



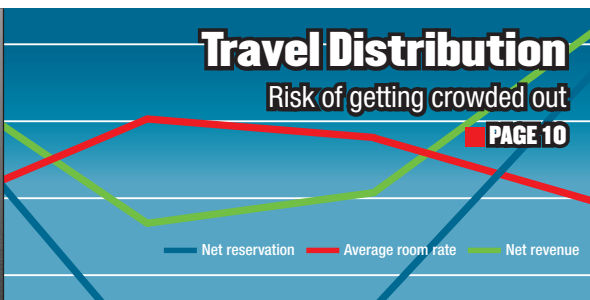
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- 6 South-east Asia's first Holiday Inn Express opens in Bangkok
- 7 Apple Vacations to debut FIT booking engine
- 8 Airphil Express' new Manila-KL flights to ease seat crunch
- 9 Yangon hotel trio to get makeover
- 10 New air connections enhance Davao's accessibility

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# Australian holidays evolve

Travel experts pushed to adapt to changing profile of travellers to the destination

By Gracia Chiang

**ATE 2012, PERTH** With the traditional group market from South-east Asia into Australia experiencing weak to negative growth, the travel trade is looking at ways to repackage the destination.

Australian sellers are scrambling to tap the burgeoning free-and-easy market, with self-drive being the buzzword.

Tourism Tasmania regional manager, Asia, Vivian Chow, said the destination began working with travel consultants on the concept of self-drive convoys last year. It partnered Singapore-based Chan Brothers Travel to offer a suggested itinerary, with the option of activities such as honey collecting and fruit picking for convoys of more than 15 people. Individuals travel at their own pace during the day, but check in at the same accommo-

dation at night.

"It's a different travel format. In a market like Singapore that's more mature, travellers have done coach tours already."



Peterson: groups to FITs

Choice Hotels Australasia, which operates brands such as Comfort and Quality throughout the country, has jumped onto the bandwagon, publishing a self-drive brochure that has "gone down extremely well" with travel experts.

Said general manager, sales and marketing, Aileen Cobern: "We've put together self-drive itineraries to help them understand the distances between our properties. Singapore and Malaysia (travel experts) have been very positive about the FIT market. There's a fair bit of 'let's try something new', South Australia and Tasmania in particular."

With the introduction of Scoot's Singapore-Gold Coast

flights, Tourism Queensland is also eyeing younger, individual travellers from the region on a much larger scale than before.

"The traditional family market is still important, but we are making an effort to target singles and couples with our social media campaign," said Lim Mui Khim, international director, South-east Asia. She added that the state was showcasing its shopping and nightlife attractions, as well as its sporting options from zorbing to marathons.

The launch of new Australian routes by LCCs is changing the face of the market from "a fairly group market to a fairly big FIT market", said Gary Peterson, company director of the AOT Group, which owns inbound tour operator ETA.

He said: "We're seeing more Malaysian (travel consultants) working with us for FITs, (but) you have to do a lot more FITs

to do the same numbers. We will potentially see that now with Singaporeans having access to very low airfares into Gold Coast and Sydney."

The emergence of LCCs has also changed buying patterns, said Maggie White, Tourism Australia regional general manager, South Asia, South-east Asia and the Gulf.

"When AirAsia or AirAsia X goes out with deals, people just snap it up six to eight months in advance. People are now coming to (travel consultants) and saying that we've got this fare, we're going to Australia, what can we do."

"The trade has to adapt if they're going to take advantage of this opportunity by providing just purely ground arrangements, recognising that most people are booking their airfares online."

Wego chief commercial officer, Craig Hewett, told TTG

Continued on page 2

## Davao-KK-Manado circuit shapes up

By Rosa Ocampo

**MANILA** The Davao-Kota Kinabalu-Manado triangular route – first proposed by MASwings during the Airline CEO Summit in Davao in April – is fast taking shape as the Malaysia Airlines subsidiary prepares to launch tour packages in the three destinations to complement its new services.

This development was announced at the Brunei-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area joint tourism development meeting in Tarakan, Indonesia, on June 12, which was attended by the Philippine Department of Tourism regional director for Davao, Art Boncato, and MASwings vice president of sales, marketing and regional management, Shauqi Ahmad.

At the meeting, MASwings presented the Coral Triangle diving package, spotlighting the best dive sites in Davao,

Manado and Kota Kinabalu, with four nights at each destination. Longhaul European travellers are among its target markets. A golf circuit package is also in the pipeline.

In the Philippines, the Davao Association of Tour Operators (DATO) is the consolidator and groundhandler of the Free and Easy Package, a basic three-day, two-night programme created exclusively for the route.

DATO president, Alexander Divinagracia, said: "We have a tie-up with the Small Hotels Association, and eventually, we will also (partner) big hotels."

"We are offering this package to the triangular route passengers (to enable them) to see Davao at the lowest rates. Our target markets are Malaysian and Indonesian

Continued on page 2



## Intuitive Smits

A hybrid of West and East, Jan Smits has innate cultural sensitivity and sensibility, which comes in handy as he zooms into his wider role as InterContinental Hotels Group's CEO for Asia, Middle East and Africa. **Raini Hamdi** talks to Smits – see page 7



# Tourism Australia trains sights on Asia

NTO intensifies efforts in India, China and Indonesia

By Gracia Chiang

**ATE 2012, PERTH** Having launched a China 2020 Strategic Plan last year, Tourism Australia announced a similar strategy for India at ATE, while also promising to up the ante in Indonesia.

This will see the NTO commissioning research to understand Indian travellers better, developing quality experiences for the market, building aviation links and pumping in additional resources according to a focused geographical strategy. This includes the doubling of marketing spend for the next financial year to more than A\$5 million (US\$5 million) and support from the national A\$61 million Asia Marketing Fund over four years.

Although the absence of direct air services has been cited as a limiting factor, Indian travel experts highlighted pricing as the biggest challenge facing the market now, partly due to the weak rupee and airline woes in India.

“Airtickets to Australia cost 50 per cent more. Hotel prices are okay, but activities and attractions are expensive. It’s a very high-end destination. Australia should think of giving incentives for groups,” said Jayesh Ashar,

managing director, Pearl Travels.

Guldeep Singh Sahni, president, Outbound Tour Operations Association of India, said Australia was up against other high-end destinations where hotels were throwing in freebies such as a complimentary night’s stay, “knowing that the market is down”. He added that the NTO should consider conducting workshops and fam trips in conjunction with the association, as there was currently a lack of awareness of products other than those along the eastern coast.

As part of India 2020, Tourism Australia managing director, Andrew McEvoy, said affluent, mid-life travellers had been identified as target customers, while in the short term, focus will be given to New Delhi and Mumbai.

Meanwhile, Tourism Australia will continue to build on China 2020 by introducing a number of new initiatives. From the second half of this year, Australian sellers interested in becoming China-ready can tap on a A\$600,000 Welcome Chinese Visitors grant. Several digital projects will also be launched, such as a tool for tourism operators that will enable visitors to book and pay

online, translation of all product information on the Australian Tourism Data Warehouse into simplified Chinese and the creation of a China-hosted consumer website.

Aside from the two Asian giants, McEvoy revealed that Indonesia would receive stronger focus. Tourism Australia will establish an office in the market by year-end and spend 150 per cent more compared to 2011.

“Indonesia is a strong market for Australia. We have good aviation access and Jakarta has a lucrative middle class,” he said. Indonesia is the second fastest-growing source of arrivals for the country after China.

This year, the cornerstone of Tourism Australia’s initiatives in Asia is the second iteration of its brand campaign, *There’s Nothing Like Australia*, which already debuted in China earlier this month. It will be progressively introduced to the region.

Similar to when the campaign was first introduced in 2010, customisable tools such as widgets will be offered to travel consultants, allowing them to list relevant packages alongside pre-loaded featured experiences.

Continued from page 1

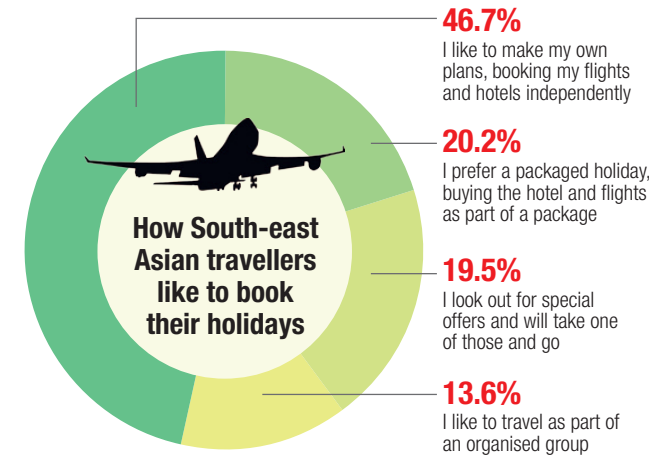
## Looking at new ways to sell Oz

Asia that according to findings in a recent poll his firm commissioned, traditional group travel to Australia was in decline among Singaporean, Indonesian, Malaysian, Thai, Vietnamese and Filipino customers (see graphic).

He said: “This matches the behaviour that we’ve seen on Wego. Searches for packages are at an all-time low. In the last 24 months, it has dropped to four per cent of all our searches compared to flights and hotels. In the past, it was close to 10 per cent.”

Meanwhile, inbound tour operators who continue to run group tours are putting together off-the-beaten-path itineraries that travellers would find it hard to design themselves. Launched last year, Inspiring Journeys is The Travel Corporation’s new brand that offers a small group (12-16 pax), high-end Australian product.

“It suits a certain attitude to travel, a certain generation of traveller. We know that the market is looking for something more experiential, and the places that we operate in are very remote,” said Tammy Marshall, managing director.



Note: Based on a poll of close to 700 respondents in June 2012. Source: Wego

She added that the brand’s strong focus on Tasmania and the Northern Territory would gel well with second- and third-time travellers from mature markets.

