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TTG

A S I A

No. 1669/October 5 – 18, 2012

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US outbound bounces back

China and Indochina are happy recipients

By Linda Haden

MANILA The US outbound engine is revving up once again, after having suffered heavy blows in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, with several buyers at the PATA Travel Mart reporting a surge in bookings to Asia.

"Traffic from the US is bouncing back. Rosier economic prospects, coupled with mounting trade with Asia and air capacity increases of around 30 to 40 per cent between Asia and the US, have played pivotal roles in bolstering the US outbound sector in the last 12 months," said M Zaki, travel consultant with RZ Travel US, adding that he had recorded a 100 per cent rise in booking volume from the US to Asia so far this year, compared to 2011.

Russell Oquist, president, MG Tour Company US, said: "Generally, more Americans now have a bucket list of destinations. They've seen Europe and South America, so Asia is the next stop naturally, as this region is still new and relatively unexplored by US travellers." The company has seen bookings to Asia rise by 20 per cent since the start of the year, relative to 2011.

China and Indochina, particularly Myanmar and Cambodia, were experiencing the strongest uplifts, US buyers pinpointed.

Oquist said: "China has long been a must-see destination for US travellers, but Myanmar and Cambodia have just gotten on the to-do list, and consequently, there's been a dramatic upswing in bookings there."

Swe Swe Myint, managing director, Legendary Myanmar Travel and Art, observed: "As the US gradually lifts sanctions to Myanmar, US travellers have

started to flow in. Some 70 per cent of our tour bookings are now made by US travellers, compared to 30 per cent last year."

So far this year, double-digit growth from the US to Indochina has been recorded by Khiri Travel, said its Cambodia general manager, Jack Bartholomew. "Cambodia now features in 80 per cent of our tours... We envision the upward trend to Cambodia will continue into 2013, as there's so much pent-up demand."

Statistics from the US Office of Travel and Tourism Industries, however, revealed that US traffic to Asia rose by only nine per cent between January and July.

Some observers suggested that this inconsistency could be attributed to the fact that the bulk of growth from the US to Asia derives from the upper-middle to luxury-end of the market, which comprises a small proportion of the US outbound market.

While generally optimistic about the future prospects of the US outbound market to Asia, some buyers had doubts about how long this recovery would last, particularly for the budget to middle-end of the market.

Said Oquist: "The US market is fragile. Most US travellers are timid, and any perceived security threat at a destination, whether from a terrorist attack or a health scare, could deter them from travelling altogether."

"Nonetheless, travel consultants who deal with the higher-end of the market need not fret as much as US travellers in the luxury spectrum tend to be more experienced, and are less likely to cancel trips just because of an unconfirmed threat."



Oquist: traffic to Asia on the up

The journey is just starting for SilverNeedle Hospitality, which is gearing up to expand in Asia-Pacific with its own business-focused brand, Next. MD and CEO, Iqbal Jumabhoy, gives Gracia Chiang a preview – see page 8

Building a house of brands



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Russia and China shine for Phuket

By Liang Xinyi

MANILA Phuket is seeing emerging source markets, particularly Russia and China.

Phuket is now the second-most popular destination for Russian tourists after Pattaya, according to Visanu Jaroensilp, director—the Americas marketing division of Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), who was handling the Russian market until a

"Russian outbound has climbed from 280,000 in 2008 to one million in 2011."

Visanu Jaroensilp

Director-the Americas, who handled Russia until one month ago
Tourism Authority of Thailand

month ago.

Interviewed at PATA Travel Mart, he said: "The Russian market has seen exponential growth since 2008 when TAT set up an office in Moscow. Russian outbound has climbed from 280,000 in 2008 to one million in 2011. Of these, about 20 per cent would visit Phuket."

Testifying to the popularity of Phuket is Liudmila Baranskaya, general manager of Milor Tour Russia. The island has risen to be among "one of the main destinations in Thailand" her clients are interested in, owing to an increase in flights.

