind it will be given preference, depending on departure suitability. You'll have to leave two days before the tour begins.

The tour includes a free night's stay in Oslo during transit, all taxes, and visa and insurance fees. A doctor is also available on call throughout the voyage. More specifics can be worked out when you finalise your choice of tour.

VERDICT The consultant was prompt and forthcoming with information. Non-persuasiveness given the niche tour was reasonable, but a follow-up call after the e-mail could have scored points with a client.

– **Anand and Madhura Katti**

TTG Travel Pursuits

Compiled by The Fox

QUIZ

1. What was the name of the Singapore-based airline operating Singapore-Europe flights in competition with Singapore Airlines?
2. What was the name of Hong Kong's previous airport?
3. What was the first name of SilkAir?
4. Which hotel brand, started in France, did Starwood buy?



1. Sabar Air 2. Kai Tak 3. Tradewinds 4. Le Meridien

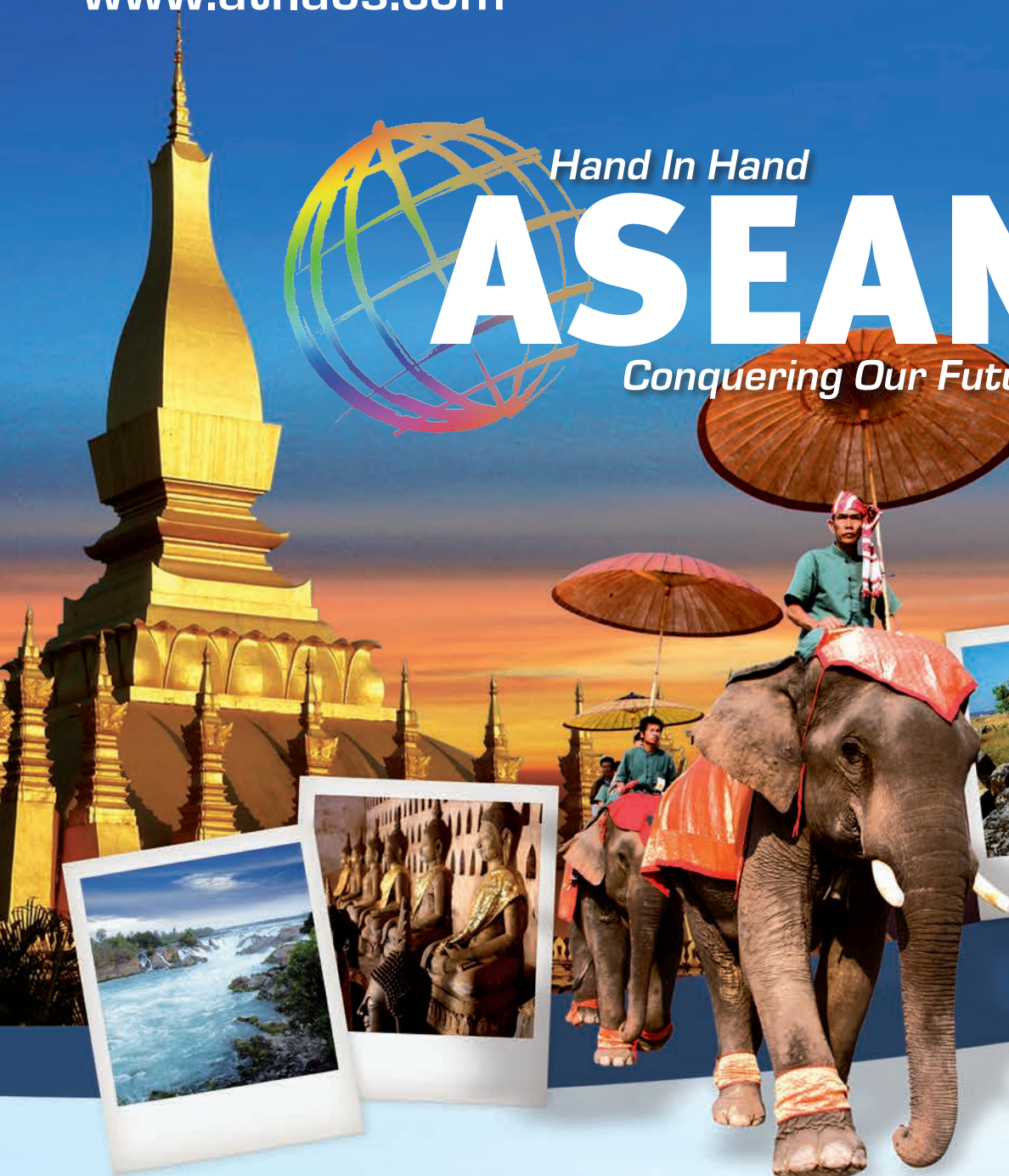


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its intrinsic Buddhist culture, national and colonial architecture, gastronomy, World Heritage Sites, multi-ethnic people, trekking locations and local handicrafts. Its unparalleled natural landscape has earned Laos the reputation of being the only remaining "original" South-east Asian experience left, and it is just waiting to be discovered.

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The thrill is on



Universal Studios Singapore's Hollywood Dreams



Ocean Park Hong Kong's Thrill Mountain

Theme parks in Asia are pulling in the crowds, with those in Singapore and Hong Kong clearly the darlings of fast-growing outbound markets such as India, China, Indonesia and the Philippines.

The region's newcomer Universal Studios Singapore (USS) welcomed approximately four million visitors in 2011, propelling it into the league of one of the top theme parks in Asia. Hong Kong's Ocean Park and Disneyland also enjoyed record-high attendances (both around 5.9 million visitors) in their last fiscal year.