ATE buyer Citystate Travel Singapore chairman, David Ho, said with the perception of Australia becoming an expensive destination, he would be targeting senior travellers and appealing to their sense of well-being. “When they buy Australia, they are also buying the environment and the atmosphere. This year, I am looking at Tasmania, North-

ern Territory and South Australia. They have nature, but are not too strenuous.”

Said Brent Anderson, manager, Singapore, Tourism Australia: “We’ve seen the launch of a lot of luxury concierge-style agencies in Singapore. Our job is to go and find them a product. Last year, we introduced the Luxury Lodges of Australia collection, which is a fantastic premium product that fits well into their niche. Those are the people who still want a (travel consultant).”

TTG Intelligence

Analysis by Murray Bailey

### Qantas Group grows, led by Jetstar International

International seat sales at Qantas Group\* for January-April increased 13% to 4.9 million, performing better than 10% at Cathay Pacific – which has China at its doorstep and where big growth is almost a given – 7% at Singapore Airlines, 3% at Lufthansa and 2% at United Airlines (traffic, not seat sales).

Most of the group’s gain comes from Jetstar International (JSI), which is taking some of Qantas International’s (QI) growth potential. In terms of seat sales, JSI is already 78% the size of QI. However, when it comes to capacity (seats multiplied by distance flown), JSI is only 13% – because QI flies over great distances – but it’s fast catching up.

\*Qantas International, Jetstar International, Jetstar Asia

#### Qantas Group

Airline	Seats sold, x 1,000	Growth,%
Qantas International	2,084	3.2
Jetstar Australia	3,597	7.5
Jetstar Asia	1,169	34.7
Jetstar International	1,619	14.9
Qantas Group	15,558	6.9

Notes: Qantas Group does not consolidate data on a calendar year basis; data shown here are extrapolations by Travel Business Analyst from Qantas base data. Qantas Domestic and Qantas Link are excluded.

### SIA, Qantas lock horns in low-cost arena

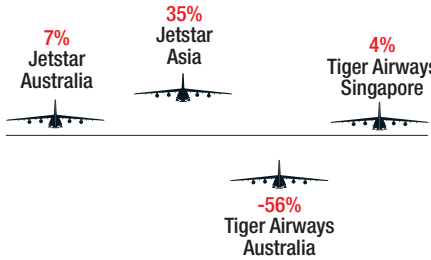
Whether it’s on home turf or in international skies, the low-cost subsidiaries and associates of Qantas and Singapore Airlines (SIA) are competing head-to-head.

Jetstar, the budget offshoot of Qantas, is based in Australia and Singapore. Between January-April, Jetstar Australia sold 7% more seats to reach 3.6 million. At the same time, Jetstar Asia’s seat sales rose 35% but its total volume was only 1.2 million.

It’s the reverse situation at Tiger Airways – a SIA subsidiary – whose Australia operations are still reeling from the impact of its six-week grounding in 2011. Tiger only started separating its Australia and Singapore results in April. In that month, Tiger Airways Australia’s seats declined 56%, while Singapore’s managed only a 4% increase.

Despite Tiger’s setbacks, Jetstar Asia’s total seat sales is still some 10% smaller than Tiger’s Singapore-based airline.

#### Seat sales of budget arms



Note: For Jetstar, figures span January-April 2012; for Tiger Airways, figures are only for April 2012, the first month Tiger posted separate results

Continued from page 1

## Davao’s connections grow

tourists,” said Divinagracia.

Boncato revealed that MASwings is currently looking for a groundhandler in Manado, and this arrangement is expected to be replicated in MASwings’ base in Kota Kinabalu.

“Our target is for one or all these (packages) to be launched within the fourth quarter of this year,” said Boncato. At press time, Shaqui could not be reached for comments.

Meanwhile, Davao’s accessibility is set to improve with the revival of Wings Air’s weekly Davao-Manado service on July 5 and the introduction of SEAir’s twice-daily Manila-Davao flights on July 31.

SEAir’s new Manila-Davao route, which complements its

existing twice-daily Singapore-Manila flights, replaces the direct Singapore-Davao service which Tiger Airways – part owner of SEAir – axed last April due to low load factors.

The return of Wings Air, a subsidiary of Indonesia’s Lion Air, to the Davao-Manado route after four years of absence represents a big gain for Davao, which lost access to Manado when Cebu’s Mid-Sea Express suspended operations on this route last April.

The new air routes “augur well with our efforts of improving the city’s accessibility both for tourism and business purposes,” said Jason Magnaye, head of Davao’s City Tourism Operations Office, who will lead a trade mission to Singapore in October.



Boncato: year-end launch



# New air distribution standards

IATA wants to introduce industry solution that offers more choice, overcoming GDS limitations

By Brian Higgs

## IATA 68TH AGM & WORLD AIR TRANSPORT SUMMIT, BEIJING

IATA plans to unveil new airline distribution standards that will help travel consultants to sell airfares not just by price proposition, but also product differentiation.

IATA says the new standards will allow travel consultants to show and sell more than just standard seats, giving them greater access to airline ancillary products, more choice in the marketplace and a simplified shopping and booking process.

Aleks Popovich, senior vice president, industry distribution & financial services, IATA, said: "At the moment, when a customer goes (directly) to an airline's website, they can see the full product (portfolio) of the airline. The airline is in control of distributing its seats, and the full value items around those seats. Through the GDS,

however, the airline's product is dumbed down. It's simply about the price of the product, so the airline can't really show the travel (consultant) the full richness of its product."

"The vision is for consumers to be able to choose among full products from different airlines whether they look through their mobile phone, whether they go to a travel management company – it won't matter what channel it is. In today's world, they can only shop and compare through an indirect channel on the basis of price."

The new standard, which has been coined New Distribution Capability by IATA, will be presented at the World Passenger Symposium (WPS) in Abu Dhabi in October. The IATA Board of Governors will review the progress of the project in December and set new goals for 2013 to 2016 based on the outcome of the WPS.

The model will be based on

a common technology interface used by the entire distribution stakeholder supply chain, including airlines, travel consultants and GDSs, so that companies willing to make airline products available can do so, and at a lower cost. The new interface will also enable airlines to better identify customers, provide tailored offers and reward them.

"This has got to be a collabora-

tive approach, not just an airline approach. It's got to be a GDS approach, a travel management company approach," said Popovich.

IATA director general & CEO, Tony Tyler, said: "I am confident that the GDSs will join as partners...I am also confident that the new platform will unleash innovation and new entrants that will revolutionise

airline relationships with their customers."

However, Christoph Klenner, secretary general, European Technology and Travel Services Association, the trade body representing GDSs, was reported as saying: "GDSs invest heavily in technology research and development, so the claim that we have not been able to facilitate innovation is baseless."



Popovich: richer product displays

## Latest airline partnerships

• Japan Airlines (JAL) and Malaysia Airlines (MAS) have announced a codeshare deal, effective July 1. From June 12, JAL started marketing MAS-operated flights from Kuala Lumpur to Tokyo (Narita) and Osaka (Kansai), and to other Malaysian points including Kota Kinabalu, Penang, Langkawi, Kuching and Kuantan. JAL will also market MAS-operated flights to regional destinations such as Bangalore, Chennai, Hyderabad, Mumbai, New Delhi and Male. MAS has also placed its flight indicator on JAL-operated flights connecting Tokyo (Narita) to Fukuoka, Nagoya and Sapporo, and nine international cities, including Kuala Lumpur.

• Air China and US-based LCC JetBlue have entered into an agreement to initially offer interline connections between their networks at New York (JFK) and Los Angeles international airports. Subject to government approval, the partnership will be expanded into a codeshare this autumn.

• SriLankan Airlines will join oneworld in late 2013, bringing Kochi, Tiruchirapalli and Thiruvananthapuram – all in Southern India – to the alliance's network. Cathay Pacific will serve as the carrier's sponsor. SriLankan has also agreed in principle to codeshare with oneworld members Royal Jordanian and S7 Airlines, a Russian airline.

## M'sia-Phil seat crunch alleviated

By S Puvaneswary

**KUALA LUMPUR** The commencement of new flights between Malaysia and the Philippines is providing a much-welcome seat capacity boost, with the latest development being Airphil Express' thrice-weekly services connecting the two capitals (*TTG Asia e-Daily*, June 21, 2012).

Airphil Express' flights, which began on June 21, will provide relief for Manila-bound clients, particularly during the peak outbound travel period in November and December, said SAF Maju Travel & Tours manager, Prince Mahmud Doel.

He said: "In the past, we had to send some clients (to the Philippines) through Singapore as it was impossible to get seats out of Kuala Lumpur."

He added that the company would await customer feedback on Airphil Express' services before deciding how aggressively it would promote the airline.

Airphil Express' entry on the Manila-Kuala Lumpur-Manila route has increased inventory by an additional 540 seats weekly. The airline utilises Airbus A320 aircraft, which offers 180 seats in economy class configuration.

PYO Travel senior manager, sales, distribution & global support, John Chan, said the added seat capacity had prompted the company to intensify its marketing and promotional efforts in the Philippines and to develop more comprehensive short-term packages to Clark and Manila.

Two other airlines plying the Kuala Lumpur-Manila route are Cebu Pacific Air, which provides 11 weekly flights, and Malaysia Airlines, which has 21 weekly flights. Both airlines offer a total of 7,513

seats weekly.

A source from Malaysia Airports Holdings said Zest Air had also engaged the airport operator in discussions to start operations between Manila and Kuala Lumpur, with the possibility of launching flights within this year. The source added that Cebu Pacific Air was also evaluating routes to secondary destinations in Malaysia such as Langkawi, Penang and Kuching.