At the same time, Phuket is seeing stellar growth from another market – China. Asian Trails, strong in the Europe market, launched a Chinese department three months ago to capture the large chunk of upmarket FITs, deputy managing director, Claudio Kellenberger, said.

Krosakorn Rokrunroj, also

Continued on page 3



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Tourism Data



Mobile bookings for flight tickets and hotels are growing at a dizzying rate of 68 per cent per month in India; Australians, British and Americans rank as the top source markets for arrivals during this year's F1 season in Singapore

Hot Moves

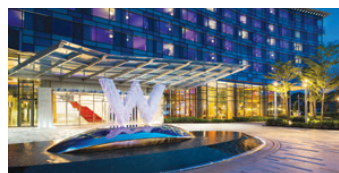


Shannon Creado (left) helms Anantara Hotels, Resorts & Spas' new sales office in India as regional sales director;

Abacus International promotes Jack Zhai to chairman of Abacus China; Destination Asia appoints Nicholas Mulley as group COO and executive director of Destination Asia China, Linda Wang as managing director of Destination Asia China and Annette Graf as general manager of Destination Asia Myanmar

Hot Deals

Starwood Hotels & Resorts offers travel professionals the opportunity to book a second night for free as part of a new resorts campaign; newly opened W Singapore – Sentosa Cove (below) is offering the Island Glamour Welcome package, which includes accommodation in the Wonderful guestroom, breakfast for two at The Kitchen Table and cocktails at Woobar, with prices starting at S\$388++ (US\$316)



When growth hurts



Sure, growth must be pursued, but it must also be sustainable.

Gracia Chiang
Deputy Group Editor and
TTG Asia Editor

I WAS SLIGHTLY taken aback when a fortnight ago I asked an industry friend what he thought were the prospects of Singapore's tourism industry. He shot back with a question instead on whether I had recently flown out of Changi. "Did you experience any delays while waiting for your turn to take-off?" he pressed, his point being that the growing number of congestion cases on the runways seemed to suggest saturation.

It was this same conversation that my thoughts inadvertently returned to when that same weekend I was trapped in a massive human jam while trying to exit the Formula 1 (F1) circuit after one of the event's concerts at the Padang. It took me almost 45 minutes of sweaty jostling to get to the nearest MRT station, which is normally just a five minutes' walk away. Turned out the underground linkways could not support such a teeming crowd. Even though I was so exhausted from the night out, I also could not take a cab due to the long queues and road diversions, and had to ride the subway instead.

Singapore has been scoring As in its tourism report card, but just as doubts are brewing over whether Changi can expand fast enough to sustain the continued boom in visitor arrivals, perhaps it is not only the airport that is in need of spruced up hardware. Having hosted five F1 races and with at least five more in the bag now, Singapore's NTO and related bodies ought to see to it that the country's infrastructure can indeed support the influx of tourists it is seeking – F1 season or not.

This is a question that every country should be mulling over just as much as it contemplates how

to further boost its inbound figures.

Drawing from the example of another neighbour, Hong Kong too is feeling the effects of having opened its floodgates to embrace the burgeoning Chinese market in its backyard. Shenzhen had originally intended to offer its residents multiple-entry visas to Hong Kong from last month, but gripes over the latter's capacity to absorb the expected 4.1 million visitors have forced the two governments to put changes in the Individual Visit Scheme on hold indefinitely.

Back to Singapore's case, while plans have been announced to develop a fourth terminal and a third runway, this may be barely enough to meet the surge in regional air traffic, say aviation experts.

The fourth terminal will augment capacity to 82 million passengers a year from the current 73 million when it is completed in 2017. Changi's average annual passenger growth has been 12 per cent in the last two years, higher than the average of eight per cent since the LCC boom began in 2004, according to the Center for Asia Pacific Aviation (CAPA). However, at a 12 per cent yearly growth rate, Changi would reach 82 million in 2016, just as the new terminal opens. And even based on an eight per cent growth rate, a fifth terminal would be needed by the end of this decade, said CAPA.