"Indian and Chinese tourists are our main clients while Indonesians and Thais constitute a large chunk too," said Gary Tan, assistant vice president, resort sales, Resorts World Sentosa (RWS), where USS is based. He predicts 15 per cent growth in demand over the next two years, mostly driven by the twin giants of Asia.

According to a report published by PricewaterhouseCoopers titled *Global Entertainment and Media Outlook*, consumer spending on theme and amusement parks within the Asia-Pacific region is expected to grow to US\$8.4 billion by the end of 2012, a rise of 5.7 per cent over 2008 compared to five per cent worldwide.

Panorama Tours Indonesia president director, Royanto Handaya, said the opening of RWS and its ensuing advertising and promotions had helped reposition Singapore as the destination du jour, even though it had previously been viewed as "Indonesia's backyard".

Rashmi Mansukhani, managing director of India-based Destina-

tion Management Travel Services, too, said demand for theme park holidays among Indians was growing between 12-15 per cent every year. She said: "For most Indian leisure travellers to the ASEAN region, at least a day or two is reserved strictly for the entertainment of the children."

It is the same trend with Filipino travellers. "So long as they have kids, it is a must to include theme parks (for Hong Kong and Singapore itineraries)," said Gene Hari-Ong Gan, managing director of Philippine's Everyday Travel and Tours. She estimates 70 per cent of her business has theme-park related packages.

Philippine-based Celebrate Life! TLC operations manager, Simon Ang, added: "Hong Kong Disneyland is for kids, while Universal Studios Singapore has solidified its hold on teenagers. These theme parks are doing well by knowing what their niches are," noting new attractions like Disneyland's Toy Story Land and a section opening in 2013, as well as USS' Transformers ride, justify return visits.

Indeed, Philippine-based Goldlink Travel & Tours operations manager, Allan Sze, observed Filipinos were fond of short weekend trips to Hong Kong and Singapore and were likely to visit Disneyland and USS respectively. "Tour requests and hotel reservations (for travel consultants) have gone up," he said.

Clients to Hong Kong typically stay one out of four days at Disneyland, arranging for transfers that allow them to arrive

when the park opens and leave as it's about to close, Sze added. "Filipino visitors try to experience everything when they visit."

His eye is also on soon-to-be-unveiled parks in Malaysia such as Legoland, located in Johor Bahru. Two other children-targeted attractions will open close by: KidZania, an interactive park, and Hello Kitty Town.

Keeping it strong

Meanwhile, older theme parks in the region are still doing brisk business. Malaysia-based BMC Travel inbound manager Jessica Koh said Sunway Lagoon and the theme park in Resorts World Genting remained the two bestsellers for the country.

"Genting is popular with the Asian market because of its highland location and casino, while Sunway is popular with families because of the adjoining shopping mall," she explained.

Malaysia-based Asian Overland Services Tours & Travel (AOS) assistant account manager-Asia, Hoong Keat, added that the two parks were popular with tourists from Indonesia, Thailand and Singapore, in addition to student groups. Koh also pointed out that MICE clients were fond of holding their gala dinners there.

Established parks in the region can also take heart that travellers from mature outbound markets like Singapore and Hong Kong continue to arrive in droves.

An estimated 60 per cent of packages to Japan, Hong Kong, South Korea and Australia sold by Singapore's Hong Thai Travel comprise theme park visits. Comparatively, one in three packages at Singapore-based SA Tours features a theme park.

According to Stella Chow, Hong Thai's manager, advertising and marketing division, outbound tour, Singaporeans are still flocking to theme parks, particularly those operated by Disney, Universal Studios and Warner Bros., chiefly because "these parks are household names and are associated with Hollywood movies and characters".

Ocean Park Hong Kong

Innovate, innovate

Nonetheless, in order for theme parks to thrive, Chow emphasised it was crucial they keep reinventing themselves by "adding new rides, introducing new themes and merchandise, or developing new shows".

Addressing the World Travel Monitor Forum last November, Mason Florence, executive director of the Mekong Tourism Coordinating Office, said "Asia's more sophisticated urban life will create demand for more specialised products", edutainment theme parks being one such.

In addition to rides, theme parks should create more teambuilding activities, fun games and educational programmes, said AOS' Hoong.

Hong Kong-based W Travel managing director, Wing Wong, added that efforts must be made to engage a more tech-savvy audience. Other travel experts suggested that 3D, 4D and virtual reality technologies should be harnessed.

Hong Kong's EGL Tours executive director, Steve Huen, pointed out that since the Internet and mobile phones had become ubiquitous, parks could also "offer interactive games via such communication tools, allowing guests to win gifts or download further information so it lengthens the experience".

Panorama Tours' Royanto said park operators must also employ digital channels. He listed targeted promotions through social media, smartphone e-mail blasts and merchant tie-ups as examples.

Royanto added that FITs, loyalty cardholders and wholesalers should be tapped, while corporates could provide new business.

However, several members of the trade felt that theme parks were not giving them enough support.

KM Lam, manager, international sales of Malaysia's Mayflower Acme Tours, said the profit margins for tickets were slim, "so there is no real incentive to push sales".

AOS' Hoong agreed. "As we bulk purchase thousands of tickets, we should receive better rates than the walk-in rate."

Hong Thai's Chow said theme parks should continue working closely with the trade to sell packages, even as they pursued online sales. "Singaporeans, and Asians for that matter, still desire face-to-face contact when booking travel and theme park tickets."