Airphil Express' new flights come on the back of Philippines' AirAsia introduction of daily flights between Clark and Kuala Lumpur on June 9. This service, departing 15.15 from Clark to Kuala Lumpur and 19.50 for Kuala Lumpur back to Clark, complements AirAsia's existing Kuala Lumpur-Clark-Kuala Lumpur morning departures out of both cities, which have been in operation since 2005.

The improved air connectivity between the two countries was set into motion by Malaysian tourism minister, Ng Yen Yen, who met with Philippine tourism secretary, Ramon R Jimenez Jr, and senior officials from five airlines in February to discuss collaboration opportunities. The carriers had agreed to lend support to promote bilateral tourism by increasing their flight frequencies.

Tourism Malaysia's deputy director-general, Azizhan Noordin, said: "Improved air accessibility from the Philippines to Kuala Lumpur will encourage more tourist arrivals from the Philippines and help achieve Tourism Malaysia's target of 400,000 Philippine arrivals this year."

Last year, Malaysia saw a 26.5 per cent reduction in tourist arrivals from the Philippines, compared to 486,790 visitors in 2010.



Chan: stepping up marketing



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## Tipsheet

Robin Yap, MD, The Travel Corporation Singapore, dishes out eight tips for a good holiday; Adrian Caruso, founder and CEO of Fastrack Australia, on why agencies need an email marketing strategy

## Hot Deals

Insight Vacations offers discounts on India (below) and Nepal packages; Shanghai JC Mandarin features a Great Saver package for stays until December 31; IHG rolls out cluster MICE offer in Vietnam, Cambodia



Insight Vacations

## Hot Moves

Aireen Omar helms AirAsia Berhad as CEO; PATA appoints Ben Montgomery and Ivy Chee as regional directors of Greater Mekong and East Asia respectively; Qantas Airways CEO and MD, Alan Joyce, is named IATA chairman

## Poll

For which business purpose do you most often use social media?

- Connecting with customers
- Marketing products
- As a sales platform
- Maintaining an online presence

### CORRECTION

In *TTG Asia* June 15, we omitted Panorama Destination executive director's name, Achmad Sufyani. We also wrote that Panorama Destination's revenue fell 2.6 per cent in 1Q2012 from the same period in 2010. It should be 2011. We are sorry for the errors.

# How do you get to 2020?



While NTOs paint 2020 outcomes, few flesh out how they intend for the trade to get there.

Gracia Chiang  
Deputy Group Editor

I'VE just returned from ATE in Perth, where it is clear that both the Australian public and private sectors are taking big strides towards growth aspirations as part of the country's Tourism 2020 strategy.

2020 will indeed be the year to watch, with several destinations in this region gearing up to position themselves as veritable playgrounds for quality visitors.

In Malaysia, tourism has been identified as a key driver of transforming the country into a high-income nation by 2020. To grow arrivals and receipts, the creation of more luxury products such as upscale accommodation and international festivals is being encouraged.

Singapore, too, has unveiled Tourism Compass 2020, which will see it focusing on four broad areas: sustaining a pipeline of original tourism experiences, rejuvenating existing products, upgrading the industry's capabilities and harnessing the collective energies of Asia.

Which destination will emerge as the front runner?

Granted, it may not exactly be a fair comparison, but Asian countries could take a leaf out

of Australia's book. As part of its 2020 analysis, the Australian government found that an additional 56,000-152,000 jobs will need to be filled; 40,000-70,000 new rooms are required; aviation capacity needs to grow by 40-50 per cent and 23-30 per cent for international and domestic routes respectively; and only a third of the country's tourism operators have online booking and payment facilities. As such, it has drawn up an action plan to address each of these gaps.

Tourism Australia has also launched country-specific 2020 plans for the two biggest outbound markets in Asia – China and India (see page 2). How many Asian destinations have a 2020 strategy, much less a comprehensive one for key visitor sources that includes developing an online tool for tourism operators to take online bookings and payments?

While NTOs often paint pictures of what tourism outcomes in 2020 will look like, it is just as important that they flesh out how they intend for the trade to get there.

Travel experts would also do well to chart their own 2020

roadmap. Where do you see yourself at the end of the decade?

As the trend shifts from destination-based to experience-based travel, the future market for travel consultants is likely to be about niches and specialisation, according to Amadeus' *Travel Gold Rush 2020* report. Among its recommendations was for travel professionals to become 'lifestyle managers', providing higher-margin, tailored services to consumers.

Indeed, many companies have already begun targeting specific customer segments such as female backpackers or serious foodies, but so many others have not.

In Australia's case, tour operators have aligned themselves with the NTO's initiatives to home in on high-spending visitors such as golf groups from China and Indian incentives, while Asian travel consultants selling the destination have moved towards offering concierge-style services.

For any long-term national strategy to succeed, both the government and the trade need to work hand in hand, with the former handing the latter the tools to get started if necessary.

## Most commented on www.ttgasia.com

### It's time for tourism in ASEAN to grow up

Willem Niemeijer, CEO and co-founder of Khiri Travel, wrote an opinion piece about the need for ASEAN tourism to be more visionary in order to meet future challenges.

Andrew Wood, president of SKAL International Thailand, said: "Probably the best piece I've read on this topic – focused and clear. The AEC2015 represents the most unique opportunity for ASEAN tourism; we hear the gripes about what will be lost to individual stakeholders but the glass is half full!"

US-based Janet Harmon praised the article's clarity and its ideas, while urging for more cross-border tourism. "As a seasoned traveller, the ease and convenience of European border crossings have allowed me to enjoy (the countries)," she said.

### Enforcement is key to deter illegal tour guides

The threat of unlicensed tour guides sully Singapore's image continues to draw a flurry of comments from our readers.

Kenneth Tan from Singapore said: "In an industry that has oversupply of tour guides, it is already quite challenging without the illegal guides. Local agencies caught employing illegal tour guides should have their license suspended."

Meanwhile, Mong See Kim suggested using the Singapore Visitor Centre at Changi Airport as an enforcement station so that "officers can react fast when they receive tip-offs".

### International hoteliers betting big on China

In reference to last issue's feature on hotel chains launching Chinese-specific brands, Thailand-based Kevin said: "I heard that Howard Johnson – a mid-market US motel franchise – is very successful in China as an upscale brand because the Chinese like American brands."

### Indonesia sees positive arrivals amid slowdown

Gerald van Amerongen from Bali-based Happy Trails agreed with the approach of Indonesian minister of tourism and creative economy, Mari Elka Pangestu, to balance quantity with quality tourism. He said: "Finally a minister who understands the hospitality industry in Indonesia."



TTG Travel Trade Publishing is a business group of TTG Asia Media

### EDITORIAL

**Karen Yue**  
Group Editor (karen.yue@ttgasia.com)

**Gracia Chiang**  
Deputy Group Editor (gracia.chiang@ttgasia.com)

**Brian Higgs**  
Editor, TTG Asia Online (brian.higgs@ttgasia.com)

**Linda Haden**  
Senior Reporter (linda.haden@ttgasia.com)

**Liang Xinyi, Jayne Tay**  
Sub Editors  
(liang.xinyi@ttgasia.com, jayne.tay@ttgasia.com)

**Mimi Hudoyo**  
Editor, Indonesia (idmfasia@cbn.net.id)

**S Puvaneswary**  
Editor, Malaysia/Brunei (puvanes@ttgasia.com)

**Sim Kok Chwee**  
Correspondent-at-large (aviasian.images@gmail.com)

**Timothy France, Chamsai Jotisalikorn (Chami)**  
Correspondents, Thailand  
(timothy.france@ttgasia.com, chamsai@fastmail.fm)

### Marianne Carandang, Rosa Ocampo

Correspondents, The Philippines  
(mcarandang@gmail.com, rosa.ocampo@gmail.com)

**Prudence Lui**  
Correspondent, Hong Kong  
(prului@yahoo.com)

**Patricia Wee**  
Correspondent, Shanghai, China  
(wee.patricia1@yahoo.com)

**Glenn Smith**  
Correspondent, Taiwan  
(glenn.smith@ttgasia.com)

**Shekhar Niyogi**  
Chief Correspondent, India  
(shekhar.niyogi@ttgasia.com)

**Feizal Samath**  
Correspondent, Sri Lanka (feizalsam@gmail.com)

**Redmond Sia, Tan Kok Yong**  
Creative Designers

**Lina Tan**  
Editorial Assistant

### SALES & MARKETING

**Michael Chow**  
Group Publisher (michael.chow@ttgasia.com)

**Katherine Ng**  
Associate Publisher (katherine.ng@ttgasia.com)

### Marisa Chen

Senior Business Manager (marisa.chen@hk.china.com)

**Karen Cheung**  
Business Manager (karen.cheung@hk.china.com)

**Jonathan Yap**  
Business Manager (jonathan.yap@ttgasia.com)

**Cheryl Tan**  
Corporate Marketing Manager  
(cheryl.tan@ttgasia.com)

**Tan Ee Hiang**  
Marketing Executive (tan.ee.hiang@ttgasia.com)

**Cheryl Lim**  
Advertisement Administration Manager  
(cheryl.lim@ttgasia.com)

**Carol Cheng**  
Assistant Manager Administration and Marketing  
(carol.cheng@hk.china.com)

### PUBLISHING SERVICES

**Tony Yeo**  
Division Manager (tony.yeo@ttgasia.com)

**Agnes Loy**  
Senior Production Executive (agnes.loy@ttgasia.com)

**Nancy Lee**  
Desktop Publishing Executive (nancy.lee@ttgasia.com)

**Carol Wong**  
Circulation Executive (carol.wong@ttgasia.com)

### TTG ASIA MEDIA

**Darren Ng**  
Managing Director (darren.ng@ttgasia.com)

**Raini Hamdi**  
Senior Editor (raini.hamdi@ttgasia.com)

### OFFICES

**SINGAPORE** 1 Science Park Road  
#04-07 The Capricorn, Singapore Science Park II  
Singapore 117528  
Tel: (65) 6395-7575  
Fax: (65) 6536-0896  
contact@ttgasia.com;  
www.ttgasia.com

**HONG KONG** 11/F ING Tower  
308-320 Des Voeux Road, Central, Hong Kong  
Tel: (852) 2237-7174  
Fax: (852) 2806-0646



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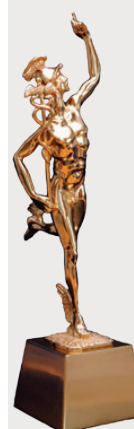
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### Travel Hall of Fame

The Travel Hall of Fame, displayed in the Raffles Hotel Museum on the third level of Raffles Hotel Singapore, showcases accolades, artefacts and memorabilia of the region's most exceptional travel organisations.