Much attention is given to demand generators, but can NTOs play a larger role in supporting supply? Destinations need to gaze into their crystal balls earlier and start infrastructure planning way in advance to stay ahead of the curve. Sure, growth must be pursued, but it must also be sustainable.

Most commented on www.ttgasia.com

Indians lose fascination for Malaysia on high airfares, few attractions

In our original story, Guldeep Singh Sahni, president of the Outbound Tour Operators Association of India and managing director of Weldon Tours & Travels, said he had seen a 25 per cent and 30 per cent year-on-year drop in leisure travel and outbound MICE respectively.

He warned: "If airfares to Kuala Lumpur remain high and companies move their dealer incentive programmes to another destination, it will be difficult to get them back as many companies have a policy (of repeating) destinations."

New Delhi's Vineet Arora said he agreed with Sahni's comment. "The travel trade has been experiencing a difficult time. Thanks to the USD/INR ratio, increase in government taxes, increasing airfares, unethical competition by online portals (which tend to display cheaper prices on the front page and include taxes on the payment page) and decreasing airline commissions, (there has been a) decrease in overall volumes."



Unfastening opportunities

PATA Travel Mart 2012 successfully concluded last week at the SMX Convention Center in Manila. There were 454 exhibitors representing 29 countries, with the Philippines contributing the most sellers. Some 304 buyers from 52 countries also came, with India having the largest contingent. Pictured are PATA vice-chairman Rick Antonson (left) and Department of Tourism Philippines' undersecretary, tourism planning and promotions, Daniel G Corpuz.



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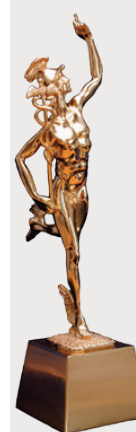
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Travel Hall of Fame

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.



Asia high on Phil’s radar

Outbound travellers attracted to S’pore, HK, while new inbound destinations are emerging

By Marianne Carandang and Rosa Ocampo
MANILA Asian destinations continue to command high interest among Philippine tourists, with Hong Kong and Singapore at the top of the list.
“The mainstream destinations are Hong Kong and Singapore, simply because of flight frequencies,” said Tim Tio, sales and outbound marketing manager, Travelite Travel & Tours Philippines.
Philippine arrivals to Hong Kong grew 15.6 per cent year-on-year from January to July. Singapore welcomed 677,681 Philippine visitors in 2011 – slightly more than Hong Kong’s 659,829 – and has 154 flights from the Philippines compared to Hong Kong’s 148 as of last month.
According to Philippine travel consultants, Resorts World Sentosa and Universal Studios were Singapore’s main drawcards in 2011, while the new Legoland in Johor Bahru and the upcoming Hello Kitty attraction also provide selling points.

Double-digit jumps

16

Year-on-year growth, in per cent, of Philippine arrivals to Hong Kong for January-July 2012

“I am already selling Legoland tours through my Singapore operator, and transfers can be done from any hotel in Singapore to Legoland and back,” said Alex Divinagracia, general manager at GlobalWings Travel & Tours.
However, a 25.6 per cent drop in Philippine arrivals to Malaysia in 2011 – 362,101 – has prompted Tourism Malaysia (TM) to adopt a more aggressive stance

this year by launching product seminars in Manila, Clark, Cebu and Davao, as well as tactical promotions for the F1 Malaysia Grand Prix and MICE groups.
Numbers seem to be bouncing back: Philippine arrivals to Malaysia reached 43,423 in June 2012 versus 26,493 in June 2011.
New airlinks and higher frequencies have also helped, said TM marketing executive, Katrina Bianca Tamayo. Airphil Express, Zest Air and SEAir started flying to Malaysia this year, while Cebu Pacific Air is launching flights from Cebu to Kuala Lumpur in December.
Meanwhile, the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) is attracting ecotourists to areas like Krabi, Khao Lak and Koh Chang. According to Kanok Kittika Kritwutikon, TAT director for the Philippines and Singapore, a six-agency consortium was formed last year to sell Krabi, while this year’s strategy is to position Thailand as a gateway to Indochina. Thailand’s arrivals from the Philippines grew 8.9 per cent