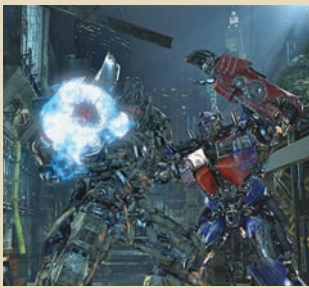




Theme parks in Asia continue to excite, but they must reinvent, says the trade. Compiled by **Gracia Chiang** with contributions from **Linda Haden, Shekhar Niyogi, Prudence Lui, Marianne Carandang, Mimi Hudoyo** and **N. Nithiyananthan**

Hong Kong
Disneyland's
Toy Story Land

What's new



Universal Studios Singapore

Transformers: The Ride opened to much fanfare in December. The first-of-its-kind simulator experience immerses thrill-seekers in a battle between the heroic Autobots and villainous Decepticons using a combination of special 3D effects and advanced motion technology.

This year, the theme park also launched its first full-scale parade. Consisting 14 spectacular floats and over 100 performers, Hollywood Dreams marches through five out of the park's seven zones for 30 minutes. It will run once a day on Saturdays, Sundays and selected holidays.



Ocean Park Hong Kong

Its latest attraction is Thrill Mountain, a carnival-themed zone spanning two hectares and stretching from one end of the park to the other. Opened in December, attractions include six new exhilarating rides, eight game booths, F&B outlets and stores selling specially designed merchandise. Later this year, the park will also introduce a 1960s-inspired Old Hong Kong area, featuring food stalls and souvenir booths reminiscent of the city's past, as well as a replica of the city's vintage trams.



Sunway Lagoon

Malaysia's long-standing theme park will add the WhiteWater Abyss waterslide to its attractions by mid-2012. Rafts take up to six riders through a series of open and enclosed sections with gripping twists and turns before plummeting them into the core of the Abyss. The high wall and long funnel allow for huge drops and sustained oscillations, while eliminating the need for thrill-killing water brakes.



Shanghai Disneyland

Opening in 2015, the mainland's first Disneyland will offer cheaper admission tickets compared to its sister park in Hong Kong (pictured), according to reports. It will also feature Chinese elements in its design to distinguish it from other theme parks. The first phase of the park will span 390 hectares and is located within the 2,000-hectare Shanghai International Tourism and Resorts Zone in Pudong. It has also been said that a global recruitment campaign would be launched next year and the government would conduct training lessons for applicants to improve their chances at employment.



Haw Par Villa

In December, the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) announced that it would breathe new life into the once-lively park which features a curious collection of dioramas and statues depicting Chinese mythology and folklore. *TTG Asia* understands that the NTO intends to hold a public consultation in March/April to determine how Haw Par Villa should be redeveloped. Experts on Chinese culture will also be brought in for advice on how to preserve this unique attraction.



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Haikou will be the site of a mega leisure and entertainment project, which includes the existing Mission Hills Haikou International Golf Resort

Courtesy of Mission Hills Haikou International Golf Resort

Hainan is heating up

‘China’s Hawaii’ is a veritable battleground for international resorts and hotels, says **Prudence Lui**

Arrivals The southern province of Hainan welcomed 26.7 million overnight visitors in the first 11 months of 2011. This was 15 per cent up on the same period of the previous year. The island recorded 709,200 foreign visitors, a 19.1 per cent increase. Top five source markets were Russia (202,114 visitors), Hong Kong (122,200), Taiwan (85,300), Singapore (48,019) and the US (24,862). Tentative statistics revealed that visitor numbers for last year would top 30 million, with tourism receipts reaching RMB30 billion (US\$4.7 billion).

Director of Hainan Provincial Tourism Development Commission, Lu Zhi-yuan, said: “The approval from the central government in 2010 to develop Hainan as a world-class international leisure island is a window of opportunity for us. In terms of arrivals, the Russian market has demonstrated robust growth thanks to multi-destination traffic generated through Hong Kong.”

Hotels The 509 tourist hotels in Hainan recorded average room and occupancy rates of 60.1 per cent and RMB348.5 re-

spectively in the first 11 months of last year. There are currently more than 40 five-star properties, with at least 20 more due to come online. This year, 18 five-stars are scheduled to open, while the pace will slow to five in 2013 and 2014.

Sanya’s 18.7km Haitang Bay on the southern tip of Hainan is the latest boom area, with Sheraton, Grand Hyatt, Shangri-La, Crowne Plaza, Hotel Indigo, Sofitel and Fairmont moving in alongside the existing Doubletree Resort by Hilton, Conrad, Kempinski and Renaissance brands. In the north, capital city Haikou will welcome a Westin, Shangri-La and Marriott.

Meritus Mandarin Haikou general manager, Ather Bhutto, said: “Thanks to more international events happening in and around Haikou city, our hotel closed in 2011 with double-digit growth in ARR (average room rate) and hotel revenue.”

Cruise In 2011, Star Cruises’ *SuperStar Aquarius* became the first international cruise liner to use Sanya as its home port. Between November 2011 and March 2012, the ship will offer 62 cruises from Sanya



“Last year saw a substantial increase in business for both our hotel and the overall hospitality industry in Haikou, particularly for upmarket brands.”

Ather Bhutto
General manager
Meritus Mandarin Haikou

to Halong Bay, Danang and Hue, bringing 100,000 passengers to the city.

In addition to at least four sailings to Sanya in January and February, Costa Cruises’ *Costa Classica* will offer a repositioning sailing from Hong Kong to Singapore, calling at Sanya in March, and *Costa Victoria* will have two repositioning Singapore-Shanghai sailings, calling at Sanya in May and November.

Riding on the buoyant demand, Sanya’s six-year-old Phoenix Island International Cruise Terminal is also planning a RMB1.8 billion development, which will add four berths and bring capacity up to two million passengers a year.