Since 2002, luminaries who have won the prestigious TTG Travel Award at least 10 consecutive times for the same award title have been honoured in the Travel Hall of Fame.

Singapore Airlines and Singapore Changi Airport are the Travel Hall of Fame's pioneering honorees, having been voted by Asia-Pacific's travel trade as Best Airline of the Year and Best Airport of the Year respectively, for more than a decade. Joining this elite family are Hertz Asia Pacific, Star Cruises, Royal Cliff Beach Resort Pattaya, Abacus International, SilkAir and Lotte Tour





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- Best Western Travel Card cannot be exchanged for cash or any other form of payment.
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## MYTHBUSTER SIMON SAYS

In this column series, Travelport's president and managing director, Asia-Pacific, **Simon Nowroz**, examines assumptions about travel distribution

**Myth**  
Apps are for geeks, not travel consultants

**Fact** When you look around at the world today, it's clear that great software companies build with their customers in mind. But the most successful companies push the boundaries in enabling their developer partners to build on top of their platform.

Just take the iPhone and Apple's App Store for instance. Of course, some apps are built by Apple, but the vast majority isn't. The iPhone itself may be fantastic but are we really attached to the device or to the apps?

The travel industry too is evolving – travel providers want to sell the way they want and travel ex-

perts want to book the way they wish. To enable this, GDSs need to get smarter and look at providing flexible access to content and services through an open platform, creating a multi-channel experience so services can be delivered on multiple devices and platforms.

For example, Travelport has invited the developer community to create new solutions utilising our Universal API. This allows third-party IT specialists to reuse the core technology in innovative ways to meet the needs of travel agency customers and, ultimately, the end traveller.

A great case study is an app Car Pilots developed for our Universal Desktop platform. By coding to the Universal API, it integrates a car transfer booking application into the desktop workflow, enabling travel consultants to seamlessly book ground transfers.

Having an open platform is key to our future and the changing needs of the travel agency business. It's all about harnessing the best possible new ideas and creativity to make travel content available to the widest possible audience.

And that's something I believe is a win-win scenario for all of us.

## TTG Travel Pursuits

Compiled by The Fox

### QUIZ

1. Don Mueang is the name of Bangkok's newest airport. True or false?
2. In which country are both AirAsia and Jetstar planning to start new airline subsidiaries this year?
3. Is InterContinental's regional office based in Hong Kong, Singapore or Sydney?
4. What are the initials of the metro/underground railway names in Hong Kong and Singapore?
5. What is the name of the US motel group that Accor is selling?



1. False. The city's main international airport has been Suvarnabhumi since 2006
2. Japan. Jetstar Japan, in cooperation with Japan Airlines, is due to start in July. AirAsia Japan, in cooperation with All Nippon Airways, will launch in August
3. Singapore
4. MTR for Hong Kong, started in 1979; MRT for Singapore, started in 1987
5. Motel 6, to Blackstone

Illustration by renjith krishnan

## Humour

- 1 What is the name of the hospitality company that allows you to change rooms in your hotel and choose any category? Move-N-Pick.
- 2 If Singapore Airlines buys Garuda's budget carrier Citilink, will the latter's name change to SinCiti?
- 3 If Los Angeles' Academy of Television Arts & Sciences starts an airline awards category, will it be called EmmyRates?
- 4 If All Nippon Airways (ANA) makes profits for two years running, will it change its name to AnaGain?

## A-Zs of Successful Agencies



In this regular column, Adrian Caruso, founder and CEO of TA Fastrack Australia, dishes out advice to travel experts. A former travel agency and hotel owner/operator, Caruso now coaches travel, tourism and hospitality businesses throughout the region.

I often tell travel consultants: The more you narrow your focus, the more you expand your market.

The concept of niche marketing is often misunderstood. It is a way of helping you focus on locating new clients, not a set of restrictions on your business offerings. Niche marketing is not necessarily about gearing your entire business to a particular type of travel, but rather segmenting your marketing efforts to focus on particular groups. Many travel consultants avoid it out of fear of having to turn away business outside the chosen niche or being too closely identified with a niche.

The lesson of effective niche marketing is this: It is important to be clear about the market you are addressing and to address that market clearly. This might require you to have one marketing brochure for adventure travel, one for senior escorted tours and one for golf travel. You do not have to devote your travel business exclusively to any of

these niches, but you can devote some of your marketing tactics to these niches. Then, choose the appropriate marketing tools and pitch for the market you are addressing.

When you focus on a niche, you very quickly become an expert. You will be able to speak with authority on your topic and marketing will be a matter of speaking directly to those who share an affinity for your niche. As an expert in a niche, your ability to generate referrals will be amplified as your customers will tell others interested in similar travel experiences. You will also develop deeper and richer relationships with suppliers as they come to understand your devotion to their area of business.

Another advantage is the way in which it helps you locate potential clients. When you are marketing generalised travel, everyone is your potential market and you lack focus. When your market is adventure travellers, however, you know where to find them. Once you have located your

## Niche Marketing

market, it is much less costly to reach out to them as opposed to using much less efficient shotgun approaches.

A niche will assist your other marketing efforts. Within a niche market, your website or blog can more easily stand out as authoritative on a topic and become a favourite of the search engines. For example, compare a search for 'travel agency' and its 32,700,000 million results (google.com.sg) with a search on 'driving tours of civil war battlefields' and its 900,000 results.

Finally, niche marketing can place you squarely in the middle of the type of travel which you are most passionate about. Far too many travel consultants spend the majority of their time planning travel for which they have no affinity or expertise.

Do yourself a favour and begin to search out a niche area of practice. Done well, you will be happier for the effort. Hint: It is also very profitable as you can charge more in service fees by being a specialist.



**Jan Smits**  
**CEO, Asia, Middle East,**  
**Africa, InterContinental**  
**Hotels Group (IHG)**

He continues to rise at IHG, with Middle East/Africa under his wings aside from Asia/Australasia since last July. Smits does it through being competitive but, more importantly, with humility and by being intuitive of people and diverse cultures. **Raini Hamdi** gives insights into the CEO

**What's it like having a bigger role covering AMEA smack in an Arab Spring?**

The region has its volatility. Political or natural catastrophes happen. Last year, we had two earthquakes, in New Zealand and Japan, the Arab Spring, floods in Thailand...but that's business. Things will happen but it's how you react to these things that is important.

**You hold a Dutch passport, grew up in Zimbabwe, Borneo, Singapore, lived all over the world – how does this diverse background shape you as a leader?**

Living all over the world gives you cultural sensitivity, so you're very 'aware' how individuals behave, what's acceptable to them, even if you don't know sometimes that you are aware.

It makes you respectful of people and different cultures, so you don't, for example, ask for a conference call with the team on Friday/Saturday (weekend in the Middle East) or Saturday/Sunday (weekend in Asia) – there are enough days to meet between Monday and Thursday instead.

Then there's that whole piece about coaching and mentoring people. In my early days, I watched how elders in the village take the time to teach the kids, how one generation passes on

the mantle to the next generation. Intuitively as a leader you know that that is a responsibility. You're only as good as the people you have and driving the right people in the right jobs with a clear strategy is how you get an outcome.

Leaders need to articulate and communicate the outcome they want, which will be clear if they take the time to think about it.

This is why I actually have 'think days' in my calendar. Then, once you've articulated the objective, step back and help people achieve the outcome but don't tell them how to do it. It's not about making the decisions for them, but helping them find the answers for themselves – so the old theory on teaching them to fish rather than giving them fish. As the region gets bigger, it has

too much time thinking about how to improve the business. It should go hand in hand.

I like mind maps, so I draw and think.

Thinking is hard, and leaders don't spend enough time thinking. Sure you can do it on the plane or while jogging, but on planes, especially through different time zones and jet lag, your clarity is not there.

are more upscale – close of half of InterContinental hotels in the world are in the region. There is heavy F&B content. The owner profile is similar – more high net worth individuals, fewer institutional investors and the labour markets are cross-regional, unlike UK hotels, which are run mainly by people from UK, or Australia, run mainly by Australians.

There's also a lot of Middle East investment going into Asia, even Australia. So, when you look at the owners, customers, business models, people (labour), Middle East/Africa have more similarities to Asia/Australasia than to Europe.

**Are Middle East owners similar to Asian owners and are they getting younger like them too?**

Culturally they are different but needs are the same – it's all about relationships. Institutional owners are different compared with these high net worth families where one-on-one relationship with the management company counts.

And yes, I used to be the youngest guy on the table (Smits started his career with IHG in 2002), now I'm the oldest (laughs). But it's exciting to see the next generation come through. They are astute business people who have been mentored by their family. They are ready to grow the empire and they come with a fresh pair of eyes. It's fantastic. And our customers too are getting younger.

**What is your biggest achievement since taking on the AMEA role?**

Setting up the framework on how to work the region and doing it differently. I have a diverse management team – leaders all over the place and they are not in one office – and we're using technology to effectively manage the business. We only get together four times a year; there are different technologies now to meet, but it takes discipline and focus, for example, when you've set aside time for a conference call, you have to be really present. It's the same principle as giving quality time and not quantity time with your family.

