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# Verdict still out on Qantas

Impact of Emirates tie-up on Asia to be seen

By Linda Haden and Sim Kok Chwee

**SINGAPORE** Inbound operators are bracing themselves for a drop in stopover business following the announcement by Qantas to withdraw from Singapore on the Kangaroo Route between Australia and the UK (*TTG Asia e-Daily*, September 6, 2012). The new 10-year alliance with Emirates, which leaves former partner British Airways out in the cold, will begin next April, subject to regulatory approval.

Judy Lum, the group vice president, sales & marketing, Tour East Singapore, one of the country's main operators of Qantas stopover tours, said: "Clients have notified us to expect a decline in their stopover business, but they have also assured us that they will be looking into alternative airlines such as Singapore Airlines, as there is a large proportion of passengers who still prefer to fly via Singapore."

Carol Tan, director of cruise and leisure travel, Destination Asia Singapore also expects stop-over traffic to be "affected to a degree", but said it made up only a small percentage of the company's leisure travel business.

As part of its network restructuring, Qantas has said it would increase dedicated capacity to Singapore and retime its flights to Hong Kong, but Lum warned that because no detailed plans had been revealed for the Australia-Asia leg, it was difficult to judge if the proposed increase would wholly eradicate the loss.

However, she pointed out that augmenting Australia-Singapore flights would have a positive effect on the destination. "Singapore is continuously trying to promote itself as a holiday destination while downplaying its role as a stopover destination. With the increase in (Qantas)

Continued on page 2



## A different direction

Born with an artistic flair and trained in accountancy, Berjaya Land and Berjaya Hotels & Resorts executive director, Leong Wy Joon, never thought he would be heading one of Malaysia's largest property development groups. He tells **Karen Yue** which are the next big destinations – see page 8

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(as of September 18, 2012)

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- 2 Philippines appoints COO for Tourism Promotions Board, boosts marketing budget
- 3 Maldives to get Louis Vuitton resort, floating projects
- 4 Branded budget hotels gain popularity among Indonesians
- 5 Indonesia heightens efforts in sustainable tourism development
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# Economy demand matures

Research shows price no longer the sole factor and more bookings are made online

By Gracia Chiang

**SINGAPORE** Customer demand for economy hotels in the region is becoming more sophisticated, with more emphasis on non-price aspects such as design and service.

Accor, which is in the midst of revamping its economy brand, Ibis, believes the sector is seeing segmentation. It now has Ibis, Ibis Styles (former All Seasons) and Ibis Budget (former Formule 1), catering to those who want a high level of service and comfort; comfort paired with unique design; and essential comfort at the best price point respectively.

Announced a year ago, the upgrading process is around 70 per cent complete, and a major communications campaign will be

unveiled next month. Most of its economy hotels will be branded as an Ibis, with Ibis Budget accounting for 10-15 per cent and Ibis Styles, 15-20 per cent.

Accor Asia Pacific chairman and COO, Michael Issenberg, said: "Customer expectations are increasing. As the market matures, it won't be price alone as the determinant. Design and service will be important."

Speaking at the 4<sup>th</sup> annual Economy Hotels World Asia, he also revealed findings from Accor's inaugural Asia Economy Hotels Research 2012 which saw six out of 10 respondents saying they preferred an international brand over a domestic one, and were happy to pay a premium – nearly 90 per cent more in

markets such as India and Hong Kong. A total of 845 travellers were surveyed (*TTG Asia e-Daily*, September 11, 2012).

Said Issenberg: "We were a little bit surprised that one of the reasons for choosing international brands was service. You don't think of service when you think of economy hotels as it's a limited-service product but (it shows that) getting that limited service right is crucial."

He added that the chain would be stepping up training of staff, in order to promote "more guest engagement and make (the experience) more emotional".

Another finding was that 62 per cent of travellers booked their rooms online, a finding that Accor is taking seriously with the

roll-out of its brand websites in more Asian languages. A Korean one will launch in December, while a Thai one, next year.

"Having the right distribution tool in the local language is important not just for the domestic but intra-Asia market... Since we launched our Bahasa website in May, we saw a 20 per cent spike in demand for Japan from Indonesia," said Issenberg.

He told *TTG Asia* that while a third of the chain's hotels in the region was currently economy, 40 per cent of pipeline committed over the next three years was in this sector. This year alone, Accor signed more than 50 such properties in Asia-Pacific, and opened in cities such as Hong Kong and Bandung.

Continued from page 1

## Status boost for Singapore

flight frequencies dedicated to Asia, it will strengthen Singapore's position as a standalone holiday destination, as well as part of a multi-city Asia itinerary," said Lum.

CAPA - Centre for Aviation chief analyst, Brendan Sobie, added: "The potential upside for Changi Airport is that the Australia-Singapore flights are going to be retimed so they connect with more Jetstar Asia flights to destinations in Asia... Changi will become an even more important hub in the growing Australia-Asia market although it will lose more of its lustre as a hub for Kangaroo Route traffic."

Meanwhile, a British Airways spokesperson said the twice-daily flights between Singapore and London as well as the daily service to Sydney would be continued. – Analysis in next issue

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## Philippines taps ASEAN potential

By Rosa Ocampo

**MANILA** Tourism stakeholders in the Philippines are waking up to the massive potential of the regional market now that LCCs have blazed a trail in intra-ASEAN connectivity by flying directly from secondary gateways in the country such as Cebu, Boracay and Clark.

The Philippine Department of Tourism, for example, is gearing up to launch a tactical campaign in Asia for 4Q2012 and 2013. Its marketing representative in Malaysia has also been tasked to oversee an additional market: Thailand.

Ine Faustino, general manager, CT 168 Travel and Tours, said the open skies policy was bearing fruit on inbound. Having joined a fam trip organised by Cebu Pacific in Vietnam, Faustino said she had recently received bookings from the market, with some even going farther than Manila



**Munsayac: more regional air links**

to Bohol and Cebu. Margie Munsayac, vice president, sales, Maribago Bluewater Beach Resort and president, Hotel Sales and Marketing Association, said while the country's outbound market to the rest of South-east Asia was strong, she would like to see a parallel or reciprocal programme, so that more regional tourists would also be encouraged to travel to the Philippines. She suggested that the destination shift its focus beyond attracting overseas Filipino workers.

Intra-ASEAN connectivity also benefits longhaul markets such as Europe, said Jayne Lim, sales and marketing manager,

Blue Horizons Travel and Tours.

Due to the existing European Union ban on Philippine carriers, travellers from the market are currently hindered from exploring the entire country by the domestic flight component. However, with Asian LCCs now serving various cities, European tourists can travel directly to Cebu, Boracay or Davao, she explained. Lim added that while she had not introduced any intra-ASEAN packages, she would be keen to explore such itineraries.

Munsayac said: "We need intra-ASEAN travel. Developed countries are having their own economic problems but the Asian economy is healthy."

Highlighting Boracay as an example, she said the island used to have a limited market but this grew with the opening of an airport, which allowed passengers to fly directly from Asia.

## Volcano closure has li

**JAKARTA** The closure of Mount Tangkuban Perahu (*TTG Asia e-Daily*, September 4, 2012) has raised some concerns among Bandung travel consultants that tour operators might eliminate the destination from their Java-Bali overland tours.

Apart from the Saung Angklung Udjo bamboo music show and its heritage sites, Tangkuban Perahu and its crater are considered must-visits in Bandung for the European market.

Batik Holiday Bandung managing director, Maktal Hadiyat, said: "Overland tour operators have been facing the problem of traffic jams, not only in Bandung, but all the way from Jakarta, which worsen during public holidays or long weekends."

"If the problem continues and the Tangkuban Perahu Tourism Park management does not improve its services, I'm worried that (tour operators) would just

skip Bandung altogether."

Nusa Ina Leisure has developed itineraries to Garut (about two hours' drive from Bandung), attracted by the destination's growing attractions and accommodation, according to managing director, Jongki Adiyasa.

He said: "Garut serves as an alternative to touring Bandung, but we can never scrap Bandung (from the itinerary). It has its charm and the heritage sites are also of interest to the European market... It will also be too long to drive from Jakarta to Garut."

Similarly, Panorama Destination COO, Achmad Sufyani, has "no plans to cut Bandung from tour programmes", although the company had already made Tangkuban Perahu an optional tour for over a year due to the park's poor management.

"We have placed more emphasis on city tours, visiting museums, historical sites like

# Multiple-entry visa for M'sians to Japan

Outbound operators anticipate greater travel interest to Japan with the launch of a new visa scheme

By S Puvaneswary

**KUALA LUMPUR** Outbound operators are hopeful that the introduction of a multiple-entry visa for Malaysian nationals visiting Japan will boost travel demand. Previously, Malaysians were only eligible for single-entry visas.

Effective September 1, the multiple-entry visa to Japan is valid for a maximum of three years, with the length of each stay limited to 15 days. This may be extended to 30 or 90 days, subject to approval by the Japanese authorities.



Ong: Muslim tourists targeted

PYO Travel senior manager, customer support, John Chan, said: "Departures to Japan for the past one-and-a-half years have been stagnant. The multiple-entry visa will create renewed interest, and going forward, we expect at least a 20 per cent year-on-year increase in leisure travel to Japan." The company will continue to promote primary destinations such as Hokkaido, Osaka, Honshu and Tokyo.

Also welcoming the new visa was Apple Vacations & Conventions group managing director, Desmond Lee, who felt that the current application process for a Japanese visa was "troublesome" as applicants had to prove their employment status with bank statements or company letters.

He said: "The multiple-entry visa makes it easier for us to promote Japan as travellers only need to (apply for) their visa once and can enter Japan as many times as they like within three years.

Despite rosy sales of Japanese destinations like Hokkaido, Osaka, Kyoto and Tokyo at the recent MATTA Fair, Lee said: "We expect sales to Japan to rise by only 10 per cent as it is not cheap to travel to Japan." Gifu in Central Japan is a new destination his company is promoting.

Lee also urged the Japan National

Tourism Organization (JNTO) to ramp up promotional efforts through local media, market Japan's four seasons and offer a "more personal touch (to) agencies in Malaysia."

In response, JNTO Singapore office manager, Susan Maria Ong, said the marketing and promotion budget for Malaysian and Singapore this year had risen by 15 per cent over 2011 in order to cater for

more tradeshows and trade support.

To attract more Malaysian travellers to Japan, JNTO will also publish a Muslim guidebook by year-end, listing the halal food outlets and mosques in Japan.

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## mitted fallout

Gedung Sate (West Java Governor's office) and other attractions, with Saung Angklung Udjo as the highlight. We have also featured Dieng Plateau in Central Java in place of Tangkuban Perahu."

However, Achmad added that he was going to introduce an additional itinerary for 2013 which would not include Bandung and West Java. "Travellers will have a choice of taking the train from Jakarta directly to Semarang in Central Java," he explained.

On the other hand, Pacto director of operations and business development, Umberto Cadamuro, continued to believe in Bandung's opportunity for growth

"There are other alternatives we can offer to travellers. We have introduced cycling and walking tours to the mountains, in addition to heritage trails, trekking and (off-track) jeep-riding, so there is no plan to cut down on days, let alone scrap Bandung and West Java from our itineraries," he remarked. "Neither the mountain closure nor the increasing traffic has impacted our Bandung itinerary." – Mimi Hudoyo



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## Tourism Data



Travel bookings on social networks have yet to flourish, according to PhoCusWright's latest research; Airfares in Asia will increase between four and five percent, while hotel ADRs in the region will rise by five to eight percent, according to Advito's 2013 Industry Forecast

## Poll

Is the concept of sustainable tourism more idealistic or realistic?