Products New developments are springing up to capitalise on Hainan’s tourism growth spurt. Mission Hills Group, which opened an international golf resort in Haikou in 2010, is linking up with the Lan Kwai Fong Group to develop a 240,000m², leisure and entertainment project, due to open by end-2013. It will have a cluster of resorts, as well as six key high-lights such as the Lan Kwai Fong Entertainment Zone. There will

also be two new hotels – a Ritz-Carlton with 180 rooms, 20 villas and the Ritz-Carlton Golf Clubhouse; and a Renaissance, with 300 rooms.

Access This month, Far Eastern Air Transport will inaugurate a twice-weekly Kaoshiung-Haikou service, further strengthening Hainan’s air links. Last September, China Airlines launched thrice-weekly services to Haikou and twice-weekly services to Sanya while Eva Air kicked off twice-weekly operations to Sanya a month later. Hainan Airlines added a thrice-weekly Lanzhou-Guilin-Sanya service in November. A new airport is also due to open in Boao, east Hainan, within two years.

However, Pullman Sanya Yalong Bay Resort & Spa general manager, Thierry Douet, said there were still insufficient international flights. “Markets such as (South) Korea have to rely on charters,” he added.

Meanwhile, a high-speed train service that opened in 2010 has shortened travelling time between Haikou and Sanya to approximately two hours. A further high-speed railway is also being built in west Hainan.

Making MICE a priority

Hainan is not just big with the leisure crowd, it's oozing MICE potential too, says **Prudence Lui**

1 Why is Hainan attracting so much MICE business? Being China's only tropical destination has its perks. According to the Hainan Hotel Market Overview by Horwath HTL last November, the ease and cost savings of travel to a resort within China for MICE groups, particularly those from state-owned enterprises, work to Hainan's advantage. And China's MICE market is growing, thanks to foreign-owned companies and domestic firms that are increasingly adopting international meeting and training practices.

Meritus Mandarin Haikou general manager, Ather Bhutto, said: "Hainan is becoming the first choice for both domestic and international MICE customers as tourism infrastructure on the island becomes more efficient at facilitating top-calibre MICE events."

The local government's marketing efforts, including the introduction of more global events such as the International Yacht-

ing Exhibition, Celebrity Golf Championship and International Marine Expo, have also helped MICE thrive.

2 Does Hainan have the hardware? Since being identified as the next resort district by the government, 153 construction projects have been planned, the crown jewel being a conference centre in Haitang Bay.

Sheraton Haikou Resort, general manager, Subash Basrur, said the authorities were pushing for Hainan to become an international tourism island by 2020. "To achieve that, the government is improving infrastructure, building duty free shops and shopping malls in Sanya and Haikou, and offering landing visas for visitors from more than 30 countries," he added.

Of the 7,407 top-tier guest rooms, approximately 60 per cent are in Yalong Bay, which has established itself as Sanya's first high-end resort destination.

By 2015, approximately 20

Luxury properties

20

The number of top-end hotels that will open in Sanya alone by 2015.

new luxury hotels with 7,308 rooms will have opened in Sanya. These will enhance Hainan's MICE appeal, as they will come with state-of-art facilities.

Examples include Sheraton Sanya Haitang Bay Resort's 3,600m² in meeting space across seven rooms and its 1,500m² Grand Ballroom; and the conference and banqueting centre with 11 meeting rooms at the Kempinski Hotel Haitang Bay.

Besides meetings and exhibitions, others like the Pullman Oceanview Sanya Bay Resort & Spa have also set their sights on the wedding business.

3 What are the key challenges in selling Hainan as a MICE destination? Sanya attracts many large-scale events but it lacks a major conference and convention venue.

Sanya Shishi Exhibition assistant manager, Sophia Liu, said: "If a group has less than 1,000 people, hotels may still be able to cater. We had a group of 4,000 from a pharmaceutical company and were forced to split them into three groups. What we are looking for is a huge venue that can accommodate big groups under one roof. The city also needs more hotels, as capacity is tight during the peak season from October to March."

Hainan Haoyang International Travel Service president, Johnny Liang, added that Hainan's software "like language pro-

ficiency of hotel staff needs to be brushed up".

4 What about cruise MICE? Star Cruises has noted a rising interest from MICE groups. Senior vice president of sales, Michael Goh, said Hainan has the potential to further develop in this area, comparing Sanya's draws to that of Miami.

"Sanya is suitable for cruise sailings throughout the year and is also within easy reach, as ships can sail to many overseas ports within 24 hours," he explained.

Costa Cruises has also seen an increase in volume of enquiries for Hainan. Said its vice president of Pacific Asia operations, Buhdy Sin Swee Bok: "We are currently exploring opportunities for 2012. Increasingly, the industry is looking to cruises as a suitable option to host MICE events given that the budget is easily controlled, the event and entertainment contained under one roof, and satisfaction rates easily evaluated."

Checking in



Pullman Oceanview Sanya Bay Resort & Spa



Prudence Lui is impressed by the breathtaking views and thoughtful service offered by the latest Pullman to arrive in Hainan's Sanya

LOCATION Rolling out the red carpet in late 2010, the Pullman Oceanview Sanya Bay Resort & Spa straddles a waterfront location and a main road which connects the hotel to Sanya's CBD. This means that various local public transport options are available at your doorstep. Apart from an attached serviced apartment block, there are no other high-rise buildings surrounding the standalone property, which affords tranquil and panoramic views of the ocean and city.

However, the area is not exactly the centre of activity, so guests

who want an entertainment or shopping experience will have to make their way to town.

The hotel is conveniently located in Sanya Bay, a 10-minute ride to downtown Sanya and a stone's throw away from the Phoenix International Airport. Bear in mind there are two Pullman properties in Sanya, so it's best to be specific when speaking to your taxi driver, as the distance between the hotels is a 45-minute drive.