**What drives you in this role?**

I love the diversity of the region. Cultures always excite me.

The region is also exciting. Yes, it's had its challenges but look at the development – I was in Saudi Arabia for the first time, look at the infrastructure that is going in!

I'm a competitive person, and the other thing that drives me is people – seeing people and owners who work with us grow.

# Intuitive Smits

become more important that we ensure everyone has the space to grow and run the business.

**Tell me about your 'think days'.**

I lock out a day in a month at least, where I don't take appointments and spend time looking at where we are and what's happening. For that full day, no one comes near me and I don't even turn on the email. The problem with email is you turn it on at 8am and your blood pressure goes up (chuckles), so I turn it on at 4pm on my 'think day'.

**What do you think about?**

I don't have an agenda, but I jot down a couple of points to think through. I think not only about the business, but how I'm going myself, areas I want to improve on. As a leader, you need to grow and develop, so that you can help the business and others, but we spend

**Give me an example of a great idea from one of your 'think days' recently.**

Sometimes you just get great clarity from it. I know some of my leaders say they have been at the receiving end of Jan's 'think day' (chuckles) when I start going 'What about this?, What about that?'. I've to be mindful as that can be negative, so I write things down and at the right time pull them out.

**What's the biggest issue in AMEA that keeps you thinking?**

How you attract, retain and develop your talent is going to be critical. At the end of the day, your hotels in India need to be run by Indians – you need a diversity of talent, so you need to develop them. India's a great example, it's got 150,000 rooms, 200,000 rooms or something under construction – just think the multiples and where you are going to get the talent, with the call centres, etc, also trying to attract the same pool.

This is why I'm getting my head around to leveraging on the people we have in AMEA, how we can capture Indians, Indonesians, Filipinos, etc, working in InterContinental or Crowne Plaza hotels in the Middle East, if they want to leave, to work with us in Asia or vice versa.

This is why putting Middle East/Africa as part of Asia rather than UK or Europe makes sense. Geographically, it is a wide spread, covering 50 countries (40 of which IHG operates in), but the two businesses are similar. Eighty per cent is managed (the rest franchise). The hotels





# Asian port encounter

	Which is the most desirable port of call in Asia?	Which is the most challenging port of call in Asia?	If you had your way, where is your next port of call in Asia?
<div><div>Royal Caribbean International</div><div>Kelvin Tan, regional director, Asia-Pacific, Royal Caribbean Cruises</div><div><div>Voyager of the Seas</div></div></div>	<p>There are many desirable and attractive ports in Asia. Just to name a few, based on our guest ratings, popular destinations in North Asia include Jeju, Kagoshima, Kobe and Okinawa, while in South-east Asia, Halong Bay, Danang, Phuket, Bali and Penang.</p> <p>Most of these destinations offer great port and tourism infrastructure, as well as impressive cultural, historical and scenic attractions and shopping and gastronomic experiences.</p>	<p>Some cities have great tourism appeal but their lack of port infrastructure, such as a cruise terminal located in or near these destinations, have prevented our ships from calling. Seoul, Bangkok and Hanoi are examples.</p>	<div></div>
<div><div>Silversea</div><div>Melvyn Yap, regional director, Asia, Silversea</div><div><div>Silver Whisper</div></div></div>	<p>For turnaround ports, i.e. Singapore, Hong Kong, Tokyo, Bangkok and Shanghai, we desire good air connectivity to the rest of the world.</p> <p>For ports of call, there should be decent infrastructure to support the berthing of a cruise vessel and enough attractions nearby. There should also be a convenient transportation network.</p> <p>Taking into consideration of the above factors, berthing in Singapore and Hong Kong are equally desirable.</p>	<p>Ports in India are the most difficult as the immigration, customs, port operators, the tourism board, etc, do not seem to communicate with each other.</p> <div><div>New Delhi, India</div></div>	<p>We made port calls in Myanmar in the past, but had to stop due to political reasons. We hope to return to Myanmar, as it is a beautiful country.</p> <p>There are also many wonderful islands in Japan, but it is a case of too many destinations and too little time. As much as we would want to squeeze everything into an itinerary, our Asian clients have short vacation durations.</p>
<div><div>Costa Cruises</div><div>Buhdy Bok, vice president, Pacific Asia and China, Costa Cruises</div><div><div>Costa Victoria</div></div></div>	<p>Asia is such a diverse region that there are many ports that we can define as most desirable.</p> <p>For nice beaches, there are Kagoshima, Wakayama, Langkawi, Kuantan, Penang, Malacca and Sanya. For cultural experiences, Penang and Fukuoka are prime choices. <i>Costa Victoria</i> offers itineraries from four to seven nights to these destinations.</p>	<p>There isn't a port of call in Asia that we consider challenging. However, we value ports that allow our ships to berth without too much navigational difficulty, and have a terminal that is functionally efficient and with a good land transportation network.</p> <p>Costa's presence in Asia is growing bigger each year, and we face infrastructure restrictions that prevent us from calling at some ports that can handle only smaller ships. We encourage expansion among terminals to accommodate bigger and better ships.</p>	<p>We are always exploring new ports as well as seasonal destinations. For example, Yeosu, which is currently hosting the 2012 World Expo; the tropical paradise of Hososhima/ Miyazaki; Osaka; Wakayama; and the Kanto region.</p> <p>We would also love to explore more destinations, such as Bali and the Komodo Island in the near future.</p> <p>The only limitation to Costa's expansion is port infrastructure, and we will continue to extend our itineraries as and when ports address size and capacity issues.</p>
<div><div>Star Cruises</div><div>Michael Goh, senior vice president, sales, Star Cruises</div><div><div>SuperStar Virgo</div></div></div>	<p>Popular Asian hotspots include Redang, Penang, Langkawi, Malacca, Kuala Lumpur, Phuket, Koh Samui, Bangkok and Krabi. These exotic destinations have a fascinating blend of culture, history and adventure.</p> <p>Redang is an all-time favourite, made famous by the Hong Kong movie <i>Summer Holiday</i>. It has pristine beaches for diving and a colourful underwater life for snorkelling.</p>	<p>Although Redang is popular among both local and overseas passengers, <i>SuperStar Virgo</i> can only call at this port in the summer from April to September each year due to the north-east monsoon season.</p> <div><div>Bangkok, Thailand</div></div>	<div><div>No answer given.</div><div><div>Jeju, South Korea</div></div></div>
<div><div>Fukuoka, Japan</div></div>			<div><div>Redang, Malaysia</div></div>



**S** While there are no lack of appealing Asian destinations, port infrastructure is stopping cruise lines from featuring a wider range of itineraries. Compiled by **Linda Haden** and **Jayne Tay**

**What are you looking for in a potential port of call?**

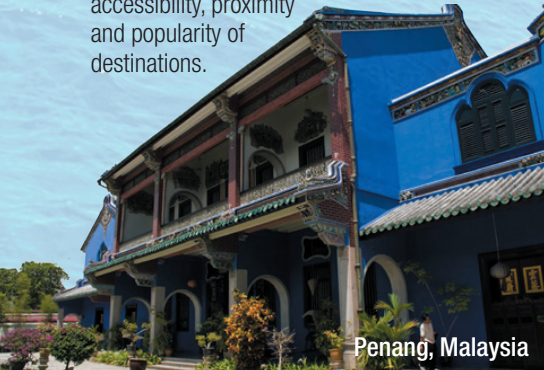
Correct and adequate infrastructure that can support over 3,000 guests and 1,200 crew at the same time. Other important factors to consider are visa policies and immigration procedures.



Inle Lake, Myanmar

As Silversea operates smaller cruise vessels, there are not as many prerequisites as a big ship would need. Having said that, it is important to have good port infrastructure so that our guests are allowed to go through usually restricted port areas without hassle. Our guests also appreciate if we can run our own complimentary shuttle buses to town, such as in Phuket and Jakarta, where these were not permitted. Our guests had to take local taxis that charged high prices.

Our concerns are infrastructure, accessibility, proximity and popularity of destinations.

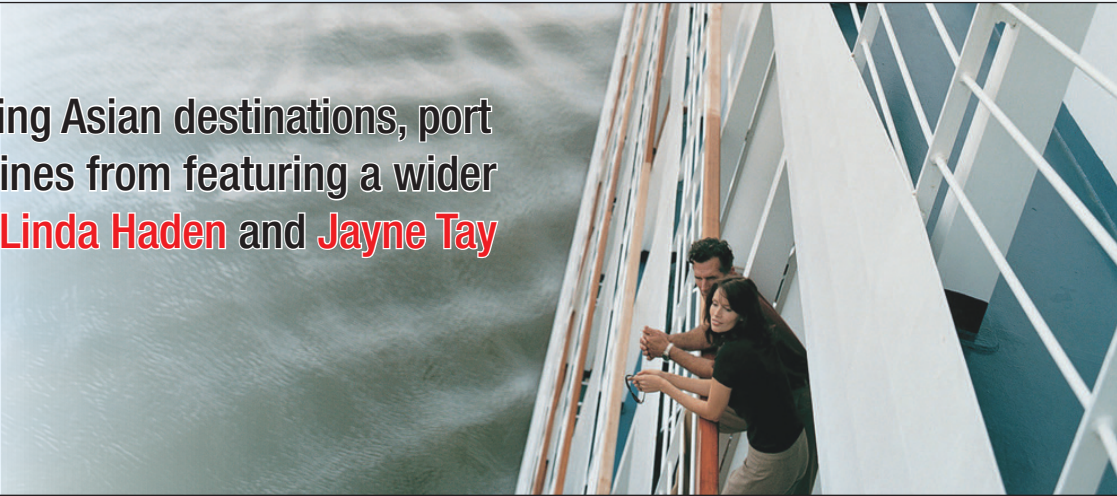


Penang, Malaysia

Factors are key tourist attractions, good infrastructure, extensive air, sea and land connectivity, and great convenience based on visa exemption for international guests. For example, Malaysian ports practise 72-hour visa-free policy for some nationalities.