from 2010 to reach 268,375 visitors last year.
While outbound continues to grow strongly, Philippine sellers are also broadening their buffet of tourist options in an effort to spread inbound visitors beyond usual Manila, Cebu and Boracay.
Asian travellers who are not into sun and sea, as well as Europeans whose travel insurance do not cover flying with domestic carriers, are being shown the welcome mat to emerging destinations such as Banaue and Baler on the island of Luzon, which are reachable overland from Manila.
Jeepney Tours is set to launch experiential packages for Batad town in the highlands of Banaue, which will include taking part in activities such as farming in the province renowned for its 2,000-year-old rice terraces.
Other destinations in the early stage of emergence are Baler in Quezon, north-east of Manila, due to its surfing, as well as Laoag in Ilocos Norte, north of Luzon, for its sand dunes, casino, museums and churches.

Continued from page 1

Phuket’s other markets feel some impact

observed that China has been making steady inroads into Phuket. For instance, since taking over the management of Centara Grand West Sands Resort and Villas in Phuket last year, the resort has recorded high interest among the Chinese, particularly families who are drawn to the water park.
Amnuay Thiamkeerakul, TAT’s director-East Asia marketing division, said Chinese arrivals had been increasing at an average of 50 per cent each year.
However, some tour operators expressed concerns of existing markets being squeezed out.
Asian Trails’ Kellenberger remarked: “With more Russians, the Scandinavian market is now shifting to smaller destinations like Koh Lanta and Krabi.”
Go Thailand Tours managing director, Raimund Wellenhofer, added that some suppliers have also shown preference to the Russians, making it harder for him to secure rooms for his European clients during the high season.



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Indo spells out 16-16-7

Tour operators applaud efforts to develop alternative destinations beyond Bali

By Brian Higgs

MANILA Indonesia has embarked on an ambitious initiative that will see the country concentrate on 16 core markets, 16 tourism destinations and products, and seven special interest segments from now until 2014.

At the PATA Travel Mart, Nia Niscaya, director of international tourism promotion, Ministry of Tourism & Creative Economy, told *TTG Asia* that infrastructure and transportation networks would be enhanced across 16 areas designated as National Tourism Strategic Sites. Of these, five have been earmarked for priority development next year, namely Bromo-Tengger-Semeru, Komodo, Wakatobi, Toraja and Sanur.

Roads, seaports and airports will be spruced up or built, while tourism villages will be constructed in selected areas. Destination Management Organisations will also be appointed to coordinate improvement works,

and to educate local communities on the benefits of tourism.

"While Indonesia is blessed to have Bali, we believe that Bali already has enough drawing power and doesn't need additional promotions. We want to develop and promote other products and destinations in Indonesia beyond Bali," said Niscaya.

"By making it more convenient for tourists to visit these areas, we hope to increase the variety of choices available and boost visitors' experience in Indonesia. Hopefully, they will be encouraged to extend their stay beyond Bali, while tour operators will be keen to launch more packages combining multiple destinations within the country."

Armed with a US\$53.7 million marketing budget for 2012 – more than double of what was formerly allocated – the ministry will focus its overseas promotional efforts in the 16 key sources of Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, China, Taiwan,

Japan, South Korea, India, Australia, the Middle East, the US, the UK, France, the Netherlands, Germany and Russia.

The destinations under development will be highlighted at various travel tradeshow and sales missions, while fam trips for travel consultants and media will be organised. The ministry will also ramp up marketing efforts through traditional and social media channels.

Seven special interest segments have also been previously identified: culture and heritage; nature and ecotourism; recreational sports such as diving, surfing, sailing, trekking, hiking and golf; cruises; culinary and shopping; health and wellness; and MICE.

Indonesian tour operators welcomed the move to develop alternative products besides Bali.