ROOMS Don't get lost because the hotel is huge. For example, I was booked on the seventh floor and there was no passage connecting the hotel's two wings so I had to make sure I was in the correct wing.

My deluxe ocean view room was about 45m² with a generous balcony. Over 90 per cent of rooms are ocean-facing, and

Sanya Bay was right below my feet! I spent a lot of time on the balcony because the sunset view was irresistible.

Furnishings and design are a blend of South-east Asian and Chinese influences, bringing about a homely feeling. Work wise, I had a spacious writing desk with a smart multimedia box which resolved all connectivity issues. Apart from two electric sockets, there was an extra multi-plug for tech-savvy travellers like myself. I had my laptop, mobile phone and iPod to charge, and many more.

What impressed me the most was the yoga mat I found in my wardrobe. It came with an instruction sheet in English and Mandarin giving information on basic yoga poses. After a long conference day, I opted for a quiet and relaxing moment in my room and followed the illustra-

tions on how best to breathe and unwind.

F&B There are two signature restaurants – Chinese and Western – along with a choice of three bars and a lounge. My favourite was the Lobby Lounge: the high ceiling and natural breeze make it a great place for a drink and casual conversation while overlooking the pools and gardens.

FACILITIES Apart from dedicated MICE facilities – eight function rooms plus a grand ballroom with 600 banquet seats – the hotel features a gym, spa, outdoor pools and a 300m private beach. Paying attention to those with family in tow, the property completed last year a new children's playground with a library and toy area.

SERVICE Young staff possess

Name Pullman Oceanview Sanya Bay Resort & Spa

No. of rooms 413

Rate From RMB1,500 (US\$237) for off-peak; peak season, from RMB3,500

Contact details

Tel: (86-898) 8895-9115

Fax: (86-898) 8828-6655

Email: H7126@accor.com

Website: www.pullmanhotels.com

a zealous service attitude. I had trouble getting a taxi as the lobby is on the third floor, away from the main road. The concierge escorted me in a golf cart to the front entrance and hailed a taxi for me. He also made sure the driver knew the correct direction, which I appreciated.

VERDICT A one-stop property that meets both business and leisure needs.

Selling sustainability

Hotels in China gear up to meet the demands of eco-conscious guests. By **Manuela Zoninsein**

IT TAKES more than a paint job to go 'green', as hotel properties in China would attest. In this day and age when sustainability is a mounting concern, guests want to see real substance in steps taken, an expectation that hoteliers intend to fully live up to.

"There is a growing awareness, especially among the younger generation of leisure and business travellers, to seek responsible choices in holiday destinations, food sources, meetings/events and banquets," observed Patricia Gallardo, director of CSR and sustainability, Shangri-La Hotels and Resorts.

Organisations that are practitioners of CSR themselves "align with like-minded businesses and are choosing to stay at properties that mirror the company's views on sustainability," she added. For instance, General Electric was the first to support green meeting packages at Shangri-La's China World Hotel in Beijing.

Likewise, at Shanghai-based URBN, touted as China's first carbon-neutral hotel, guest experience manager, Jonathan Ma, said there had been a huge increase in demand, with the ma-

jority of guests being aware of the hotel's green position.

"Green is the new black," he added, predicting a "significant increase in guests who will stay with us for our stance on environmentalism".

This wave of eco-consciousness has seen hotels scrutinise every aspect of their daily operations from energy needs to even what's cooking in their kitchens.

Shangri-La focuses on five areas for its environmental efforts: lowering energy consumption; indoor air quality; waste disposal management; water use; minimising ozone depletion; and biodiversity conservation.

New hotels such as the Kerry Hotel Pudong, Shanghai and China World Summit Wing in Beijing are built according to the LEED Green Building Rating System and are at least 20-30 per cent more energy-efficient. Older properties in Dalian and Chengdu have also switched to LED lighting upon renovations, while other properties have taken the lead in herb gardens and composting, like the Shangri-La Hotel, Guilin and Futian Shangri-La in Shenzhen.

At Shanghai's URBN, minimising energy and water usage are high on the agenda, as is using locally-sourced, low-impact materials such as bamboo. The result is double-paned windows, lights set to low levels and water purification systems on-site.

Marcel Schneider, CEO of TUI China, pointed out that many hotels in China were also doing away with daily changes in towels and linen, opting to do so only on customer request.

"This is just a small step towards a better environment, but our clients appreciate it," he said, while noting that there were other moves to reduce cooling in summer and heating in winter, both by international chains and local hotels.

Eco-friendly eating is also sweeping across China. At The Schoolhouse, a boutique hotel near the Mutianyu section of the Great Wall, a commitment to sourcing food locally has extended to teaching farmers how to grow organic fruit, fish and meat, and the creation of a Sustainable Food Program Manual.

These initiatives are being complemented by chains oper-

ating within China such as The Peninsula Hotels which recently banned the sale of shark's fin soup on its premises.

On the demand side, travel companies echoed that customers were definitely becoming more discerning.

Being 'green' certainly helps a place to stand out, said Pacific World China senior account manager, Violet Wang. "When considering our itineraries, we are always looking for something that can really captivate the market," she explained.

For TUI China, Schneider added that soft adventure clients and some FIT families were keen on staying in green hotels.

However, the travel trade emphasised that sustainable tourism in China was still in its early stages.

"We're hearing a lot of discussions about sustainable tourism in China; different awards are being given out to properties and operators who do different things," said Zhang Mei, founder of adventure travel company, WildChina. But there is currently not much transaction around it, she added.

"For operators to adopt green practices or for consumers to see sustainable travel as a buying factor is going to take a little time," said Zhang.

Schneider added: "Generally it can be said that the green infrastructure in China is still in its infancy compared to most Western source markets."