Yangon, Myanmar



Silversea Cruises



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\*2-night cruise to Malacca.      \*Ports-of-call differ for these 3-night cruises.

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\*5-night cruise with additional port-of-call at Langkawi.

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# Risk of getting crowd

Hotels across Asia are experiencing a spurt in bookings through brand websites, OTA and GDSs, all of which are fast eclipsing conventional distribution channels in importance.

Hong Kong's The Peninsula Hotels director of marketing, Sherona Lau, said: "Compared to five years ago, we've seen a 100 per cent jump in online bookings through various sources, including our own website and OTAs."

Aston International Indonesia vice president sales and marketing, Norbert Vas, said room production from Aston's website had doubled in the last two years, and now accounts for around 20 per cent of the group's business.

At Hong Kong-listed Kosmopolito Hotels International, over 30 per cent of total business is currently booked electronically, mostly through OTAs, said senior vice president sales and marketing, Philip Schaez.

He said: "We have a group-wide agreement with Sabre SynXis, and we are going to revamp our entire website presence with stronger emphasis on organic search, complemented by our active and strategic pay-per-click campaigns with the goal of increasing traffic to our website and booking conversion." The company recently appointed a corporate director of distribu-

tion to drive these efforts.

In India, almost 28 per cent of Marriott's total revenue in 2011 was also from electronic/online distribution channels.

"Initiatives to explore newer points of sale and working with newer partners on real-time inventory and price management systems have been key areas of our efforts," said John Woolley, area director of sales and marketing, Marriott International.

It's a similar story at The Lee-la Palaces, Hotels and Resorts, which gets a third of its bookings from electronic/online sources. Some 20 per cent originates from the GDS, seven to eight per cent from OTAs, and five per cent from the group's website.

### Shifting powers of negotiation

Aston's Vas added: "Years ago we would contract more than 200 per cent of a hotel's inventory into allotments, but we don't do that anymore."

He went as far to say that chains "did not even need the GDS anymore", explaining that with brand websites and OTAs, the playing field has been levelled even for smaller, independent hotels.

Santika Indonesia Hotels & Resorts corporate director of e-commerce, Andy Khen, said: "Hotels have more bargaining power now. With so many mid-



**Sean Seah**  
Vice president for e-business, loyalty and partner marketing, Langham Hospitality Group



**Norbert Vas**  
Vice president sales and marketing Aston International



**Paul Leung**  
Managing director Holiday World Tours

dlemen, and such tight competition among them, hotels are at an advantage when it comes to negotiating rates and allotments.

"Hotels have started to focus on their online distribution because of advantages including low cost, full control on rates and allotments and a wider market. And of course, online distribution works 24 hours, seven days a week."

Malaysia's Swiss-Garden International Hotels, Resorts & Inns, too, noted that traditional room allotments had given way to real-time inventory management.

"Room allotments will invariably require an auto-release clause. As with the extranet, it is based on real-time availability. We also offer free sell to wholesalers and (travel consultants) whenever necessary," said Kem

Siew, general manager-sales and marketing.

Philippine-based Afro Asian World Events president, Angel Bognot, observed that contracts were more temporal now. "The business is more wait and see... depending on the conditions, contracted rates for wholesalers do change and rates differ from what are being offered to OTAs."

A positive sign is that a growing number of wholesalers have started to use technology to their advantage, said hoteliers.

"They have direct access to real-time availability from suppliers at a contracted percentage off best available rates which they distribute through their partner network. This is truly a win-win situation for all parties: the wholesaler, supplier and end consumer," said Kosmopolito's Schaez.

### Money to be made

Unlike air seats, hoteliers interviewed said they were continuing to pay out commissions for rooms, with OTAs cashing out at the higher end of the scale.

"Over the years, commissions have increased from minimum 10 per cent to maximum 25 per cent," said Vandana Dutta, director-business development, The Claridges New Delhi.

Swiss-Garden International's Siew concurred: "Commissions have increased but they are in line with production."

Kosmopolito's Schaez explained: "We are happy to pay commissions to travel partners who are able to assist us with our marketing initiatives into segments we are not able to capture through our own sales and distribution networks."

Said Subhash Goyal, presi-

## Online hotel bookings in Asia-Pacific

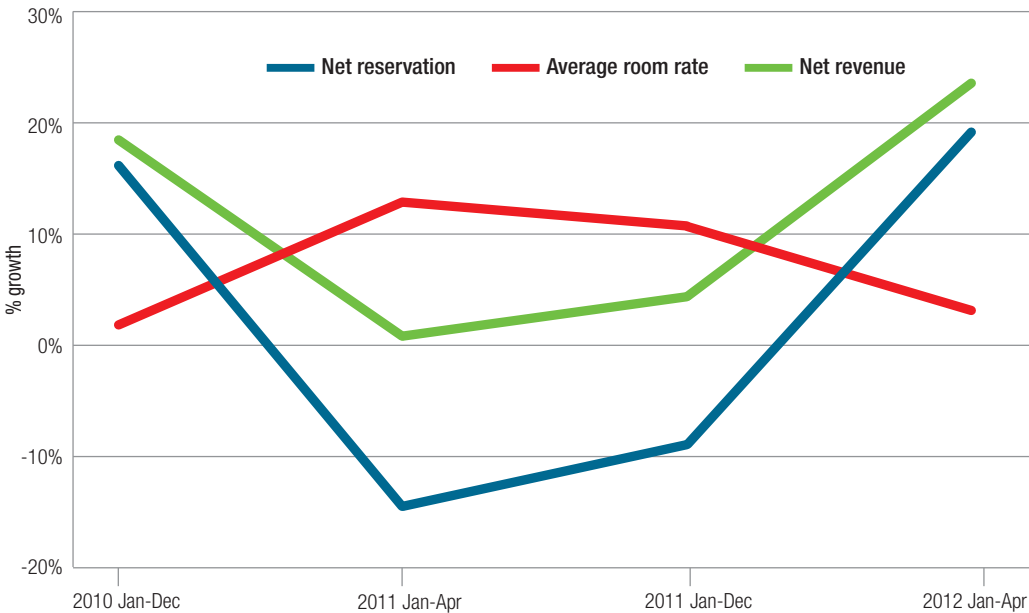
Analysis by Murray Bailey

Pegasus Solutions reports a big increase in leisure-focused ADS hotel bookings in Asia-Pacific for January to April (19%). This, however, may be a correction as it follows a 15% fall in the same period last year.

Average room rate still lags bookings growth (3%), which may indicate resistance in the market to rate increases. But it also follows a sizeable growth last year during the same period (13%).

Overall revenue looks comfortable, growing near 24%. That compares with just 1% during the same period last year.

Leisure-focused ADS\* channel results



	2010 Jan-Dec	2011 Jan-Apr	2011 Jan-Dec	2012 Jan-Apr
Net reservation	16.2%	-14.5%	-8.9%	19.2%
Average room rate	1.8%	12.9%	10.7%	3.1%
Net revenue	18.5%	0.8%	4.4%	23.6%

\*Alternative distribution system (ADS) channel, which is used mostly for leisure travel. This consists of purely Internet bookings, including non-GDS online third-party channels or OTAs primarily used by consumers. Notes: Includes Africa. Source: Pegasus Solutions

## Expedia room sales

1Q2012

	Growth %
Transactions, mn	18.1
Gross bookings, US\$m	15.4
Per transaction, US\$	-2.3
Roomnights, mn	24

Expedia's 50/50 JV with AirAsia helped produce a 27% increase in Expedia's roomnight sales in 1Q2012, compared with 24% growth outside the JV (started July 2011). In 2011, Expedia's roomnight growth with the JV was 21% in 4Q and 19% in 3Q.

Elsewhere at Expedia in 1Q2012, gross bookings increased 15% to US\$8.4 billion, but per transaction bookings fell 2% to US\$417. Roomnight sales increased 24% to 23 million.

27%  
Growth in Expedia-AirAsia's roomnight sales in 1Q2012

21%  
Growth in Expedia-AirAsia's roomnight sales in 4Q2011

19%  
Growth in Expedia-AirAsia's roomnight sales in 3Q2011

Source: company; some calculations by Travel Business Analyst



# ed out

As hotels increase their reliance on online channels, will there be room to grow for wholesalers and retailers? By **Mimi Hudoyo, N. Nithiyananthan, Prudence Lui, Divya Kaul & Marianne Carandang**

dent, Indian Association of Tour Operators: “Even though travel portals and websites have become stronger and are witnessing an increase in number of bookings, travel (consultants) cannot be ignored. Their role is as important as earlier. That’s why hotels have maintained minimum 10 per cent commission to travel (consultants).”

However, he urged travel retailers to become tech savvy, in order not to “lose business”.

## Remaining relevant

Wholesalers need to enhance their extranet to be in line with current trends, said Swiss-Gar-

den International’s Siew.

Peninsula’s Lau pointed out that distribution partners needed to make more effort in upgrading their services. “We would like to see greater opportunities for upselling among key players. The industry is still defined by price-point sensitivity, and we see an opportunity as the market matures.”

“Distribution channels need to generate good amount of business regularly through different promotions, packages, etc, in order to remain competitive,” added The Claridges’ Dutta.

Tauzia Hotel Management corporate director of sales and

marketing, Antoine Villette, said while brick-and-mortar channels would “still have the market of those who prefer people-to-people contact”, they would have to explore other means of distribution or risk “disappearing”.

Aston’s Vas foresees that “more and more retailers and wholesalers will either start their own OTAs or become niche operators”.

Holiday World Tours Hong Kong, managing director, Paul Leung agreed. “People are booking online and hotels are going directly to guests through their websites...We should diversify and specialise in other services or products that others don’t have.