- It's definitely more fluff than substance
- Ultimately achievable, but it takes awhile
- I don't even know what it means

## Hot Deals

Club Med Bali, Cherating Beach, Kani (Maldives) and Phuket slash 50 per cent off room rates for travel consultants and airline staff; Shangri-La's Rasa Sayang Resort and Spa, Penang (below) rolls out Paradise in Penang package



## Hot Moves

Farrington American Express Travel Services' Lily Agonoy joins BCD Travel/Jebesen Travel Management as MD; Le Grande, Pecatu, Bali appoints Taufik Junianto as DOSM; Depesh Seth joins the Sheraton Shanghai Waigaoqiao Hotel as GM

# When design is not cool



Why this niche is losing its plot is not difficult to answer. Basically, it has produced few real breakthroughs.

Raini Hamdi  
Senior Editor

*Just a d.*

**D**ESIGN HOTELS, hip hotels, boutique hotels, art hotels, contemporary hotels, etc, etc – how did the industry end up with this mess of nomenclature?

These categorisations alone reflect the plunge of a niche from novelty to oversaturation and one that is in serious danger of not being taken seriously.

How to take it seriously, when any small, independent hotel can scatter a few designer furniture and label itself 'boutique', or when any big brand can create a new edition (pun intended) by latching onto a famous designer, or adding a technology hub and bill that a design makeover?

Moreover, design has become an integral part of hotels, so the term 'design hotels' itself is passé.

Why this niche is losing its plot is not difficult to answer. Basically, it has produced few real breakthroughs that redefine the experience, the way, say, John Portman did with his atrium hotels; Mezza9 at Grand Hyatt Singapore redefined the all-day dining experience; Adrian Zecha inspired thousands of copycats to create a 'lifestyle'; and, more recently, new-generation hoteliers such as Singapore's Loh Lik Peng reinvigorated whole neighbourhoods with their design hotels.

This is why I'm so heartened by our Design Hotels report this issue (see pages 14-16). Based on the interviews I did with design consultants and design hotels players, there is a strong movement back to being guest-centric and local-centric, from being design-centric.

I expect this to result in a new wave of holistic design hotels which will amalgamate a strong local and cultural agenda, technology, comfort, personalised service and of course, design, to levels never seen before.

My recent stay in two design hotels also convinced me that Asia has much to contribute to the future of design hotels.

One was at Nira Alpina in the Engadin Valley, Switzerland (see page 14), a creation of MPS Puri, who is no stranger to the Asian hotel industry, having worked with some of the best Asian chains like Raffles Hotels & Resorts, Peninsula Hotels and General Hotel Management. The other was Le Royal Monceau Raffles Paris designed by Philippe Starck.

Both had an Asian connection which I believe contributed hugely to their success as holistic design hotels.

On its own, the Royal Monceau perfectly captured the Parisian chic with real design mastery, but that alone would not have cut it; staying true to the Raffles DNA as being a residence-away-from-home, with genuine hospitality of a brand born in Asia, softened a stark design immeasurably and made the concept whole.

Similarly, Nira Alpina, near St Moritz, reflects Puri's hindsight in learning from "the best schools" (as he told me), with Asian touches in service delivery, deep respect for tranquility, giving comfort and space, F&B concepts, etc, all combining to make it an original in an area full of traditional or grand Swiss hotels.

An original design does not make a 'design hotel', or make a design hotel original. Design cannot be the end, but a means to an end.

In an era where choosing hotels have become a very personal thing and customer needs are more layered, design hotels have a big opportunity to be more relevant than ever before, putting to rest once and for all the debate whether they are just a passing fancy of the hotel industry or are here to stay.

## Most commented on www.ttgasia.com

### Bihar smoothes out connectivity issues to grow pilgrimage market

Tamdang Bhutia from Sikkim said: "The Government of Bihar has taken the right step in boosting Buddhist circuit tours by giving such incentives to airlines. If the Bihar government could also provide visa on arrival for travellers from Buddhist countries such as Thailand, it would be a great help in promoting tourism in this sector."

### West Java Tourism Promotion Board sets up Kuala Lumpur office

Nugroho Setiatmadji from Jakarta said: "Congratulations on the opening of the West Java Tourism Board office in Kuala Lumpur. With such an office and direct daily services by AirAsia between Kuala Lumpur and Bandung, I am confident that more and more Malaysians will be keen to explore West Java."

### Indonesia's Surya Semesta Internusa (SSIA) plans no-frills business hotels

The Voice said: "Despite the immense potential of the budget hotel segment in Indonesia, Miettinen (Surya Internusa Hotels' managing director) conceded that operators still face numerous challenges staying ahead of the game...I couldn't agree more. Particularly if you offer a 'me-too product', as (SSIA) obviously will, and only enter the market many years after the budget hotel boom actually took off."

### Australia's tourism industry faces glut of challenges

Yetin Shirke from Mumbai said: "Outsourcing to Asian companies is the best option. Otherwise, get more Asians to go to Australia. Render special concessions in a very attractive manner for investors. Skilled workers can be arranged from Asia as per industry requirement."



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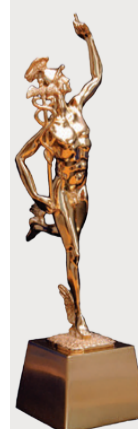
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## Travel Hall of Fame

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 Hotels Group, Abacus International, SilkAir and Lotte Tour.



MYTHBUSTER  
SIMON SAYS

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



**Myth**  
GDSs are great for air, but not for other content such as hotels.

**Fact** The GDS was first designed as the content pipeline between airlines and travel consultants, but today it has evolved significantly from its original scope to espouse the philosophy that content is king – hotels, car rentals, rail tickets and tours are now all readily available through the modern GDS.

We have witnessed phenomenal growth in the hotels sector in recent years, and the GDS has been quick to respond. A comprehensive range of hospitality options are now available on the GDS, from luxury hotels and spas to apartments, B&Bs and budget accommodation.

Euromonitor predicts the value of global hotel bookings will reach US\$545 billion in 2015, making it a highly sought-after market in the travel industry. Increasing hotel content and securing competitive rates are key priorities for GDSs as we all seek to meet the needs of agencies and the growing demand of travellers – both corporate and leisure.

It has been just over a year since we launched our one-stop shop for hotel content, Travelport Rooms and More, and we have more than tripled the number of unique accommodation properties to 340,000, with over 700,000 room offers – a figure that continues to grow monthly. Rooms and More allows leisure travel consultants to access, compare and book commissionable offers through one quick, easy process, negating the need to search for the best rates across multiple websites.

As car rentals and transfers gain momentum, we are currently trialling a new service in Asia which allows travel experts to book chauffeur-driven car transfers directly via the GDS. Travelport Drive Me has streamlined the complicated process involving third parties into an automated booking process that seamlessly integrates the booking back into the passenger name record.

So much more than a flight booking tool, today's GDS deploys sophisticated technology and user-friendly interfaces to provide consultants with new ways to sell a wider range of travel content than ever before.

TTG Travel Pursuits Compiled by The Fox

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1		T	A						B		C		B		
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- DOWN**
- What is the capital of Spain?
  - The initials of a leading airline in Japan.
  - In which city is the new company AirAsia ASEAN based?
  - The abbreviation for rooms in hotels.
  - This tour package includes everything.
  - The abbreviation for name in airline records.
  - What is the old name for Guangzhou?
  - In Singapore, what can you see from the Marina?
  - Two-letter code for Philippine Airlines.
  - (2<sup>nd</sup>) Two-letter code for Laca Airlines.
  - What is the three-letter code for Lumbia Airport in the Philippines?
  - (2<sup>nd</sup>) Two-letter code for Air India.
  - Which terminal at Singapore Changi Airport closes this month?
  - Travel fares before agency commission added.
  - The person who handles legal disputes.
- ACROSS**
- The first name of an Indian hotel group.
  - (2<sup>nd</sup>) Another name for a taxi.
  - What is the three-letter code for Nadi International Airport in Fiji?
  - (2<sup>nd</sup>) The abbreviation for ANA's cargo airline subsidiary.
  - A popular drink in the Middle East.
  - (2<sup>nd</sup>) What is the name of Myanmar's new capital?
  - Montreal-based association for airports.
  - Two-letter code for Iran Air.
  - (2<sup>nd</sup>) The abbreviation for Thailand's destination marketing organisation.
  - (3<sup>rd</sup>) What is the three-letter code for Ende Airport in Indonesia?
  - Two-letter code for Tiger Airways.
  - (2<sup>nd</sup>) You will get fined if you do this in Singapore.
  - What is the marketing name of Boeing's new B787 aircraft?
- ACROSS 1. Taj. 2. NAD. 3. Cab. 4. AICI. 5. IR. 6. TR. 7. Dreamliner. 8. Canton. 9. Bay. 10. PR. 11. CGY. 12. L. 13. AL. 14. Net. 15. Lawyer. 16. Budget. 17. L. 18. Net. 19. L. 20. L. 21. L. 22. L. 23. L. 24. L. 25. L. 26. L. 27. L. 28. L. 29. L. 30. L. 31. L. 32. L. 33. L. 34. L. 35. L. 36. L. 37. L. 38. L. 39. L. 40. L. 41. L. 42. L. 43. L. 44. L. 45. L. 46. L. 47. L. 48. L. 49. L. 50. L. 51. L. 52. L. 53. L. 54. L. 55. L. 56. L. 57. L. 58. L. 59. L. 60. L. 61. L. 62. L. 63. L. 64. L. 65. L. 66. L. 67. L. 68. L. 69. L. 70. L. 71. L. 72. L. 73. L. 74. L. 75. L. 76. L. 77. L. 78. L. 79. L. 80. L. 81. L. 82. L. 83. L. 84. L. 85. L. 86. L. 87. L. 88. L. 89. L. 90. L. 91. L. 92. L. 93. L. 94. L. 95. L. 96. L. 97. L. 98. L. 99. L. 100. L. 101. L. 102. L. 103. L. 104. L. 105. L. 106. L. 107. L. 108. L. 109. L. 110. L. 111. L. 112. L. 113. L. 114. L. 115. L. 116. L. 117. L. 118. L. 119. L. 120. L. 121. L. 122. L. 123. L. 124. L. 125. L. 126. L. 127. L. 128. L. 129. L. 130. L. 131. L. 132. 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# 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.

After over 20 years of being around the travel agency business, I'd expect most travel sellers to describe their days as hectic. This makes freeing up one more minute, much less an hour, to spend on training and education no small feat!

That said, investing some of your valuable time, and in some cases money, on training and education should be

one of your top priorities. I guarantee it will be one of your best investments ever. Here are some reasons why.

**1. The client expects expertise.** Customers today are extremely knowledgeable and often well travelled. They've usually spent a fair amount of time talking to friends and searching on the Internet for their destination or product of choice before contacting you. They won't buy from you if they don't feel you know what you're talking about and they'll perceive that very quickly. You'll only acquire and retain that expertise through regular training.

**2. It's impossible to be an expert at everything.** Focus on one or two areas of expertise to form the core of your business. Specialisations can be relatively arcane locations (Antarctic), but they can be mainstream as well (the US).

**3. You'll gain invaluable business skills.** Most travel professionals tend to devote time to training in products and destinations. Clearly, these are important areas for you to know. But there's more to training than that. Developing strong selling, interpersonal, marketing, management and other skills is arguably at least as important.

**4. Business benefits are exponential.** Training isn't a cost, it's an investment. Any investment in education,

whether time or money, will pay itself back many times over. For example, improving your selling skills by just 20 per cent will earn you substantially more profit in the same time frame. Candidly, most travel professionals can improve dramatically in their sales skills.

**5. Training is widely available.** Generally, suppliers do an excellent job at product training, but there are many other good training resources. Don't forget your franchiser, consortium or host agency as a training source. Attend their conferences. Take advantage of their expertise in developing business. Another option is online training, which today is almost limitless in scope.