Yet even in other parts of the world, the struggle in raising greater awareness about sustainability continues to exist.

For example, a new survey conducted at the World Travel Market by SustainIT, a consultancy specialising in sustainability performance, showed that many hotel employees were not aware of what their company was trying to achieve and therefore were unable to share it with their customers, revealed managing director, Charlie Stockford. The result is that many hotels are not communicating their sustainable practices to customers.

With a growing number of sustainable travel awards and sustainability standards, this will hopefully draw greater attention to the green deeds by hotels worldwide and also in China.



From left: The facade of URBN Hotel; URBN's garden courtyard; The Schoolhouse's kitchen garden; one of the dishes served at The Schoolhouse; The Schoolhouse's dining area

Bringing together nature and luxury in an exclusive setting

Brands embracing sustainability are mushrooming in China, one of the latest being Naked Retreats, which has two luxury rural resorts in the country to date.

Opened last October, its second property – the 121-room Naked Stables Private Reserve in Moganshan – aims to become the first resort with a LEED Platinum certification in Asia.

Eco-friendly efforts include installing energy metres in all units and giving incentives for reducing energy consumption, and reducing waste generation through compost and recycling systems that support the local community.

Located west of Shanghai and north of Hangzhou, the resort is a two-and-a-half-hour drive and

one-hour drive away respectively. Just five kilometres from its sister property, the new reserve is larger in size and has its own private valley surrounded by a reservoir and bamboo and tea plantations.

Rooms at the free-standing tree-top villas and earth huts go for RMB2,500 (US\$396) each, and

there are three restaurants and bars, a wellness and spa centre, a conference centre, as well as a club house and a daycare centre for children. An equestrian centre also offers horseback riding activities at its stables or on mountain trails.

Founded by South African

native Grant Horsfield, Naked Retreats debuted its concept in 2007 with the Naked Home Village, which consists of eight hillside homesteads.

Said Horsfield: "(South Africa) is a country surrounded by nature and game reserves. In China, it's difficult to find companies who do what we do...We target people living in cities who love to escape. This product is unique, as the market is not developed at the moment."

He added that the Naked brand had become well-known among Shanghai expatriates, with a three-week wait period to book a weekend stay. Peak seasons are spring and autumn.

Sales director, Teun Hanegraaf, expects the MICE market to

contribute half of the latest venture's business takings, as it already accounts for 40 per cent of all traffic in Naked's first property.

Just last week, Naked Stables Private Reserve launched its teambuilding and corporate meeting programme for 2012, complete with a dedicated events team. Possible activities include a scavenger hunt, mountain biking and art jamming.

Said Hanegraaf: "We reckon a lot of traffic from high-end MICE such as product launches, events, conferences and teambuilding activities. With a maximum capacity of 250 people and 121 beds, an entire resort buyout is feasible." Previous clients include Louis Vuitton and IKEA. – **Prudence Lui**



Naked Stables Private Reserve in Moganshan

Among the destination's latest openings is Chaaya Wild Yala, which offers wildlife sightings



Courtesy of Chaaya Wild Yala

Tourism hits new highs

Sri Lanka expects to trump last year's stellar results with better infrastructure. By **Feizal Samath**

Arrivals Tourism is booming in Sri Lanka with arrivals jumping 30.8 per cent year-on-year to 855,975 in 2011, topping the original estimate of 750,000. This year's target of 925,000 arrivals is a far cry from the half a million averaged during the 1983-2009 conflict, and should be easily reached according to travel experts.

India was Sri Lanka's major source market, with 126,882 visitors in 2011, an increase of 51.7 per cent over 2010. The UK was second-largest, with growth of just 0.6 per cent to 106,082 arrivals. Germany was the third-largest market, up 22.2 per cent to 55,882 visitors, while France rose 55.6 per cent to 48,696 visitors. China, which Sri Lanka hopes to aggressively tap, saw arrivals rise by 56.4 per cent to 16,308.

Overall average spend per tourist rose to US\$100 per day last year from US\$88 in 2010.

Anura Lokuhetti, president of the Tourist Hotels Association of Sri Lanka, said 2011 was the "most wonderful year ever in tourism", adding that Sri Lanka's advantage was its abundance of natural resources.

Starting this January, Sri Lanka begun issuing visas online,

with fees ranging from US\$10 to US\$50. Visitors from Singapore and the Maldives, however, are provided visas on arrival free of charge.

NTO A five-year campaign has been launched to attract 2.5 million arrivals by 2016. Vipula Wanigasekera, Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority acting director general, said: "Tourism development has pride of place in the overall economic development of the country, the primary focus being infrastructure and product development."

New airports and seaports are being developed across the island, while new highways are being built to offer access from Colombo to outlying areas. In particular, the southern part of the country is being developed for tourism (see page 14).

Hotels As of November 2011, Sri Lanka had 21,000 rooms for tourists, with 14,653 in hotels and 7,000 in homestays, bungalows and boutique units. Occupancy rate improved to 90.3 per cent, up from 86.1 per cent in November 2010.

Approval has been given for



"Getting a million tourists this year will be easy. Even though there was insufficient marketing of the destination last year, we severely underestimated ourselves in terms of arrivals."

Nilmin Nanayakkara
President, Sri Lanka Association of Inbound Operators

the construction of 153 hotels with 9,385 rooms over the next three to four years. The room stock will be raised to approximately 50,000 by 2016, with openings by international brands such as Shangri-La, Six Senses and Mövenpick, while properties by Marriott, Hyatt and Sheraton are under negotiation. There are also new additions from local hotel chains such as John Keells, Aitken Spence and Jetwing.