Fernando Sutanto, inbound supervisor, Mitra Global Holiday, said: "There are many Indonesian cities that are interesting, such as Jogjakarta, which is similar to Bali. For the Philippine market, we are currently only

able to sell Jakarta, Bandung, Surabaya, Bali and Jogjakarta, since we are hampered by limited flight connectivity. The Philippines and Indonesia also tend to be quite similar in terms of shopping and nightlife, so being able to highlight something different, such as tradition and culture, would appeal to Filipinos."

Herman Rukmanadi, managing director, Bhara Tours, said: "I encourage potential clients to visit destinations such as Sumatra or Sulawesi before heading to Bali to end off their visit. (However), these (destinations) mostly entail special interest tours in authentic natural surroundings, so visitors can't expect luxurious accommodation."

While Umberto Cadamuro, director of operations & business development, Pacto, pointed out that the company had already tapped the beyond-Bali market since 2005, he said the additional exposure would be crucial. "Areas such as Sumba, Sumbawa, Komodo Island, Flores and Kalimantan are operating way below their potential," Cadamuro said.

Iran eyes Malaysia

By S Puvaneswary

KUALA LUMPUR Iran is striving to promote itself as a pre- and post-stopover destination for the Muslim market in Malaysia on their way to perform the Umrah, among other efforts to tap what it deems its "most important target market" due to cultural commonalities shared between the two countries.

Malaysia welcomed 67,679 tourists from Iran in 1H2012, but Behzad Khakpour, second counsellor-economic, Embassy of Iran, estimates that no more than 5,000 Malaysians visited Iran in 2011. He blamed this on "a lack of promotion, awareness and connection" between Iranian travel consultants and their Malaysian counterparts.

He revealed that the embassy was interested in tapping the student market from Malaysia and

"Iran makes a good incentive destination for corporates who are looking for somewhere new. It is also attracts families due to the affordable pricing."

June Tan

Marketing manager
CityTan Holidays Malaysia

Sentosa's oceanarium to corral crowds

SINGAPORE Resorts World Sentosa (RWS) is expecting longer stays and greater visitor numbers once the last facility of its phase two development opens its doors in December.

The Marine Life Park, the second of two anchor attractions, with the other being the Universal Studios Singapore (USS) theme park, will open in time for the integrated resort's grand opening day on December 7 – almost three years after it soft launched in January 2010.

Housing more than 100,000 marine animals of over 800 species, including 25 dolphins, and offering two ticketed attractions – Adventure Cove Waterpark and the Southeast Asia Aquarium, the attraction is said to be the world's largest oceanarium.

Educational programmes for local and overseas school groups, as well as corporate groups keen on achieving corporate social



Adventure Cove Waterpark's Rainbow Reef

responsibility goals through marine conservation activities, will be rolled out in 2013.

According to Biswajit Guha, director, education and conservation, Marine Life Park, the attraction has "already been working closely with Singapore Tourism Board's Overseas Study Trips branch" to reach out to schools beyond Singapore.

The Marine Life Park will also augment RWS' inventory of event spaces for MICE. "We will have six different venue opportunities for corporate events, which we will start selling from January 2013. In fact, the park was designed with MICE in mind, with spaces that we can use for private events after opening hours. We hope to grow (our business in)

corporate, social and wedding events with the unique spaces offered in this attraction," said Greg Allan, RWS' vice president, rooms and F&B.

He said: "We are very happy with the level of demand this year. Summer has been very strong for us, and in the second quarter occupancy was reported at 92 per cent, with an average room rate of S\$400 (US\$326). Our casino business remains buoyant."

"We also had good attendance at USS, at 10,000 visitors daily. We aim to increase the length of stay from two nights now to three nights in 2013. We are also expecting 16 million visitors within the next year."

Additional resources would be deployed to promote all of RWS' attractions and resorts in primary and secondary cities in China, as well as India, said Allan. – **Karen Yue**

Regional expansion for AOS

KUALA LUMPUR Leading inbound tour operator Asian Overland Services (AOS) Tours & Travel has unveiled plans to expand regionally to provide customer support for its online B2B portal, aosclick.com, which has been recording double-digit growth since its 2009 launch.