Like any worthwhile endeavour, honing your skills and knowledge requires that you make a commitment to spending time regularly on your education. Many professions require ongoing continuing education. While that may not be a requirement for you, consistently upgrading your skills and knowledge will make you a more successful and respected professional.

If you find it a challenge to do this regularly, appoint someone to hold your feet to the commitment fire. We all need assistance at times! Training and education are critical to your success and growth, as they will enable you to be the expert your clients expect.

## Investing in training

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## Case study

### Customer-centric CTC Travel

**WHO** CTC Travel, a leading travel player in Singapore, initiated a number of Customer-centric Initiatives (CCI) over a year ago with funding and support from government agencies. Its plan of action encompassed the adoption of new technology as well as innovative management practices to streamline operations.

**WHAT** Said CTC Travel's senior vice president, marketing & PR, Alicia Seah: "At the start of the programme, we did an audit to pinpoint service gaps. The firm then realised that the biggest lapses were occurring in day-to-day processes."

CTC Travel invested in a new phone system that shortened customer waiting times. To improve its risk management process, it also introduced a dedicated 24-hour emergency hotline and crisis management team. The company's feedback system was also centralised, enabling management to handle complaints directly when in the past they were passed through various divisions.

CTC Travel achieved a 40 per cent reduction in the time taken to meet customers' needs and a 33 per cent time reduction in answering phones. The firm also doubled its customer advocacy rate.

**WHY** According to Seah, the CCI was rolled out in response to escalating competition, especially from the online arena. She said: "As customers now have the ability to make bookings directly through the Internet, agencies have to stand out and the only way to achieve this is by upping service levels and offering more carefully crafted, differentiated products."

**TARGET** Seah highlighted that in order to sustain the high level of service cultivated over the last 16 months, the company would be putting staff through advanced training modules. From time to time, mystery service audits would be conducted. The firm is also considering introducing an employee reward and recognition scheme.

CTC Travel is confident that the second phase of the CCI, scheduled to kick off in early 2013, will enable the company to capitalise on evolving consumer trends. "Our focus will be on customer relationship management. We want to form lifetime relationships with our customers and be there for them at every life stage by ensuring them that we offer them appropriate itineraries based on the data we collect and mine. To attain this, we are investing in a new customer database as well as a loyalty programme," said Seah.

Simultaneously, the agency is developing more experience-based customised tour packages targeted at various niches, including Muslims and students. "Even though customised travel products only comprise about 20 per cent of our total portfolio now, we envision that they will become more of a norm 10 years down the road," said Seah. — Linda Haden

## Best Western's Journey to the East – 10<sup>th</sup> Year Anniversary!



Best Western International has recently celebrated its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary in Asia with a major event in Kuala Lumpur!

The World's Largest Hotel Chain®, which opened its Asia & Middle East regional headquarters in Bangkok in 2001, marked a decade of rapid growth by holding its 8th Asian & Middle Eastern Members' Meeting under the theme 'The Great Golden 10', at its brand new luxury hotel, BEST WESTERN PREMIER Dua Sentral in Kuala Lumpur.

The event during August 27-30, 2012 has brought together 119 leaders from Best Western International across Asia and Middle East including Best Western's executives, hotel owners, hotel management team and an exciting line-up of guest speakers.

For delegates, the event offered an opportunity to celebrate a decade of success, to discover Best Western's latest strategy updates and development plans, and to explore the luxurious surroundings of the BEST WESTERN PREMIER Dua Sentral – the company's new flagship hotel in Malaysia.

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**Leong Wy Joon**  
Executive director  
Berjaya Land and  
Berjaya Hotels & Resorts

Born with an artistic flair and trained in accountancy, Leong tells **Karen Yue** that he has never thought of becoming a hotelier. Yet, his unplanned career path has taken him to a top position within one of Malaysia's largest property development groups

# A different direction

## So it is true that few actually enter the profession they are schooled in. What's your story?

I am an accidental hotelier because this is not the career I would have chosen during my younger days. I wanted to be a graphics designer because I excelled in art. I never thought about going into the hospitality industry. Anyway, in my younger days, hospitality courses were rare. There are many such courses now, and Berjaya Hotels & Resorts even has its own hospitality school. I took up accountancy because I didn't know what I wanted to do. With hindsight, it seems that it is my destiny to go into (hospitality). I am an artistic guy, I am trained in accountancy and I have a passion for travel – all important ingredients for the making of a hotelier.

My first foray into this industry was as

an accountant (with Hotel Plaza Limited in 2003) and I hated it immediately. It was not until I discovered the other aspect of the hotel business that I began to like it, and it has become what I do best.

## You came into this role on May 2. What's the key part of your job?

Developing hotels. I'm constantly on the look out for the next big destination and potential sites. These tasks entail numbers through feasibility studies and statistics, so I am fortunate that I am an accountant by training, as it has given me an affinity with numbers. This is especially important in operating and developing hotels.

## What are these next big destinations?

(Berjaya Land) is one of the biggest property developers in Vietnam, a destination

with potential because as a country, it has a land size similar to that of Peninsular Malaysia, but its population is four times bigger. There are 80 million people in Vietnam and 80 per cent of them are under the age of 35. As a developer, it affords us tremendous growth. Vietnam also has many hidden gems such as Danang and Phu Quoc. We have a resort in Phu Quoc. We went in because we believe that Phu Quoc today is Phuket 20 years ago. Infrastructure right now may not be very good; it suffers from electricity shortages and roads need improvement. But as we speak, the government has plans to pull an underwater cable from the mainland and the international airport is almost complete. These will be catalysts for change.

We are also bullish about North Asia. We have an integrated development on the south of Jeju (South Korea). It occupies a 186 acre (75 hectare) site and will have a luxury hotel with villas for sale, a casino, a casino hotel, a life centre – a place for people to go for concerts and performances – and residences. This project will keep us busy for 10 to 15 years.

Japan is a favourable investment destination too. We signed a management

agreement with Four Seasons (Hotels and Resorts) to develop a 186-key hotel in Higashiyama, the historical core of Kyoto. It is a major coup for us, as we are the first foreign developer in Kyoto's 1,000-year history to be allowed to build a hotel in the city. We expect construction to be completed in 1Q2015. We also have a 100 acre (40 hectare) development in Okinawa, which will have an integrated resort anchored by Four Seasons. There will be residences, shopping malls and possibly another hotel. This will probably take 10 to 15 years.

On a smaller scale, we are developing a Ritz-Carlton Reserve resort on a virgin island in the Maldives, which should be ready in two-and-a-half years. We have also just bought a piece of land in Bhutan, and will be developing it through a joint venture with the royal family.

## Will any of these developments carry the Berjaya brand?

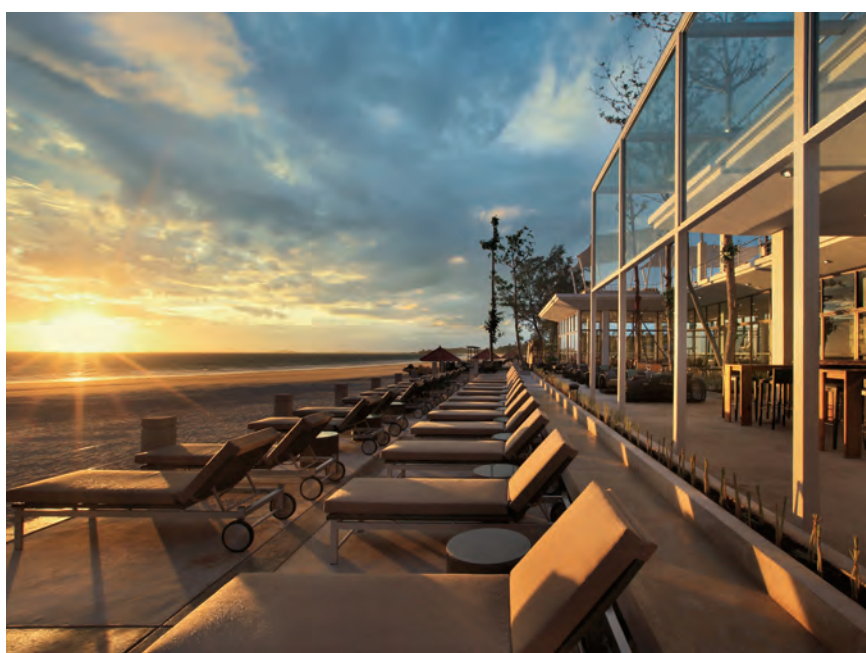
It takes a long time and a lot of effort and money to build up a strong global brand. Moving forward, this may not be a focus for us, although we have plans to concentrate on making the brand strong in Asia-Pacific, South-east Asia in particular. We are also in the process of disposing our non-core Berjaya-branded assets. Our portfolio has properties in far-flung destinations such as Sri Lanka and Seychelles. It may make sense for us to redeploy capital that has been locked in these resorts and utilise this freed capital on higher-growth areas. We have sold one in Seychelles, and there are plans to sell off the second property there and another in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

## So how are you strengthening the brand in this region?

A lot of our campaigns are built around corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts. For our island resorts, we have environment-themed CSR programmes throughout the year, which allow us to give back to the community and help us gain publicity. We want people to know that Berjaya isn't just a company that builds hotels and then market it en masse.

## How about sales efforts?

We have global sales offices in Shanghai, Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore, Australia, New Zealand, the UK, Germany, Austria, Poland and Switzerland. If we do expand this network further, then India would be next. We cannot ignore India because of its growing middle class. Indian tourists like to come to this part of Asia, especially Singapore, and we can benefit from it.



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# Welcoming a new breed

Hotels watch out. Asia's serviced residence operators are seeing a surge in short-stay bookings, with one even launching a hotel-residence brand. By **Linda Haden**, **Hong Xu** and **S Puvaneswary**



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## Frasers Hospitality

**Tonya Khong**

Area general manager, Asia Pacific

**Jastina Balen**

Director, group branding and communications

**Q** What do you think of the short-stay market?

We see an increasing number of requests from people coming on shorter stays. The market has a lot of potential to grow, particularly in cities where there is a rising influx of business travellers. Even for those travelling on leisure with a family or with girlfriends, a serviced apartment is appealing because of the communal living area. Key growth areas for our short-stay product include Australia, China, India and South-east Asia.

**Q** What is your product for the market?

Capri by Fraser is our new hotel-residence brand. Our newly opened Singapore property has a hotel licence and we will open in Ho Chi Minh City by the end of this year and Kuala Lumpur in 2013. Consumer research and input from existing properties highlighted that there was a gap in the market for a technology- and design-led serviced suite product for stays up to seven days.

**Q** What differentiates your product?

As a hybrid product, we offer guests complete flexibility and independence in terms of day-to-day living. Dry cleaning in hotels can sometimes cost an arm and a leg, so we give guests the option to do the laundry themselves while being entertained in our Spin and Play rooms. They also might not want to have room service or eat out all the time, so they can cook a

Far East's Orchard Scotts Residences in Singapore





Capri by Fraser in Singapore

meal in the privacy of their room or pick up TV dinners from our deli. Nonetheless, we provide all the services and amenities expected of an upscale hotel.

### Q Why should travel consultants choose you?

We bring our expertise from the serviced residence domain and we try to find the best marriage by combining elements of a hotel with that of a serviced residence. We don't have huge meeting rooms, but give the space back to guests in their rooms. Capri by Fraser offers a complete lifestyle, not just a room. Even though the concept is very much design-led, it is not overtly pretentious. Instead it was developed to be highly functional and has been tailored to tech-savvy young professionals.