Rates Room rates in Colombo increased sharply, with five-star properties charging more than US\$125 per night (before taxes) in 2011 compared to half of that in 2008/2009. Four-star hotels were charging more than US\$85 per night. A minimum pricing rate is enforced by the government in the capital. However, room rates in hotels outside Colombo have also risen.

Escalating rates are worrying the industry. Sri Lanka Association of Inbound Tour Operators president, Nilmin Nanayakkara, said the destination was in danger of overpricing itself.

Echoing his concern, Vasantha Leelananda, head of destination management at John Keells, said the last three years had seen rates

catch up with what Sri Lanka lost during the conflict. "We have now achieved a decent base rate and need to be cautious not to overprice," he said.

Access Over the last one year, SriLankan Airlines added new routes to Guangzhou, Kochi, Moscow and Zurich. The flag carrier also plans to fly to Canada and Vietnam and resume flights to Melbourne.

Other international airlines have also recently launched flights to Sri Lanka such as Gulf Air (Bahrain), Aeroflot (Moscow), China Eastern (Kunming) and Kingfisher (Chennai, Kochi, Thiruvananthapuram and Tiruchirapalli).

Sri Lanka will get a second international airport in the southern district of Hambantota. When completed this year, it will be able to handle one million passengers annually. A new terminal is also under construction at Bandaranaike International Airport, allowing it to handle 13 million passengers a year compared to the current six million when it opens in 2013. Domestic airports previously used by the military are also being transformed for civilian use.

The south sees a new surge

Major developments add to the allure of Sri Lanka's most popular region, reports **Feizal Samath**

SRI LANKA'S southern region, virtually untouched by the 30 years of internal conflict which ended in May 2009, is waking up to a resurgence in tourism.

Such is the pent-up demand that last year the region was short of rooms, with tourists turning up at people's homes in the search for accommodation.

"There were boards put up in the southern town of Mirissa offering rooms for Rs500 (less than US\$5) per night," said Suresh de Mel, director of Citrus Leisure Group, which has two hotels in the south.

The southern coastline, stretching more than 200km from Kalutara to Hambantota, has been Sri Lanka's biggest tourism draw for more than four decades.

The area has the highest number of rooms among all regions in Sri Lanka. As of last September there were 5,037 rooms and 92 resorts, up from 4,940 rooms and 88 resorts of the corresponding month in 2010.

The number of rooms is expected to double in the next few years with 4,000 to 5,000 added in the four- to five-star categories, according to Vipula Wani-gasekera, acting director general,



Chaaya Tranz Hikkaduwa, one of two new John Keells hotels

Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority.

New international hotels in the south include Shangri-La's second property in Sri Lanka, which will see 161 rooms and 20 beach villas opening in Hambantota in 2013. Six Senses Before Galle's nearly 100 villas and Six Senses Meerladuwa, a 16-room tented camp on a small island, are due later this year. Anantara's sister brand, Avani, too, opened the refurbished 75-room Bentota Resort & Spa late last year (see review below).

Other renowned brands already represented include a Taj

and two Amanresorts properties.

Among local brands, Chaaya Wild Yala, a 66-room luxurious property at the Yala National Park built in game lodge style, and the 150-room Chaaya Tranz Hikkaduwa opened last November and December. Both belong to the John Keells Group.

Post-war, the region has also been getting special attention, as Hambantota is Sri Lankan president Mahinda Rajapaksa's home base. In addition to new hotels, it has seen the construction of an international airport, seaport and convention facilities.

The Hambantota international cricket stadium welcomed the ICC Cricket World Cup in early 2011, while an international convention centre with a 770-seat conference hall and a 1,500-pax banquet hall will be ready in 2013. Mattala International Airport will also open its first terminal by 2012, catering to a million passengers a year.

Another major plus is the opening of Sri Lanka's first 92km expressway from outer Colombo to Galle. A 35km extension of the four-lane highway to Matara will be open by 2013 and there are also plans to extend it 75km farther to Hambantota and the unfinished Mattala airport.

"This is a great expressway and the scenery and landscape are unbelievable. It has cut travel time (to the south) by half," said de Mel.

Nilmin Nanayakkara, president of the Sri Lanka Association of Inbound Operators, said the opening of the expressway and the new airport at Mattala provided enormous opportunities for the south.

Mattala airport will also provide faster access to eastern Ampara, Lahugala and Arugam Bay, said to be among the top 10

surfing destinations in the world.

Vasantha Leelananda, executive vice president and head of destination management at John Keells, said the south would see even more infrastructure development in the future, but he sounded a word of caution.

"Our tourism industry has made vast strides over the last three years and will continue to maintain this momentum. This will also lead to overvisitation and other adverse social issues which need to be regulated and properly controlled.

"The sustainability and protection of our environment and our unique sites are a must for the sake of future generations," he said.

Priyankara Wickramasekera, president of the Southern Hotels Association and managing director and owner of the 26-room Priyankara Hotel at Tissamaharama, said: "We need to develop the community and raise the understanding of tourism."

De Mel agreed: "Part of the challenge is in equitable community development. We need to empower the community and develop self-confidence so that villagers will genuinely care for foreign visitors to the south."

Checking in

Avani Bentota Resort & Spa



True Sri Lankan hospitality makes **Feizal Samath** feel at ease in the refurbished Dutch-inspired beach home

LOCATION Sandwiched between two other pioneering hotels, this is one of the country's first beach resorts – now given a modern makeover.

Like its neighbours, the resort was built in the 1970s along the southern coast, 64km away from Colombo. Last year's opening of Sri Lanka's first expressway to the south cut travel time to the quintessential tourist town of Bentota by half. Bentota is also close to Aluthgama, which has plenty of retail options.