## The good news

While hotels continue to pursue aggressive online strategies, many are not putting their eggs in one basket.

In fact, in emerging markets such as India and the Philippines, the market is still bright for traditional players. There are also certain destinations where

travellers want all-in package convenience.

Harsha Devraj, general manager-operations, The Orchid Mumbai, said: “As compared to the rest of the world, bookings via websites are significantly lower in India. The number of inventory available to the wholesalers/tour operators has increased due to the fact that they offer a wide array of packages to FITs and groups, whether to the domestic or inbound market.”

HSAI Raintree, which manages hotels and resorts across the Philippines, also has a varying strategy for its different properties depending on target market. “For example, our resort property will allocate more rooms to wholesalers rather than our city hotel,” said Carmela Bocanegra, group director of sales and marketing.

“Families and corporate clients still need a complete service, and we’ve learned how to be more creative and more ‘out of the box’ in order to survive,” said Afro Asian World Events’

Bognot.

Bundling a different combination of services according to a client’s needs makes all the difference, added Raymond Tee, president of Horizon Tours and Travel Philippines.

Kosmopolito’s Schaetz said: “We should not denounce the importance of traditional wholesale models, which continue to cater to a particular market audience from which we continue to benefit.

“In an ideal world, we would love every consumer to book through our website. However, we all know that this is far from reality and therefore we should have a healthy mix of channels of distribution.”

Hong Kong-based Langham Hospitality Group, vice president for e-business, loyalty and partner marketing, Sean Seah, was optimistic that travel consultants would still be an important part of the distribution mix as long as they “continued to deliver value to customers and stay innovative in their selling strategies”.

“In the past, it was the hotel coming to a travel (consultant) for contracting. Today, it is the other way around.”

**Andy Khen**

Corporate director of e-commerce  
Santika Indonesia Hotels & Resorts



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The Toshali National Crafts Mela in Bhubaneswar is one of the colourful fairs on Odisha's event-packed calendar

# Drumming up tourism

Odisha's diverse attractions have yet to be discovered by international tourists. By **Shekhar Niyogi**

**Arrivals** Odisha's tourism sector is seeing healthy year-on-year growth, and Department of Tourism deputy director, Prafulla Kumar Behera, expects 10-15 per cent growth in arrivals for 2012. Arrivals increased from 76.4 million in 2010 to 83.4 million in 2011. However, foreign tourist arrivals – despite rising 10 per cent from 50,432 in 2010 to 56,488 in 2011 – account for only a handful of overall visitors. International tourist spending in Odisha was US\$32.4 million, out of a total revenue of US\$2 billion.

According to Odisha's tourism department, more than half of domestic tourists flock to the Jagannath Temple, while the Konark Sun Temple garners the most visits among foreigners.

**Hotels** Hotel development in Odisha has been slow, but it is now being stepped up.

Best Western International and Amanresorts are planning to open new hotels in 2012-2013, while Toshali Resorts International and Swosti Group of Hotels, both leading players in the state, are intending to add more premium rooms to their

portfolios. Last October, Toshali was awarded the management of four state-owned properties in Pathrajjpur, Ratnagiri, Udayagiri and Lalitgiri as part of efforts to boost Buddhist pilgrimage tourism. Mayfair Hotels & Resorts also acquired the century-old Oberoi Palm Beach Hotel in Gopalpur-on-Sea, and will refurbish the heritage property before reopening it in 2013.

According to official statistics, there are less than a dozen three-to five-star properties within the state. The target is to add another 3,000 rooms to the existing base of 4,852 rooms by 2015.

**Rates** The average room rate for four-star hotels in the capital of Bhubaneswar increased from Rs3,000 (US\$59) in 2010 to Rs3,200 in 2011, and is expected to rise further to Rs3,600 in 2012. Three-star hotels recorded Rs1,800 and budget hotels saw a low Rs600. Among cities, Bhubaneswar had the highest occupancy rate of 79 per cent; Puri, 65 per cent; Cuttack, 69 per cent; and Gopalpur-on-Sea, 37 per cent.

**Access** A key issue is



**“Odisha needs visibility and connectivity. It needs effective promotion and better connectivity within the country and internationally. Our excellent beaches are undiscovered by tourists and tour operators.”**

**Punyanand Thakur**  
Assistant general manager-sales  
Mayfair Hotels & Resorts

the absence of an international airport in Odisha, with the nearest gateway being Kolkata. The Biju Patnaik Airport in Bhubaneswar is only connected by daily flights from Kolkata, New Delhi, Hyderabad, Mumbai and Chennai. However, Odisha has a good train network linking Bhubaneswar, Puri, Cuttack, Gopalpur-on-Sea, Sambalpur and Rourkela to other major cities on India's eastern coast.

**NTO** Odisha's tourism department rolled out the new *Scenic, Serene, Sublime* campaign last September and has been actively showcasing this at major tradeshows. New tagline *The Soul of Incredible India* has also been used by the state NTO, which is focusing on the development of beaches, Buddhist sites and festivals. Media campaigns have been launched on international platforms, while fam trips will be offered to the trade.

The NTO's budget for 2012 is Rs700 million, an increase over last year's Rs560 million.

**Products** New Buddhist pilgrimage packages have been offered by the state-owned

Odisha Tourism Development Corp from June 2. Visitors to Puri and Bhubaneswar can explore the Diamond Triangle circuit, spread across the hilltop sites of Lalitgiri, Ratnagiri and Udayagiri. Operated thrice-weekly, these packages include travel by coach, lunch and snacks, entry fees to museums and Buddhist sites, and tour guide services.

“Buddhist tourism in Odisha will open a window of opportunity to boost domestic and inbound tourism...We will soon be providing accommodation (in those areas),” said T Banambar Patra, managing director, Toshali Resorts International.

Odisha's coastline and Chilika Lake also offer many ecotourism options, ranging from dolphin spotting and birdwatching to natural sulphur hot springs.

**MICE** Incentives and teambuilding exercises can be designed to coincide with regular events held in Odisha, such as the Konark Dance Festival, India Surf Festival, Gotipua Dance Festival and Puri Sand Sculpture Festival. For meetings, the historic Konark Sun Temple offers a conference facility for 2,000 guests.



Products A confluence of colourful festivals, scenic nature and historic sites



Fishermen on Chilika Lake



An olive ridley sea turtle



A Buddha relic in Ratnagiri

Chilika Lake

The largest saltwater lagoon in Asia, Chilika Lake is an important wintering ground for migratory birds. Its brackish waters support an impressive diversity of wildlife, including the rare Irrawaddy dolphins. Dotted with islands, the pear-shaped lagoon varies in size from season to season, swelling from 906km<sup>2</sup> in summer to 1,165km<sup>2</sup> during the monsoon. A narrow 32km sandy ridge connects the lagoon to the Bay of Bengal. Several ecotourism itineraries are available in Satapada, near Puri.

Contact  
Tel: (91-6756) 220-488  
Email: oritour@gmail.com

Konark Dance Festival

A spectacular extravaganza of sights, colours and sounds, this annual festival is a celebration of Odisha's rich cultural and dance heritage. Set on an open-air auditorium against a backdrop of the Sun Temple, a 700-year architectural monument in Konark, musicians will play the drums and cymbals while renowned dancers perform exquisite moves of India's traditional and classical dance forms. A craft mela spotlighting handmade souvenirs and sculptures is held in conjunction with the dance carnival. Jointly organised by Odisha Tourism and Odissi Research Centre, this

year's festival will be held from December 1-5.

Contact  
Odisha Tourism  
Email: oritour@gmail.com  
Website: www.visitorissa.org

Olive ridley sea turtle beach

Gahirmatha Beach, in Bhitarkanika, is the world's largest olive ridley sea turtle spawning site. Each year, some 100 million olive ridleys, each weighing between 50-60kg, will converge on Odisha's sandy shores during the months of January through April to lay eggs between midnight and 04.00. The mass congregation of these marine

creatures will offer an incredible experience for nature lovers and tourists alike.

Contact  
Flying Colors Travel Solution, Bhubaneswar  
Tel: (91-674) 2396-288  
Website: www.flyingcolorstourism.com

Buddhist pilgrimages

The last refuge of Buddhism in India, Pushpagiri Mahavihara was once a prominent seat of Buddhist learning in ancient times, flourishing from 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC to 11<sup>th</sup> century. Today, its heritage sites are spread across the three adjoining hills of Lalitgiri, Udayagiri and

Ratnagiri. Recent excavations in Langudi Hills led to the unearthing of the Keshava Stupa and 10 Asoka-era artefacts, believed to have been built to commemorate Buddha's visit. According to Debaraj Pradhan, director of Orissa Institute of Maritime and South East Asian Studies, the discovery of these historic relics overthrew previous beliefs that Buddha never visited Odisha during his lifetime. The famous Chinese monk, Xuanzang, visited Pushpagiri in 639.

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My choices

Odisha

Compiled by  
Shekhar Niyogi



**Harihar Patra**  
Director-marketing  
Toshali Resorts International



**J K Mohanty**  
Chairman & managing director  
Swosti Group



**L N Mishra**  
CEO  
Flying Colors Travel Solution

What is your biggest challenge right now?

There is a huge challenge to retain business as most travellers are one-time visitors. Our marketing efforts need to be more focused to overcome competition and encourage repeat visits. We also need to increase our product visibility and keep them unique and properly priced.

The biggest challenge is the lack of awareness of Odisha's vast tourism potential. It is an unspoiled destination endowed with beautiful mountains, mangrove forests, Asia's largest brackish lake and a rich cultural heritage – mostly unknown in the tourism market.

Lack of infrastructure – more hotels, roads and luxury coaches are needed. Bhubaneswar has only three daily flights from New Delhi with no international connections, while the nearest gateway airport is Kolkata. Stronger support from the state would be welcomed too.

What must be done?