## Savills Residence

Neil Harvey  
Director

### Q What do you think of the short-stay market?

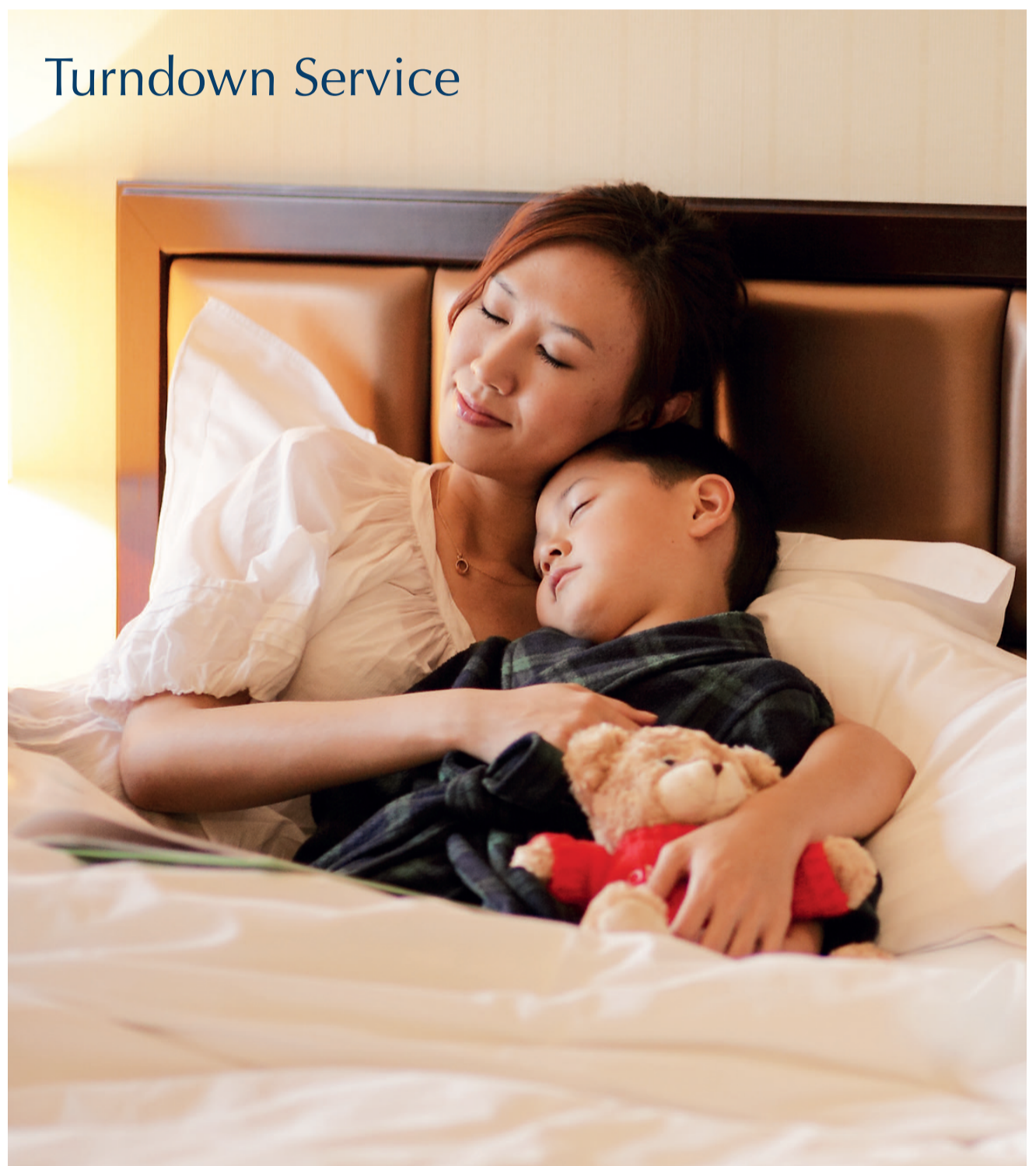
While our core business will always be longer-term stays of one month plus, we have seen a shift towards serviced apartments for weekly accommodation by business travellers. We have also seen a shift to the weekend market for domestic leisure travellers within China in first-tier cities.

### Q What is your product for the market?

Many of our properties have, or will have, hotel licences. This gives us the option to secure more short-term business if the location dictates. However, our product and format will not change from that of offering serviced apartments under the Savills Residence branding.



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The Ascott Limited is a member of CapitaLand. It is the largest global serviced residence owner-operator in Asia Pacific, Europe and the Gulf region, managing the Ascott, Citadines and Somerset brands in over 70 cities across more than 20 countries.



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**Q What differentiates your product?**

As part of a leading residential leasing company within the region, we have been able to ascertain current and future requirements of longer-term travellers from different regions. This ensures our products and facilities match the requirements of the travelling market in varying locations. Our studies have shown that lighter interiors utilising natural finishes and details for ease of use – yet remaining totally functional – are considerations in addition to the norm of security, high levels of service and privacy.

**Q Why should travel consultants choose you?**

Service delivery levels at any Savills Residence are benchmarked against those of international hotels. However, due to the longer-term nature of the guests length of stay, we provide much higher personalised levels of service for residents. These may range from guest preferences within the apartment by ensuring the same house-keeping maids provide service, to weekly grocery shopping, flower deliveries and even updates of events happening within the city that may be of interest.



There is definitely demand for a product that bridges the gap between serviced residences and hotels. Fraser's move to put its first Capri by Fraser property in Changi Business Park is a smart one, given the multitude of multinational banks based there that need to house visiting employees from abroad. It is certainly a property we would consider for travellers staying for just one to two weeks."

**Janet Tan-Collis**  
CEO, East West Executive Travellers Singapore

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Brunei Tourism  
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Meet Point Asia  
Merlin Beach Resort & Patong  
Merlin Hotel  
Middleway Travel Company  
Mövenpick Hotels & Resorts  
Nora Resorts & Hotels  
Novotel Phuket & All Season  
Naiharn Beach Resort  
Onyx Hospitality Group  
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Samui Resort  
Pavilion Samui Boutique Resort  
Ramada Encore Bangkok  
Rose Garden Riverside  
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S.I. Tours (1996)  
Sala Resorts And Spas  
Samui Nakara Resort & Spa

Santhiya Resorts & Spas  
Siam Kempinski Hotel Bangkok  
Thavorn Hotels And Resorts (THR)  
The Haad Tien Beach Resort, Koh Tao  
The Kee Resort & Spa  
The Old Phuket - Karon Beach Resort  
The Sukosol Hotel  
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The Vijitt Resort Phuket  
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Oakwood Premier in Manila



## Far East Hospitality

Spokesperson

### Q What do you think of the short-stay market?

Despite the malaise in Europe and the US, strong intra-regional demand for both business and leisure travel has made the short-stay segment an area of opportunity. We see potential particularly from regional markets, especially from Indonesia, Malaysia and Australia.

### Q What is your product for the market?

Even though we do not have a specific product or brand for short stays, we have a strong presence in the mid-upscale market with a diverse inventory that spans strategic locations across Singapore, offering short- and long-term accommodation catering to business and leisure guests.

### Q What differentiates your product?

With nine serviced apartments, our extensive experience in the short-stay segment through our hotel operations and our brand of homegrown Singapore world-class hospitality, we believe Far East Hospitality's serviced apartments offer a very competitive proposition for the short-stay segment. Even as we continue to strengthen our portfolio and grow our flagship brands Oasis, Village and Quincy, we have also been cultivating what we call 'home-grown Singaporean hospitality' across all of our operations, which will become our distinct personality and differentiator.

### Q Why should travel consultants choose you?

Serviced apartments offer a more flexible and intimate home-away-from-home experience, unlike hotels which tend to have more 'standard' rooms and products. There is a much broader variety of apartment types, services and facilities, and range of locations on offer compared to hotels – the majority of which tend to cluster in or around the city core. We believe that this will appeal to increasingly travel-savvy guests, who tend to seek more personal experiences.

## The Ascott

Tony Soh

Chief corporate officer

### Q What do you think of the short-stay market?

Although most of our serviced residences focus mainly on expatriates and business travellers who stay for a month or more, our products and services are also very attractive to travellers on short stays, especially in key international gateway cities such as London, Paris, Singapore, Melbourne, Beijing, Bangkok and Tokyo.

From a broader perspective, Asia is the fastest-growing region in the world today. The high level of foreign direct investments in countries like China, India and Singapore will continue to generate strong demand for serviced apartments, including short stays.

### Q What is your product for the market?

We believe in striking the right balance – having sufficient brands to target specific groups of travellers with unique needs and preferences, while avoiding too many brands that may be confusing. We already have three distinctive brands of serviced residences that are well-suited to the different lifestyle needs of travellers both on long and short stays.

### Q What differentiates your product?

We hope to achieve this through our multi-million dollar refurbishment programme that is being rolled out in Asia and Europe. We have received very positive feedback for our refurbished properties. Through customer-centric initiatives and enhanced reservation and property management systems, we want to redesign the experience at each service touch-point, so that in every interaction with staff, guests will experience the unique Ascott touch that makes them feel at home.

### Q Why should travel consultants choose you?

Today's savvy travellers are increasingly looking for value and flexibility when choosing accommodation options. As opposed to cookie-cutter rooms, serviced residences provide the flexibility of sharing an apartment with individual bedrooms, more space, separate living and dining areas, and a well-equipped kitchen. More importantly, these features enable guests to still enjoy the familiar comforts of home while getting acquainted with the sights and sounds of the city.

## Oakwood Asia-Pacific

Caroline Leong

Director of marketing

### Q What do you think of the short-stay market?

There has been a marked growth as travellers, both business and leisure, are more aware of the benefits and value for money this type of accommodation provides. This increase is being seen all over Asia.

### Q What is your product for the market?

All our three brands in Asia – Oakwood Premier, Oakwood Residence and Oakwood Apartments – accept short stays and provide housing for a wide range of customers who can choose according to their requirements and lifestyles. Most of our properties have no minimum length of

stay and accept stays as short as one night.

### Q What differentiates your product?

Oakwood properties are elegant in design and quality, with an international feel that makes any guest immediately feel welcome regardless of nationality. The apartments are spacious, fully furnished and fully equipped.

### Q Why should travel consultants choose you?

The major benefit of staying, or putting up your client, at a serviced apartment property instead of a hotel is the living space. Travel consultants would be applauded for not getting their customers to cram into small hotel rooms but instead allowing them to enjoy actual living spaces like the living room, dining room and kitchen. This is most important for family travel where some of the conveniences of home need not be given up, such as cooking your own breakfast for the kids or washing their clothing.



There is a growing demand for serviced residences from both business and family travellers for long and short stays. Companies sending a few staff on short-term overseas assignments find serviced residences more affordable compared to hotel accommodation. The cooking facilities also appeal to family travel, even if it is for a short stay of less than a week.

Sharitha Rajendran

Travel consultant, Topaz Travels Malaysia

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# The next wave of design

Globally, design is alive and well, thanks to growing numbers of sophisticated travellers who can tell what's kitsch and what's cool faster than you can check them in.

This is what is keeping design consultants and hotel developers awake at night: customers who not only want design, but technology that works. Customers who are always thirsty for something new, but who would ditch anything artificial for the authentic destination experience. Customers from emerging markets, who are not just vast in numbers, but also diverse in needs. Customers who are on business but combine leisure, and who are on leisure but must work. Design hotels must be flexible and cater to this amalgamation.

For design consultants like Frederic Masin, an associate at Hirsch Bedner Associates (HBA), and Christopher Chua, associate director-architecture of Blink Design Group, add also the client from hell, one without vision and an open mind, who does not know what he wants

and ends up with generic formulas which do not push designers beyond their limits. For developers, add the design consultant who goes for the theatrics and aesthetics, leading to over-designed spaces, over-trendy materials – contrived and cold odes to themselves.