Formerly Hotel Serendib, AVANI Bentota Resort & Spa reopened last November after a major refurbishment. It is owned and managed by the Serendib Leisure Group but operates within the brand guidelines of Minor Hotel Group's Avani.

ROOMS Avani Bentota Resort & Spa is a mix between a standard and boutique hotel, with pri-

vate dining on the beach and a planned butler service for suites and deluxe rooms.

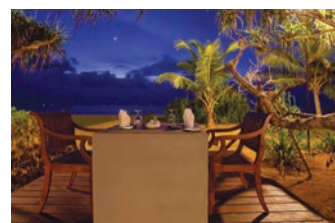
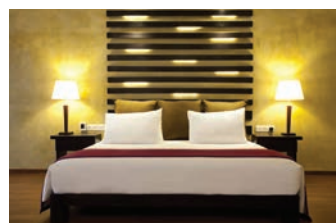
It is designed by world-renowned Sri Lankan architect Geoffrey Bawa who was inspired by an 18th-century Dutch village to create a romantic home-away-from-home amid a spectacular beachside setting. Bawa's trademark design is evident on arrival at the entrance where the corridor and lounge lead to the sea.

I stayed in one of the hotel's superior rooms with a floor area of 37m². The cosy room, with aesthetically-pleasing art and well-regulated air conditioning, had a flatscreen TV with cable connection, DVD player, mini-bar, safe and tea/coffee making facilities.

What stood out, however, was the fixed ceiling rain shower in the bathroom. Having a bath in a rain-like atmosphere was an extraordinary experience – and I just had to take many showers a day to savour that feeling.

An innovative wardrobe also conveniently opens out into both the bedroom and bathroom.

SERVICE Much of the staff were dressed in colourful, cotton sa-



rons and tunic-styled shirts, giving the property a traditional Sri Lankan feel. Guests were greeted with clasped hands and 'ayubowan' or 'welcome' in local language.

However, response time was rather slow when it came to ordering room service and fixing a faulty TV. Thankfully, this was amply compensated with the warm service at the bar, reception and dining areas. It was possible that the staff were stretched to the limit, as I checked in just after Christmas when the hotel was full.

F&B Meals are served buffet-style in the main dining room but a private meal can be arranged in your room or on the verandah overlooking the sea.

Sri Lankan favourites such as hoppers (crispy, bowl-shaped pancakes made with fermented rice flour) supplemented by spicy coconut curries and other local dishes were a hit with foreign guests. I especially liked the white chocolate-coated cornflakes for dessert.

AMBIENCE A striking feature is the absence of a band playing

Name Avani Bentota Resort & Spa
No. of rooms 75 (two suites)
Rate Currently around US\$250 for a double room with breakfast

Contact
Tel: (94-34) 22 75353
Fax: (94-34) 22 75313
Email: inquiries.serendib@serendibleisure.lk
Website: www.serendibleisure.com

in the lobby, bar or dining areas – a regular sight in most hotels but often loud, making it difficult to carry out a decent conversation. Here, the only sounds were soft background music and the soothing waves.

VERDICT Hospitality in true Sri Lankan style, with staff making guests feel like they're at home. The pleasant setting makes this an excellent getaway for a family or couple.

Amazing Pattaya Chonburi Night

13 January 2012
Unlimited
Sutanraja Hotel

After a long day at ATF2012, Amazing Pattaya swept in to bring its active beach to delegates with Sutanraja Hotel's Unlimited. Participants were treated to a fun-filled evening jam-packed with exciting entertainment programmes, including fantastic music, a lucky draw and, of course, the famed Tiffany Show. All in all, the Amazing Pattaya Chonburi Night was a great way to relax and have a great time with industry peers!

Background image: a beautiful actress from Amazing Pattaya's renowned Tiffany Show.



In the thick of the party are, from left, (front row) Mathieu Meers from World Holstein Friesian Federation and Monique Petrus from Nokia, and (back row) José Henrique Gonçalves from Abako and Aynur Şan from Oniva Tour.



Adelaida Aroca of Viajes Y Cultura (left), with Jaime Calatrava of Advicer Consultores S.L.



From left: Sengsoda Vanthanouvong and Soukaseum Bodhisane (3rd from left) from the Ministry of Information Culture & Tourism Lao, Darren Ng from TTG Asia Media, Aditya Tyagi from Luxe Escape, Autthaphol Wannkij from the Tourism Authority of Thailand, Pattaya Office, and Gilber Roels from Travel Magazine.



From left: Linda Tan from JLT Travel & Tours strikes a pose with Corazon Tan Mangondaya from Macor Travel & Tours, and Celia Magno Ranara from Vanity Travel & Tours Agency.



Enjoying their drinks together are Shailendra Kesari (left) of Shailendra Publications with Vipul Tankaria from INC Global Holidays.



Alyssa Johnson (left) from Trips4fundraising and Jan Matysik from Cumulus.



From Left: Ramia Adnyana from Furama Xclusive, Wirachart Wattaphanich from Furama Chiang Mai, Yvonne Liew from Furama Bukit Bintang, Vione Tan and Leng Siang from Furama International.



From Left: Naalyan Gendzheva from Euroholiday, Greta Veselinova from Libra LTD, Motaz Othman from MICE Middle East, Lidia Ivanova from Mega Travel, and Heldur Allese from Fiesta Reisid.



From Left: Tatcha Riddhimat and Ivan Chan from Furama, Verena Sievers along with Philipp Harteneck from Tui Deutschland, and Jirawat Worawong from The Treasury Village Group.



From left: Danny Sukomol and Komjet Chantaravisoot (far right) from Santhiya Resorts & Spas, Maria Karacheva from Novotel Hotels, Simone Hansen from Mercure Hotels, and Vorasit Pongkumpunt from Nora Resorts & Hotel.



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