New destinations should be earmarked and marketed alongside brand building. The tourism department should guide stakeholders in basic product development and revise its policies, especially inter-department coordination issues.

It is essential to promote Odisha at travel marts, as well as to invite tour operators and travel writers from different parts of the world to give media coverage to Odisha.

Our attractions must be properly maintained. Definite policies with long-term goals must be drawn, while marketing and promotional campaigns in India and major source countries improved. The enhanced visibility will help the world to understand our tourism potential better.

What do you need from...

**the government?** Improved air connectivity and better road network. Marketing professionals should be appointed to promote tourism effectively, while a measurable mechanism should be put in place to evaluate products regularly and discuss findings at local stakeholder level.

**the government?** The government should create a tourism-friendly policy to attract investment to tourism destinations, organise roadshows in different states and countries to encourage tourism to Odisha, and plan fam trips for tour operators and travel experts.

**the airlines?** More domestic and international flights. Flights from Bangkok, China and Colombo will help to promote our Buddhist pilgrimage, cultural and beach attractions. Bangkok flights will also increase foreign tourist arrivals as it is a major transit hub in Asia.

What are the prospects for 2012?

Very attractive, provided stakeholders adopt great changes in their operations. We are looking at growth rates of 10-15 per cent.

Odisha has bright tourism prospects. With more initiative on gaining publicity, maintaining hygiene standards on the beaches and developing the hospitality sector, Odisha can become one of India's most important tourist destinations.

Unpredictable – we may get about 10 per cent growth. It depends on how successful the state tourism's advertisements in local and international media are in attracting visitors to Odisha.

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Checking in

# Toshali Sands Ethnic Village Resort



**Shekhar Niyogi** is impressed by the warm service and tranquil setting of an established resort in Puri

**LOCATION** Nestled amid 12 hectares of greenery beside the Balukhanda Reserve Forest, the resort offers a blend of time-

less charm and elegant modernity in a natural setting. The traditional Odisha architecture, Mangalorean tiled roofs, open verandas, as well as an organic garden that supplies homegrown vegetables and fruits to the kitchen, all come together to give this retreat a rustic village ambience. Daily regular shuttles provide access to the pristine Balighai Beach some 2km away. The resort's location on the Konark

Marine highway offers easy access to many Puri attractions, such as the Konark Sun Temple and Chilika Lake. It is about an hour and a half from Bhubaneswar Airport and a 30-minute drive from Puri railway station, which offers numerous train connections from Kolkata.

**ROOMS** The 109 rooms, including 50 deluxe cottages and nine deluxe villas, are tastefully appointed. I was allocated a spacious deluxe villa, which was clad in a mixture of muted and bright colours. I slept very soundly on the comfortable queen-size bed.

A sense of tranquility pervaded the entire resort. The verdant landscape was dotted with coconut trees and flowers, and an occasional deer would stray onto the lush compound.

**F&B** Designed to resemble an ethnic village, the Phulpatna restaurant offers a good selection of multi-cultural dishes all day long. There is a generous buffet spread for breakfast, but late-night room-service menu is rather limited. The pool-side Madhuban Bar serves both local and imported beers.

**FACILITIES** With the abundance of space and natural lighting, the hotel feels open and expansive. The outdoor swimming pool, gym, Ayurvedic spa, tennis court and three conference rooms are popular with guests. Tours and excursions with licensed English-speaking guides are available for booking at the reception. The theatre-style meeting rooms can seat 300 delegates and are also popular wedding venues, while the smaller breakout rooms are ideal for meetings and conferences of a smaller scale.

The resort offered a complimentary cruise on a 14-seat motorboat along the languid backwaters of the Nuanai River. This journey ended at the lagoon where the river met the Bay of Bengal. According to the guide, deers are occasionally spotted along the riverside as they take to the water to quench their thirst. Unfortunately I did not see much wildlife on this trip but the soothing tranquility more than made up for my disappointment.

**SERVICE** One word – excellent. Checking in was a pleasant and breezy process. Although guests were required to go through metal detector checks, they were neither obtrusive nor bothersome. The staff seemed happy to extend the Odisha hospitality to guests. The housekeeping did a thorough job, while the concierge and front desk were very alert and responsive. The Wi-Fi Internet connection was adequate and laptops were available for hire. Extra towels for use on the beach were a thoughtful touch, as were the specially placed parasols and fresh fruit. Early check-in before noon and late check-out until 14.00 are possible upon request.

**VERDICT** No other hotel in the vicinity can match its standards. A great getaway for both leisure and MICE travellers.

**Name** Toshali Sands Ethnic Village Resort  
**No. of rooms** 109 rooms, including cottages and villas  
**Rates** From Rs3,000 (US\$59) to Rs9,000 per night  
**Contact details**  
Tel (91-674) 254-7511  
Email: inquiry@toshalisands.com  
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### CIVETS and other Emerging Markets: the potential for Asia Pacific, Wednesday, September 26 (1.5 hrs)

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### mTourism: how mobile technology is changing tourism Thursday, September 27 (1.5 hrs)

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- Best Budget Hotel
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- Best City Hotel – Manila
- Best City Hotel – Seoul
- Best City Hotel – Singapore
- Best City Hotel – Taipei
- Best City Hotel – Tokyo
- Best New City Hotel
- Best Airport Hotel

###### RESORTS – Individual Property

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# TTM+ 2012 Instrumental to Thailand's Focus on Customised Travel Experiences for Tourism Growth

The Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) and the Thai tourism industry joined hands to host Thailand's largest travel and tourism trade exhibition, the Thailand Travel Mart Plus 2012 (TTM+ 2012), from June 6-8 in Bangkok. More than 473 buyers from 60 countries across the globe met with 381 sellers at the IMPACT Exhibition Center Halls 5 and 6, offering Thai tourism products and services in 12 categories.

TTM+ 2012's theme was "Customize your experience in Thailand", which encouraged tour operators to offer itineraries tailored to customers' specific interests. TAT's Governor, Mr Suraphon Svetasreni, said: "This year, TAT is refocusing our strategies to attract a greater number of niche-market visitors seeking holidays and experiences more in tune with their personal preferences and lifestyles." The four major products that were highlighted in a special pavilion were Ecotourism, Golf, Health & Wellness, and Wedding & Honeymoon. The business categories included Accommodation, Entertainment, Tourism Organization/ Association, Tour Operator/Travel Agent, Transportation, and Other Travel Services.

Inaugurated in 2001, TTM+ aims to promote the tourism and service business in Thailand and its Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) counterparts to major international markets. This year, it continued to play an important role in building momentum for the number of international visitor arrivals to Thailand, which has recorded solid growth compared to the previous year.

"With events such as TTM+2012 encouraging an increase in the number of international tourist arrivals by highlighting all that Thailand has to offer, revenue growth from international tourists should show a 9% increase compared to last year. This will help the Thai tourism sector to meet the revenue generation target of 766 billion baht – an important contribution to the country's economy," added Governor Suraphon.







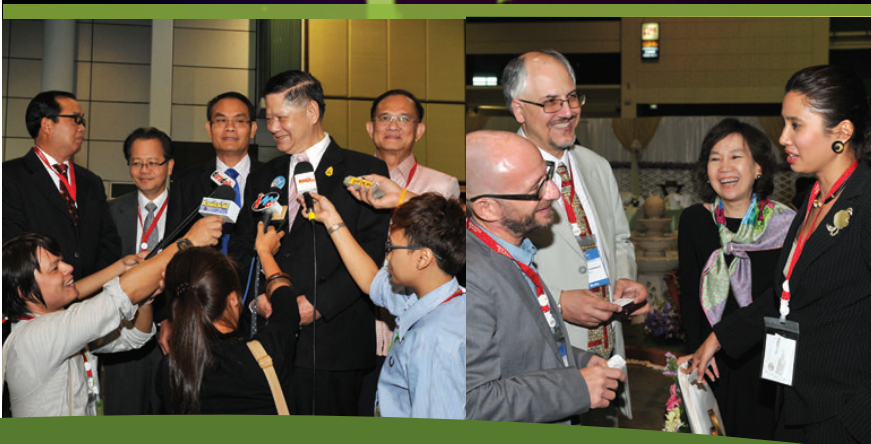
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The annual TTM+, which also highlights Thailand's role as a travel hub for the GMS, will play an increasingly important role as the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), which will come into effect in 2015, approaches. One of Thailand's major advantages is its geographical location at the heart of Southeast Asia. The trade and services liberalisation that will come with the AEC will boost people movements through and within the 10-member ASEAN grouping. In terms of travel to the GMS countries, the recent opening up of Myanmar will also benefit Thailand, due to the two countries' close connections by air, land and sea.

Governor Suraphon concluded: "A new marketing strategy has just been approved by the ASEAN NTOs' Tourism Marketing and Communication Working Group, which Thailand is proud to be chairing for 2011-2012. This strategy identifies the relevant products and target markets, charts specific short-term and long-term strategies and identifies ways to execute them via adequate funding, communications channels and measurement indicators. TTM+ 2012, which brings together buyers from the region, is a great way to highlight Thailand's tourism products and services while forging stronger links with our neighbouring travel destinations."

TTM+ 2012 closed successfully with an added bonus for buyers and the media, who enjoyed a full range of post-event tours from June 9 showcasing Thailand's world-renowned natural beauty and rich cultural heritage. The next TTM+, with comparable clout, is now looked forward to.



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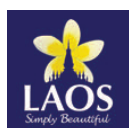
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Chanthabouly District, Vientiane Capital Lao PDR  
Tel: (856-21) 212248, 212251 • Fax: (856-21) 212769, 217910  
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TTG Asia Media Pte Ltd

1 Science Park Road #04-07, The Capricorn, Singapore Science Park II  
Singapore 117528  
Tel: +65 6395 7575 • Fax: +65 6536 0896  
Corporate website: [www.ttgasiamedia.com](http://www.ttgasiamedia.com)  
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