But when both come together like an interlocking jigsaw, the result can be a breakthrough.

For HBA's Masin, a design breakthrough entails a real conceptual change, the way Grand Hyatt Singapore's Mezza9 has changed the all-day dining concept, design and operation.

"The kitchen was brought to the front of the house and the whole layout was arranged to suit this revolution. It's actually a common experience in Singapore, where food courts are popular, so this restaurant also represents a turning point where global brands started to pay attention and learn in a creative fashion from humble but clever local solutions," said Masin.

The industry has seen other real design breakthroughs, such

as John Portman's atrium hotels; Amanresorts, which defined the 'lifestyle experience'; Banyan Tree Hotels & Resorts which created the 'destination spa'; the birth of the oxymoronic 'urban resort' such as The PuLi in Shanghai; the launch of W Hotels, which saw other global hotel chains following suit with their own design hotel lines; or more recently, the presence of players such as Mexico-based Grupo Habita and Singapore-based Unlisted Collection, whose design hotels reinvigorate whole neighbourhoods.

An exponential growth of design hotels in recent years, however, have made them common and pretentious at times, a point consultants interviewed by *TTG Asia* generally agreed on.

"It is very disheartening to see the overuse of arts, fashion and culture to hide the non-existence of real innovation in design," said Warren Foster-Brown, managing director and owner of FBEYE International, whose current projects include The Westin Singapore Marina Bay.

## The next breakthroughs

Consultants believe the next breakthroughs need to occur in the way local culture and technology are incorporated into design hotels.

Another area is in the way hotels can be designed to offer individual attention to the traveller. As Blink's Chua, who worked on W Retreat & Spa - Maldives as an architect, put it: "Can we design a hotel that allows 'pure' luxury in terms of individual service and attention to needs and likes? Have a supple design that allows for slight room adjustments for repeat guests that prefer their work desk a certain way, public spaces that allow a guest who always travels alone to have his own private corner, lobby lounges that adapt to how this particular guest likes to take his drinks, etc."

While in the past design hotels might have been more design-centric than guest-centric, the mood clearly has reversed to focus on the changing customer.

Said Foster-Brown: "The market is in their mid 20s to mid 50s,

middle to upper income, well-travelled, technologically savvy and socially conscious. Extensive information on hotels in magazines, newspapers and online media exposes them to different hotel designs from around the world and they have the ability to choose a hotel that best suits their lifestyle and personality. The design, therefore, should not only offer individualised attention and personal satisfaction but incorporate a sense of place that most hotels lack these days.

"The increased use and dependence on technology to engage and retain guests is a key matter to look into. As tablets, electronic concierges, in-room connectivity and entertainment system would continue to enhance the ambience, convenience and comfort, design hotels, unlike traditional hotels, should compete by providing a particular lifestyle experience that would exceed the guest's physical, emotional and well-being needs.

"Who wants to be at home when one can be in a home one dreams of? That's the dream stay."



**LOCATION** Totally original. It's the only one in the Engadin Valley that is linked by a private, covered walkway to the Corvatsch cable car building. For skiers in winter and hikers in summer, it does not get any better than this, a seamless access to the highest ski domain (3,300m) in the Upper Engadin region and to one of Switzerland's most spectacular hiking areas. That's not all: perched on the highest point of Surlej village, Nira has commanding views of Lake Silvaplana. So think breathtaking views of lakes and mountains, ideal too for clients who just want a relaxing, do-nothing or a spa retreat. For those who need shopping therapy, St Moritz is just 5km away.

**DESIGN** At first impression from the outside, the glass-and-timber building does not appear particularly original. Inside is what's highly original. I've been to many mountain resorts in Switzerland but I've never encountered one that has a real sense of fun, exuberance and sex appeal. It's bold of Puri, for instance, to adorn the hotel's walls, in public areas and rooms,

## Nira Alpina, Switzerland



A member of Design Hotels, Nira Alpina reflects the ideas of visionary hotelier, MPS Puri, who has worked with companies such as Raffles Hotels & Resorts and General Hotel Management. It's a study in being original in the mountains, with design as just *one* of the ways, not the overriding factor. *Raini Hamdi* reviews what makes it original

with provocative pictures of famous women by Italian photographer, Amedeo Turello. Quality natural fabrics and furnishings are used and earthy tones such as chocolate suede, rich mahogany damasks and natural Italian stone tiles – not your usual mountain resort colours – are employed, resulting in a luxurious, intimate and homely feel to Nira. Staff's attitude (youthful and helpful) also goes a long way in achieving the 'fun before formality', 'pleasure before protocol' and 'snow before show' concept of Nira.

**ROOM** Hugely original in boasting floor-to-ceiling windows and a large sun terrace

(all 70 rooms and suites have these features), which are sheer luxury for a mountain resort. They beam in the gorgeous views and colours of nature – who needs to go out? Especially too when so much care has been taken to ensure every essential amenity/service a guest needs today is all there and works without a hitch, down to an iPod dock, espresso machine, wireless Internet and the wide range of reading materials.

**F&B** Puri's F&B expertise gives Engadin new dining choices that are destinations in their own right, in particular, Stars on the top floor of the hotel, which has to be one

of the trendiest places to dine in the valley, with panoramic views of lakes and mountains. We shared utterly delicious dishes including tandoori king prawns, deep-fried lobster with wasabi mayonnaise and Black Angus entrecôte with Charon sauce. Judging from the happy laughter and the lovely buzz in the restaurant, it is clear Puri's gamble to offer a different alternative in Engadin has paid off.

**VERDICT** Opened November 30, 2011, Nira Alpina is still a best-kept secret among those in the know. But I bet that won't be for long. Its originality in several important aspects makes Nira Alpina a great design hotel.

**Name** Nira Alpina  
**No. of rooms and suites** 70  
**Rate** From CHF410 (US\$434) for two pax during winter, including ski pass and breakfast  
**Contact details**  
 Tel: (41-81) 838-6969  
 Email: [reservations@niraalpina.com](mailto:reservations@niraalpina.com)  
 Website: [www.niraalpina.com](http://www.niraalpina.com)

# hotels

Far from being passé, the design hotel concept is expected to grow. **Raini Hamdi** looks at why, and at the factors that will shape the next wave of design hotels



**Masin: breakthrough is driven by real conceptual change**

Added Lyndon Neri, founding partner, NHDRO: “Clients are becoming more global. They have two desires on a short trip: cultural immersion and a sense of tranquility. They want the hotel to have a strong sense of domesticity (home) to give them peace and rest but, at the same time, these new customers want a hotel culture that is contextual and rooted to the place that they are visiting.”

## On top of the game

Design hotels believe they are on top of changing customer trends.

Mike Tiedy, senior vice president-Design & Innovation at Starwood Hotels & Resorts



**Foster-Brown: offer a complete lifestyle experience**

Worldwide, said: “Appreciation for good design is growing around the world. We drive to wow each customer that walks through the door with an expressive and immersive environment. The customer does not have to intellectually contemplate every design solution. The design gives a feeling of comfort and ‘fit’ that makes everything just seem right.”

What makes everything fits is not just an edgy design, but a high level of comfort, technology that works and a highly personalised service delivery, added Markland Blaiklock, senior vice president of Sofitel Asia-Pacific.

The chain opened its second



**Chua: individual service and attention to needs and likes**

Sofitel So in the world in Bangkok recently and, in a first, had no fewer than four different architects/designers working on the property. But it all fits, Blaiklock maintained. “The owner, Verawat Wongvasith, wanted to theme the hotel around the five elements in Chinese feng shui and this evolved into creating four hotels within the hotel, each with its own private atrium.

“The approach merged well with the DNA of the brand, which centres on strong sense of destination (in this case, Thailand), with a fifth designer, Christian Lacroix, providing a link to Sofitel’s (French) origin.”

The hotel also introduced a



**Blaiklock: strong sense of place and link to brand’s origins**

paperless Mac mini solution in all rooms, giving guests the convenience to order room service, browse the Internet and watch TV from one source.

Players expect Asia’s design hotels sector to fast catch up with Europe and the US – which have had a headstart on the concept – and produce new breakthroughs.

Design Hotels founder and CEO, Claus Sendlinger, said: “South-east Asia appears to be leading the pack within Asia, especially Bali and Thailand, where there is an increasing number of small, independent design-led properties with interesting concepts.

“We are also seeing more



**Tiedy: good design gives a feeling of comfort and should ‘fit’**

prominent architects, designers and creative minds from Singapore working on interesting projects throughout Asia. Having the World Architectural Festival organised in Singapore for the first time this year outside of Barcelona is also a testament to the importance of design in Asia.”

Blaiklock too observes that Asia is now attracting and cultivating more talented and innovative designers. “The cost to construct and the cost of labour are also generally lower. In addition, the rich cultures in Asia provide an exotic backdrop and inspiration for very unique design concepts,” he said.



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Furama Chiang Mai, Chiang Mai  
Furama Jomtien Beach, Pattaya

FuramaXclusive Asoke, Bangkok  
FuramaXclusive Sathorn, Bangkok  
FuramaXclusive Sukhumvit, Bangkok  
FuramaXclusive Resort & Spa Aiyapura, Koh Chang

FX Hotel Makkasan, Bangkok  
FX Hotel Royal Panerai, Chiang Mai  
FX Hotel Royal Peninsula, Chiang Mai  
FX Resort Chaweng, Koh Samui

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**What breakthroughs in design hotels are you seeing?**

We're seeing some real breakthroughs by independent, innovative hotel groups such as Mexico's Grupo Habita, which has 11 hotels in Mexico and one in New York, and Unlisted Collection by Singaporean hotelier Loh Lik Peng, who owns hotels like New Majestic and Wanderlust in Singapore, The Waterhouse at South Bund in Shanghai and Town Hall Hotel & Apartments in London.

The hotels in both groups act as catalysts for renewal and reinvigorate the neighbourhoods. They are truly visionary hoteliers who look at an empty lot or a nondescript structure and turn it into a concept-driven, one-of-a-kind hotel attracting locals as well as travellers.

CitizenM has an interesting product within the mid-tier hotel chains by fitting out tiny spaces with intelligent design.

**What breakthroughs in design hotels would you like to see?**

I would like to see more hotels provide offerings that are authentic, challenging and surprising, which are attributes of an interesting city and exciting neighbourhood. So what was hot last week might not be available this week. The hotel should be a member of the community and its staff absorbed in the fabric of the neighbourhood, where the concierge takes on the role as a lifestyle consultant.

Besides functionality, I would also like to see more originality and intuitive design in hotels. I'm convinced that if something is made with intelligence, it will look good and be useful too. At The Upper House in Hong Kong, everything is entirely intuitive. When you open a drawer, you break out in a smile because it contains all the adaptors you could possibly need.

**What's passé about design hotels, what's not?**

Passé: overly-designed hotels which are not truly functional, over-using or misusing the term 'design'.

Here to stay: going local and providing an increased depth of experience inextricably linked to the surroundings.

# How to create inspiring design

Founder and CEO of Design Hotels, Claus Sendlinger, talks to **Raini Hamdi** about design that inspires and is timeless



**How do you maintain a collection that's timeless when design evolves?**

By having clear fundamentals and constantly keeping them on track. Only when a hotel has a coherent overall concept which embraces architecture, design, brand, long-term prospects, the right people to carry things through and a good connection to the local area will they be able to create a timeless product. These six pillars are indispensable for a timeless concept.

**What changes in customer profiles and markets design hotels must adapt to?**

Hotels need to determine which stage of luxury their customers and markets are in then adapt and tailor-make their offerings accordingly. Trend forecasting company The Future Laboratory has recognised the existence of five different types or stages of the luxury market today, each with its own set of attributes.

The first level is about demonstrative wealth and the purchase of luxury brands like Louis Vuitton or Gucci. You can observe this tide in the emerging economies like Russia, China, Brazil and India. The second level focuses on artisanal and heritage brands where a product tells a story like Dunhill and Hermes. Customers at the third level are engaged through emotions and experience, and are less concerned with the brand and value. The fourth level brings with it social and ecological responsibility. The ultimate luxury, or fifth level, is to take a journey inward and discover oneself, perhaps in a monk's cell or consulting a shaman.

**What's your growth target for Asia?**

We forecast an annual growth of five to 10 new members in Asia-Pacific and have been working to create a more diverse APAC portfolio over the last few years, especially in key cities where we do not have presence yet. Examples include the QT Sydney and Kimamaya, our first properties in Sydney and Hokkaido respectively. We also recently added The Gate Hotel Kaminarimon by HULIC to our Tokyo portfolio and the Mira Moon, opening in Hong Kong's Wan Chai district by February 2013 (see article below).

## Taking design cues from Chinese fables



Miramar Group's design hotel journey is just starting – and its soon-to-open Mira Moon has given Chinese traditions a contemporary spin, while incorporating technology throughout.

Mira Moon, which is scheduled to open in Wan Chai in 2013, offers 90 rooms in

three sizes (from 22m<sup>2</sup> to 40.5m<sup>2</sup>), a 139m<sup>2</sup> penthouse suite, as well as facilities such as a lobby bar, a restaurant and a gym. Rooms are outfitted with tech-savvy features such iPad dock stations.

Backed by a strong design aesthetic, guests stepping into the hotel will be greeted by a trio of hanging lanterns – which light up and move about at different times of the day.

Dirk Dalichau, director of group strategic marketing, Miramar Group, said: "A design-focused property, Mira Moon takes traditional Chinese folklore and the Moon Festival and presents them in a contemporary way."

The moon as well as characters from the fable – the Moon Goddess and the Rabbit – are represented throughout the hotel, from the peony flower walls and carpets to Bisazza mosaic tiles.

Recognising that design has become indispensable in hotels, Dalichau said: "At Mira Moon, we try to show modern Hong Kong in many ways. The city is vibrant and fun, so we incorporate items like chandeliers, while linking the traditional and urban."

Great design should be timeless, he emphasised. "For example, we feature Arne Jacobsen's Egg chairs in four different colours to match the room interiors. This timeless design dates back to the 1950s and it still works. It's vital to have a story behind to keep it alive."

However, design is not the hotel's only USP, Dalichau pointed out, as other details like welcome amenities, beauty products and technology also count.

"At Mira Moon, the initial concept is to provide more platforms of communication and we also update concepts to keep pace with travellers' changing needs. For instance, Gen Y and Gen Z have different demands and behaviours, so we need to keep things alive and up to date," he said. "It's a big step as this design hotel is only slightly smaller than The Mira. We are targeting savvy travellers from the media, music and finance (industries)."

In 2009, the chain successfully revamped and rebranded its flagship Miramar Hotel as The Mira Hong Kong, which became the blueprint for its second design hotel, Mira Moon. It now

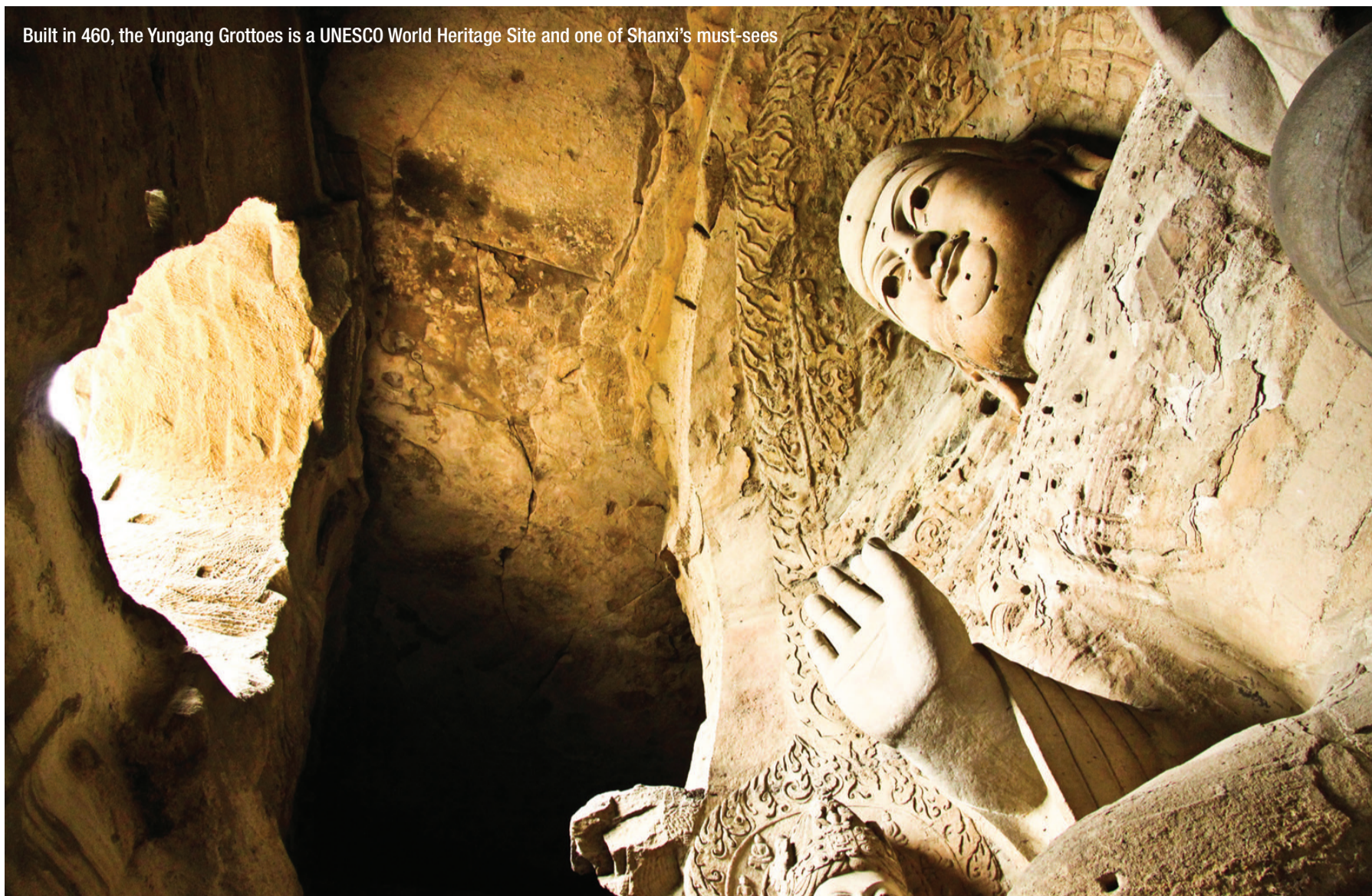
targets FITs who appreciate design and lifestyle.

"Prior to the revamp, the Miramar was an old traditional five-star property targeting tour groups. The management transformed the entire hotel – it was not just a change in design but also a service concept and product upgrade. This transformation brought the company into the lifestyle segment, raising our profile as well as enhancing our image," said Dalichau.

Brand awareness and international exposure spiked, with The Mira winning more than 30 awards since its inception. The hotel also saw its market mix – once dominated by Chinese and regional travellers – giving way to more international travellers who now comprise 50 per cent of all guests. The hotel's renewal was also a financial success as room rates doubled, he revealed.

Hong Kong's design hotel development needs to move faster to keep up with the changing demands and behaviour of travellers, Dalichau contended. "The Chinese market, for example, spend less on accommodation (to save up for shopping). However, we observe that more Chinese are seeking out different hotels and appreciating certain (types of) luxury. They learn quickly," he said. – **Prudence Lui**

Built in 460, the Yungang Grottoes is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of Shanxi's must-sees



Liang Xinyi

# Path to enlightenment

Shanxi builds on its storied history to map its future as part of a new tourism push. By **Liang Xinyi**

## Arrivals

In the first seven months of 2012, the northern province of Shanxi posted a healthy year-on-year growth of 23.6 per cent with one million arrivals, according to the Shanxi Province Tourism Administration (SXTA). Foreign arrivals grew 24.3 per cent to reach 642,300, about 63 per cent of total arrivals.

Tourists from Greater China comprise a significant chunk of international arrivals – 156,600 from Hong Kong (up 21.5 per cent), 75,300 from Macau (up 20.7 per cent) and 142,800 from Taiwan (up 24.5 per cent). SXTA is targeting 1.8 million arrivals for 2012, a climb of 18 per cent.

## NTO

Since launching last December, the *Shanxi, Jin Shan Jin Mei* campaign, which refers to the destination as a land of splendours, has received acclaim for the clever play of Chinese words and Shanxi's history.

SXTA chief, Xi Xiaojun, said: "In recent years, we have embarked on various strategies to re-invent Shanxi in order to establish the province as a renowned tourist destination, both locally and internationally. We

have pushed for the integrated development of culture and tourism to build up our branding and products, while monitoring the market and improving service standards. As a result, Shanxi's tourism development is steadily rising and products constantly becoming richer."

Promotional clips were aired across major Chinese media like the state-owned CCTV and Hong Kong's Phoenix Satellite Television Holdings and were shown as far away as New York City's Times Square. SXTA has also collaborated with local TV stations to use the province as backdrops for upcoming drama productions.

In April, the campaign was brought onto the digital platform with the launch of a feature website, which spotlighted a vote of Shanxi's top 10 scenic sites, lucky draws and a microblog detailing progress made in the tourism sector.

## Access

This year, Taiyuan saw an increase in its direct regional connections, with Hainan Airlines launching twice-weekly flights on the Singapore-Haikou (Hainan)-Taiyuan route on May 11 and Hong Kong Air-



"Our branding is becoming stronger by the day, with yearly tourism revenues growing at over 20 per cent, while economic and social benefits are constantly on the rise."

**Xi Xiaojun**  
Chief

Shanxi Province Tourism Administration

lines starting twice-weekly Hong Kong-Taiyuan flights on June 17.

Taiyuan Wusu International Airport, in the provincial capital, is Shanxi's main aviation hub. During its RMB1.57 billion (US\$247 million) expansion in 2007, a 55,000m<sup>2</sup> Terminal 2 was added to the airport to make it A380-operational and increase its handling capacity to six million passengers annually. According to the Shanxi Civil Airport Group, the airport handled 587,600 passengers last year.

Shanxi's other aviation facility in Datong city, Datong Yungang Airport, formerly Datong Beizhao Airport, was renamed last month to reflect its proximity to the Yungang Grottoes.

Due to its proximity to Beijing and Xi'an, travelling to Shanxi by car from these two cities is also popular among tourists.

## Events

Apart from its collection of UNESCO World Heritage Sites (see page 18), Shanxi has also endeavoured to drive tourism through new events and festivals.

SXTA is organising the inaugural Shanxi Tourism Season from August to October, offering 35 cultural festivals and activities

across the province's 10 cities and 25 counties. Largest among the events is the 17<sup>th</sup> China Northern Tourism Trade Fair in August, while the Pingyao International Photography Festival and the Taiyuan International Marathon – both taking place this month – are highlights.

## Trade

Travel consultants who were on the Shanxi fam trip organised by Hainan Airlines in July said the new Singapore-Taiyuan connection offered a chance to package the destination for niche travellers who appreciate history and culture. Some were also keen to combine Shanxi with Xi'an and Beijing.

However, Huang Yuxiang, president, Super Travels Singapore, suggested that the government look into better tourism infrastructure such as developing roads linking the attractions. "One of Shanxi's biggest drawbacks is the great distances between the attractions, resulting in long drives and some repeated journeys," he explained.

Hainan Airlines' flight timings (late departure from Singapore and early departure from Taiyuan resulting in almost two days spent flying) are also an issue.

My choices

Shanxi

Compiled by  
Liang Xinyi

What is your biggest  
challenge right now?

What must be done?

What do you need from...

What are the prospects for  
2012?



**Xia Zhimin**  
General manager  
Shanxi Red Horse  
International Travel Service

We hope to keep a foothold in our home province and capitalise on our rich assets and cultural heritage to develop tourism demand. Amid growing Chinese interest in overseas travel, we need to constantly create new products to meet changing market trends, as well as to expand our business and brand.

Our broad objectives are to establish our brand, expand our business networks and diversity our products. We want to leverage on our strengths to capture a bigger share of Shanxi's inbound market, while pushing our company onto the global platform.

**the government/airlines?** The government should take on a leading role to drive the market, such as creating more opportunities for us to promote our tourism brand and coming up with more incentives to boost the market. As for airlines, we hope they can increase flight capacity during the peak tourist season.

This has been a very difficult year for us, as inflation and economic turmoil have affected our business to a certain extent. In spite of such challenges, our business has been growing rather steadily in the first half of 2012, so we are likely to maintain relatively stable levels for this year.



**Sheng Xingxiang**  
General manager  
De Chao Ge Hotel

As a heritage boutique hotel, we have to integrate modern and traditional designs while preserving architecture, for example, deciding how to place light switches in the rooms and what types of chairs to use in the courtyard. As well, we have to maintain our unique positioning as one of the top boutique hotels in Pingyao.

Despite opening for just three months, we have identified areas on how we can improve our amenities based on customers' feedback. We have outlined plans to improve in-room amenities. For example, the mattresses, while authentic, will be replaced with softer, more comfortable versions.

**the government?** We definitely need the authorities to promote Shanxi to a bigger international audience. For instance, Pingyao is seeing more Europeans – about 80 per cent – among our foreign markets due to the promotion of China products in Paris, so more of such efforts will be welcomed.

The upcoming period from October to March is the low season for Shanxi, so we expect to see fewer tourist arrivals and a dip in occupancy to around 10 per cent. We hope to achieve high occupancy rates of 80-90 per cent during the peak season to compensate for the lull period.



**Xing Yidong**  
General manager  
Northwest region and  
Taiyuan operating  
department  
Hainan Airlines

China Eastern Airlines serves Taiyuan through Bangkok charters, which have connecting flights to Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand. These compete with our Taiyuan-Singapore route. In addition, Singapore's outbound market to Shanxi is not yet developed.

We have to attract more travel agencies to promote our Singapore-Taiyuan route. We are currently in the midst of discussion with interested companies to look at creating packages to grow passenger traffic both ways.

**the trade?** Outbound tour operators should try to promote new packages to Shanxi. We also hope more partners will collaborate with Hainan Airlines to create diverse products.

It will be the peak travel season for Hainan and South-east Asia in autumn/winter. We also hope the Singapore-Taiyuan market will increase progressively. Overall, the future looks bright.

Products

An opportunity to delve into the heart of Chinese history

Pingyao

Atmospheric Pingyao offers a great immersion in period Chinese living, with its cobble streets lined with pagodas, shops, family compounds and vendors plying their wares. Said to resemble a tortoise, the 2.25km<sup>2</sup> city has rammed-earth walls measuring 1.6km long and 12m high with gate towers at four corners, while some 50,000 inhabitants still reside within its confines today.

A UNESCO World Heritage Site, it stands out as a well-preserved example of a Han Chinese city that has retained much of its architecture since the Ming and Qing dynasties. Pingyao was once the financial nerve centre of China during the Qing dynasty, as the first Chinese bank, Rishengchang, had its origins here. Golf buggies can be hired

to get around – parts of the city are off-limits to vehicles.

**Contact**  
Tel: (86-354) 562-0630  
Website: [www.pingyao.gov.cn](http://www.pingyao.gov.cn)

Hanging Temple

Built on the foot of Mount Heng, one of China's holy peaks, the Hanging Temple is probably the biggest attraction of Shanxi. Perched 75m above the ground, the 1,500-year-old monastery appears precariously suspended on a rocky cliff but is actually held in place by oak cross-beams fitted into holes chiselled through the bedrock – a great demonstration of ancient Chinese architectural prowess. This remarkable site is also dedicated to China's three main religions, with Taoist, Buddhist and Confucianism shrines well-represented in the chambers. The

last major facelift was during the Qing dynasty (circa 1900), although visitors with a phobia of heights may be wary of stepping onto the rickety staircases and narrow walkways.

De Chao Ge Hotel

A two-storey boutique property that debuted in Pingyao this June, the 71-key De Chao Ge Hotel provides an atmospheric stay in a traditional courtyard setting. To maintain authenticity, local artisans were hired to restore the historic residence to its former glory, while rooms are outfitted with wooden lattice doors, kang beds (sleeping platforms) with silk runners, flatscreen TVs and ensuite bathrooms. Brick alleyways, tiled roofs, elaborate eaves and a 260-pax restaurant tucked underground add to the

sense of history. Rates start from RMB438 (US\$69) per night.

**Contact**  
Tel: (86-354) 560-2999  
Website: [www.dcgghotel.com](http://www.dcgghotel.com)

Yungang Grottoes

Offering insights into China's early Buddhist cave art heritage is Yungang Grottoes, a UNESCO World Heritage Site dating back to the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Stretching for about 1km, the 252 grottoes are carved into the sandstone cliffs of Mount Wuzhou, with its recesses housing 51,000 Buddha statues varying from a few centimetres to 17m tall. Bearing influences from as far as Central Asia and India, the sculptures and cave art have sustained some damage and cracks due to years of weathering and earthquakes. The area surrounding the grottoes was given a

facelift and expansion in 2009 to include a museum, an exhibition hall and a performing arts centre. On-site guides conduct tours of the 2.2km<sup>2</sup> premise; for bigger groups, headphones can be requested.

**Contact**  
Tel: (86-352) 302-6230  
Website: [www.yungang.org](http://www.yungang.org)



From left: Pingyao, Hanging Temple, De Chao Ge Hotel and Yungang Grottoes

## Test drive

## Hainan Airlines



**Liang Xinyi** takes a seat on the Chinese carrier's new flights between Singapore and Shanxi's Taiyuan

**WHY** Hainan Airlines launched its Singapore-Haikou (Hainan)-Taiyuan (Shanxi) route on May 11, providing the first direct link between the Lion City and the northern Chinese province.

An extension of the carrier's existing Singapore-Haikou service, the twice-weekly Singapore-Haikou-Taiyuan flights are operated using Boeing 737-800 aircraft with eight first class and 156 economy class seats.

The fourth-largest Chinese carrier in terms of fleet size, Hainan Airlines has in recent years beaten other bigger state-owned airlines to garner higher ratings among passengers and trade bodies alike – it was certified five-star by Skytrax in 2011. It also offers a frequent-flyer programme, Fortune Wing Club.

**WHAT** I boarded the Shanxi-bound flight on a late Monday afternoon at Changi Airport Terminal 2. A brightly lit cabin and flight attendants – clad in grey uniforms with cheery red-and-orange-striped scarves – greeted me. Eight business class seats were located at the front of the aircraft, while the 3x3 seating configuration in economy class – where I was seated – brought to mind a budget carrier, but afforded a decent level of comfort and legroom.

Shortly after take-off, the crew started serving dinner, which included rice topped with fish or chicken and a Western meal set. Service was prompt and delivered with smiles, although on-board announcements in English could be clearer.

The Chinese newspapers and inflight magazines provided a good read but the lack of English materials is likely a bane to non-Chinese travellers. Moreover, without in-seat TV, some passengers may find it hard to keep themselves entertained through-

out the flight.

At Haikou's Meilan International Airport, all passengers, whether disembarking or transiting, were required to go through immigrations – a Chinese regulation that customs have to be cleared at the first Chinese port of call. While adding one-and-a-half hours to the journey, the stopover also provided a much-needed stretch for my legs after the three-hour-plus flight from Singapore to Haikou.

The onward flight took another three-plus hours, with just juices and simple snacks served for this leg. Finally we landed in Taiyuan past midnight, and by then I was just keen to check in to my hotel for the night.

**HOW** As the flight makes a stopover at Haikou, Hainan Island can be included as part of a Shanxi package.

Travel consultants keen to sell the Singapore-Taiyuan route can approach Hainan Airlines for discounted fares on group tour bookings.



**Name** Hainan Airlines  
**Rates** From S\$632 (US\$506) for a return Singapore-Taiyuan economy ticket

**Contact details**  
Tel: (86-898) 950-718  
Email: ffp@hnair.com  
Website: global.hnair.com



**VERDICT** An efficient airline that is a notch better than its Chinese counterparts, an observation also made by several

travel experts who were on my fam trip. Hainan Airlines offers value for money with attractively priced flights and generally up-to-par service.

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Solaire Resort &amp; Casino Manila will be first to open among the four projects in Entertainment City



Solaire Resort &amp; Casino Manila

# Gearing up for more fun

Entertainment City's debut and new flights are set to increase footfalls. By **Marianne Carandang**

**NTO** In January, the Philippine Department of Tourism (DoT) unveiled a new campaign, *It's more fun in the Philippines*, which was promoted extensively across mainstream and social media as well as major trade-shows. It has also given special attention to Palawan's Puerto Princesa Underground River, voted one of the New7Wonders of Nature early this year.

Marketing efforts were strengthened in South Korea, Japan, India (Punjab), the US and Russia (Khabarovsk and Vladivostok), with special advertising and promotional activities also held in London during the Olympic season.

To grow more arrivals from South-east Asia, the DOT has appointed Malaysia representative Melissa Ong and Singapore representative Charles Leong to take on marketing responsibilities in Thailand and Indonesia respectively.

**Arrivals** According to the DoT, arrivals from January to June reached 1.9 million, a year-on-year growth of 11.7 per cent. However, the NTO has revised its 2012 target from 4.9 mil-

lion to 4.6 million arrivals due to the mass cancellations from the Chinese market after China issued a travel advisory for the Philippines. In spite of this, it is still the country's fastest-growing market, surging 43 per cent from January to June to reach 105,423 visitors.

During the same period, arrivals climbed 10.5, 4.8 and 7.8 per cent respectively for top markets South Korea (474,685), the US (354,259) and Japan (195,504). Singapore – ranked the 7<sup>th</sup> market with 73,015 visitors – grew 10.4 per cent, while Malaysia – at the 11<sup>th</sup> position – grew 12 per cent with 49,788 visitors.

**Products** Solaire Resort & Casino Manila, one of the four integrated resorts (IRs) that make up the 962,000m<sup>2</sup> Entertainment City along Manila Bay, is now gearing up for debut in early 2013.

Operated by Bloomberry Resorts, the 500-key Solaire will have a 1,900m<sup>2</sup> column-free grand ballroom for 1,600 pax, a 18,500m<sup>2</sup> gaming space on two levels, 300 gaming tables and 1,200 slot machines, various F&B outlets and wellness facilities.

Belle Entertainment's Belle



**"There are a lot of emerging properties in Manila. If we have higher room capacity, our rates might become competitive in relation to our ASEAN neighbours."**

**Cesar R Cruz**  
President  
TRIPS Travel

Grande Manila Bay, which features 1,100 rooms across six hotels and 19,600m<sup>2</sup> of casino gaming space, is likely to open by end 2013 or early 2014.

The US\$2.3 billion Manila Bay Resorts by Universal Entertainment Corp is expected to debut in 2014 with 2,050 keys and 28,000m<sup>2</sup> of gaming space, while Travellers International plans to open the 2,800-key Resorts World Bayshore by 2015 or 2016.

Optimistic about the prospects of IR tourism, DoT assistant secretary for tourism planning and promotions, Benito Bengzon, said: "You can imagine the success of Entertainment City and what it can offer as a must-see destination in Manila."

**Access** In March, Cebu Pacific (CEB) began twice-weekly flights from Manila to Hanoi and thrice-weekly flights to Siem Reap in April. Zest Air started thrice-weekly flights from Manila to Jinjiang in April, daily flights to Incheon in June and four weekly flights to Shanghai in July. Philippine Airlines (PAL) launched twice-weekly flights to Bali in April and increased frequency of Incheon services to thrice daily from July.

The destination is also seeing the development of secondary international airports. AirAsia Philippines began operating in February from Clark, mounting services to Davao, Kalibo, Puerto Princesa, Kuala Lumpur, Kota Kinabalu, Hong Kong and Macau, while Dragonair started daily Clark-Hong Kong flights in May. SEAir began thrice-weekly flights from Clark to Kota Kinabalu in May and will up flights between Clark and Hong Kong to twice daily from 10 a week starting October 28. Sister LCC, SEAir I, is also expected to launch in October or November.

From its Iloilo hub, CEB will commence twice-weekly flights to Hong Kong and thrice-weekly flights to Singapore on November 8 and 9 respectively. Its Cebu-Bangkok and Cebu-Hong Kong routes – both twice-weekly services – will take off on December 8 and 9 respectively.

Meanwhile, the creation of new air links from the Philippines to China has been postponed due to the travel advisory, but flights are expected to resume gradually. China Southern Airlines will ramp up frequency on the Guangzhou-Manila sector from once- to twice-daily from October 1.

Checking in

Sofitel Philippine Plaza Manila



Marianne Carandang gets a rare glimpse of the hotel's most opulent offering, the 576m<sup>2</sup> Imperial Residence

**LOCATION** Nestled within the Cultural Center of the Philippines Complex, Sofitel Manila is just some 20 minutes from Ninoy Aquino International Airport. It is also near the World Trade Center Metro Manila and the SM Mall of Asia, with complimentary shuttles to the mall.

**ROOMS** Boasting 609 rooms, the hotel includes three Opera Suites, four Luxury Suites, eight Prestige Suites and 28 Sofitel Suites. I was put up at the Imperial Residence – comprising the Imperial Suite and four Luxury Club Millésime rooms – which has hosted heads of state such as Hilary Clinton and Al Gore, as well as celebrities like Justin Timberlake and Manny Pacquiao. Relunched in March after a US\$1 million revamp by Japan's

Spin Design Studio, it is now adorned with furnishings from Cebu and bronze sculptures designed by Philippine artist, Eduardo Castrillo.

I was welcomed with a delicious lemongrass-infused mango drink and a cold towel, before being shown around the luxurious facilities. A personal butler attended to all my needs, from arranging my meals to scheduling a spa treatment, offered daily for Imperial Suite guests.

The living room opened on to a balcony deck with unobstructed views of the Manila Bay. The stately dining room, which seats 10, can also be used for meetings.

In the bedroom, the double bed was clad with crisp sheets and soft pillows, which gave me a restful sleep after a long day. The bathroom featured Hermès toiletries and his-and-hers Gessi shower fixtures with three settings and LED lights, while a water closet with a warmed toilet seat and programmable settings provided extra comfort.

Other amenities include three LCD TVs (in the living room,

bathroom and bedroom), free Wi-Fi, Bose sound systems and a pre-programmed iPod.

**F&B** The hotel offers five dining outlets and excellent French cuisine. Le Bar, where all buffet meals are served, features sushi, foie gras, escargots and a good selection of cheese. The Sunset Bar, as its name suggests, is good for sundowners, as is the So Chill bar. Snaps Sports Bar is open 24 hours and has a casino game area. Currently under renovations, Spiral is due to reopen in October as an interactive dining outlet with 21 cooking stations.

If you'd rather stay in, the Imperial Residence's fully equipped kitchen is well-stocked with complimentary drinks and snacks. A private chef can also whip up customised meals on request and serve them en suite, in the dining room or on the balcony.

**FACILITIES** The hotel has a spa, a gym and an outdoor lagoon pool. Meetings can be held at the club lounge, Club Millésime. The recently renovated Davao and



Boracay ballrooms can also be divided into 16 meeting rooms. The Harbour Garden tent, which can host up to 1,900 people, is being renovated and will be reopened in time for the hotel's upcoming Oktoberfest.

**SERVICE** Check-in and check-out were handled en suite. All staff were personable, confident and open, while the butler, anticipated my needs and ambitious requests round the clock. For those coming from the airport, a VIP welcome awaits, with limousine transfers and access to iPad with Wi-Fi and champagne en route.

**VERDICT** Although it can take 30-45 minutes to get to downtown Makati, Sofitel's proximity to the airport is a distinct advantage.

**Name** Sofitel Philippine Plaza Manila  
**No. of rooms** 609  
**Rate** From US\$180 for a Superior Room to US\$9,415 for the Imperial Residence  
**Contact details**  
Tel: (63-2) 551-5555  
Email: room.reservations@sofitelmanila.com  
Website: www.sofitelmanila.com

tage. The Imperial Suite can turn any stay into a romantic getaway, while providing the right setting for business travellers who mix work with pleasure.

Despite renovations in certain sections – the hotel was affected by typhoons in 2011 and floods in August – it still retains a vibrant, energetic buzz.

Overall, a great venue for both meetings and leisure.

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Email: info@icpb.org, conclave@icpb.org | www.icpb.org

My choices

Philippines

Compiled by  
Marianne Carandang

What is your business outlook for the next six months?

What would you like to see happening to rates in the next six months?

What is your biggest concern in the next six months?



**Cesar R Cruz**  
President  
TRIPS Travel

Still good – we are keeping the momentum we’ve established over the last five years. The Department of Tourism should be going more full blast with their media campaign anytime now. We expect this to be a good year for us.

There are a lot of emerging properties in Manila, and an increase in room capacity is good for the leisure market. If we have a higher room capacity, our rates might become more competitive in relation to our ASEAN neighbours.

Hopefully, additional international flights, the progress (we’re witnessing) in Congress regarding the common carrier tax issue and the upgrading of our airports will address one of our biggest setbacks – accessibility. If there’s an increase in flight capacity, this year’s arrival target for the Philippines is achievable.



**Arnie Bayag**  
Managing director  
Blue Horizons and Travel

We’ll be okay – on target with our budget for this year. We expect a few surprises, maybe an improvement in our forecast, if the travel advisory in China (against the Philippines) is lifted. We are doing well in the Russian market.

We would like them to remain steady. Hotels are not likely to increase them by the end of the year so there aren’t likely to be any changes. Gas and electricity prices are going up, but I think hotels will maintain their rates because of the increased competition. Many hotels have just opened.

If the weather situation we experienced in early August – rain and flooding – persists, that would be a big concern for us. Otherwise, everything seems on the right track – new hotels are coming up; our tourism campaign is doing well. Things look very positive.



**Anna Maria Dolor-Fernandez**  
Director of sales and marketing  
Oakwood Premier Joy~Nostalgy Center Manila

We are optimistic as we are entering the peak period from October onwards. There has been a slight drop in the long-stay segment for Q3, but our short-stay business remains constant. Several conventions have been booked in the Ortigas Business District area from October onwards, and this will surely boost occupancy in the area.

Our property was successful in increasing our average rate by 10 per cent from last year and we would like to hold on to the same rate increase in the next six months.

There will always be concerns and challenges affecting our business. One concern which can affect business is the Scarborough Shoal standoff with China. If China continues to stand firm and does not agree to settle the dispute, then this will definitely have a negative effect on the business climate.



**Cristina Ong-Cruz**  
Director of marketing  
The Peninsula Manila

Although the market remains price sensitive due to the EU monetary crisis and the China-Philippines territorial dispute, the outlook for the next six months shows growth, as investments flourish. As the host for the PATA Travel Mart 2012, the country is positioning itself as a major MICE destination to improve the MICE market.

Room rates have been healthy and we would like this to continue. I think hotels will look at increasing rates by at least five per cent to cover inflation. Hotels look at at RevPAR as a true measure of growth. Our hotel’s year-to-date RevPAR achieved a 8.7 per cent increase versus last year.

We have three main concerns: increasing electricity costs, as it affects our bottom-line revenues; talent acquisition, as talents move to join competitors with the opening of other hotels; and sustaining market share, as most corporate offices mandate cost-cutting.

Products

A discovery of Philippine culture through food, spa and heritage sites

Fort Santiago and San Agustin Church

Both historic sites are nestled within Intramuros, Manila’s old walled city. With walls made of original adobe stone and Latin marble dating back to the Spanish colonial period, Fort Santiago is also home to a museum dedicated to José Rizal, the country’s national hero. San Agustin, which incorporates Baroque and Asian influences, is the oldest missionary church in the Philippines dating back to 1571, and has been rebuilt many times after natural disasters and the Battle of Manila in 1945.



Fort Santiago

**Contact**  
Tel: (63-2) 525-6322

Binondo and Divisoria

Binondo – founded in 1594 – is the world’s oldest Chinatown. The district is best explored on foot, where you will discover a bustling but charming combination of jewellery stores, herbal pharmacies, noodle houses and full-fledged banquet halls like President’s Tea House, a local institution. Many visit Chinatown to eat, shoot pictures and scour hard-to-find Chinese items.

A new mall, Lucky Chinatown, has just opened in August,



San Agustin Church

and is conveniently connected to bargain centres like 999 Mall, 168 Mall and CityPlace Square in nearby Divisoria, where the ultimate bargains can be found. Be careful of pickpockets though, especially in Divisoria.

Binondo, located across the river from Intramuros, can be reached via taxi from P Burgos or Intramuros over Jones Bridge – ask to be dropped off at Ongpin or Lucky Chinatown Mall.

Tiendesitas

Tiendesitas may be a little out of the way for visitors – about 10-12km north of Manila Bay – but its offerings rival that of Bangkok’s Chatuchak Weekend Market. Open from noon till midnight, this airy 30,000m<sup>2</sup> market is popular with budget-conscious shoppers on the lookout for modern or ethnic antiques and furniture, novelty goods, fashion, pets and plants. Themed bazaars and live music gigs are hosted regularly at Tiendesitas.

**Contact**  
Tel: (63-2) 386-3927  
Website: [www.tiendesitas.com.ph](http://www.tiendesitas.com.ph)



Ang Bistro Sa Remedios

The Spa Manila

Spa treatments are just as popular in Manila as elsewhere in Asia, with top brands having developed different styles of massage beyond Swedish and shiatsu. Try the Philippines’ traditional *hilot* massage, a deep-tissue therapy using warm virgin coconut oil. Major hotels offer such massages, but The Spa Manila’s pampering treatments are highly recommended; bookings are essential.

The Spa Manila has seven branches – two of them in Makati (Greenbelt and Rockwell Mall) and one in Bonifacio Global City.

**Contact**  
Email: [thespa@thespa.com.ph](mailto:thespa@thespa.com.ph)  
Website: [www.thespa.com.ph](http://www.thespa.com.ph)

Ang Bistro Sa Remedios

If you find yourself in the lively Malate neighborhood, ignore the honky-tonk bars and videoke (karaoke) parlours, and head to Ang Bistro Sa Remedios (also known as Bistro Remedios), which delivers Filipino home-style cooking with aplomb. Must-try dishes include the oxtail *kare-kare*, a peanut sauce-based stew; *sugpo sa aligue*, large prawn mixed with crab fat; or *binukadkad na pla-pla*, humbly fried but delicious tilapia. Their inventive desserts, like Claude’s dream, are to die for.

**Contact**  
Tel: (63-2) 523-9153  
Website: <http://ljcrestaurants.com.ph>

# hotel meets residence



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