Two overseas offices will be established in Cambodia and

Singapore, which will be known as Asian Overland Travel Cambodia and Asian Overland Travel Singapore respectively. Reporting to the main office in Kuala Lumpur, both offices will continue to work with existing local partners to provide groundhandling services.

Said managing director, Yap Sook Ling: "The office in Cam-

bodia will be set up in end-October to provide inbound and outbound tours. Both leisure and MICE traffic from China and India will be targeted as both countries are new markets for Cambodia, and by going in early, we hope to get first-mover advantage."

The Singapore office will be operational in December. Explaining the reasons for selecting the Lion City to set up shop, Yap said: "Singapore has easy

flight access and is a sought-after destination among Asian and European travellers. It is also an attractive destination for MICE. With this office we hope to promote dual-destination incentives, combining Malaysia and Singapore."

She added: "This is just the beginning of our expansion plans. By 2015, we plan to have an operations office in every major Asian destination." – **S Puvaneswary**

CityTan Holidays Malaysia marketing manager, June Tan, said: "For this winter, packages combining Tehran and Dizin are selling well. Compared to Istanbul, which is a popular destination among Malaysians, savings are about RM1,000 (US\$328) or more for a 6D5N package inclusive of airfare and hotel accommodation in a four-star hotel based on twin share."

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In swoops the Falcon Route

The Kangaroo Route is about to hop away. In its place, a Falcon Route is in the making. **Sim Kok Chwee** examines how a Qantas-Emirates partnership will change the stakes for the key players

When Qantas Airways (QF) announced a new 10-year alliance with Emirates (EK) (*TTG Asia e-Daily*, September 6, 2012), no one was surprised, as the two airlines had been in talks since mid this year.

What was surprising was QF's move to end the joint service agreement (JSA) it had with British Airways (BA) for almost two decades.

QF needed to stop the bleeding in its international operations, while EK wanted to grow its footprint in Australia.

Most significantly, the new alliance, which will kick in April 2013, subject to regulatory approval, will bring about a realignment of the famous Kangaroo Route.

QF first flew from Sydney to London via Singapore on December 1, 1947 and, after straying to Bangkok and Hong Kong for several years, re-established Singapore as its mid-point hub on the Kangaroo Route in August 2011. So did British Airways, which upgraded the aircraft used on its London-Singapore-Sydney route from a Boeing 777-200ER to a B747-400.

For point-to-point travellers between Sydney and London, not much will change beyond the scenery at the transit airport. Passengers who currently fly from Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth to Singapore to connect to QF's London-bound A380s will now either have to backtrack to Sydney or Melbourne if they wish to travel exclusively on QF-operated flights (resulting

in a two-stop itinerary instead of a single stop in Singapore), or travel exclusively on EK if they prefer a single stop itinerary.

QF has also confirmed its withdrawal from the Frankfurt route that currently operates daily with a stop in Singapore.

Australian travel consultants believe the alliance will positively impact many of their clients travelling to Europe.

Sydney-based Mary Rossi Travel's Claudia Rossi Hudson said: "Our clients can go to places other than Singapore or Frankfurt...It's a one-stop flight to many more destinations in Europe with more flexibility; you can change flights at Dubai and QF customers can decide to fly to Spain or Italy."

Graham Chisholm of Brisbane-based Milton Travel & Cruise believed the partnership would be good for clients, but lamented the end of the Frankfurt flights. "A lot of people flying from Brisbane to Europe often stop over in Singapore on the return flight, and travellers like a good stopover, such as Singapore or Dubai," Chisholm said.

'Constructive'

Standard & Poor's editorial director Shukor Yusof, described the new alliance as "constructive" for QF and EK in the long run.

"From EK's perspective, it is purely to get a larger foothold into Australia as well as siphon off those passengers that would otherwise be hopping onto Singapore Airlines (SQ) or other European carriers," said Shukor.

"This alliance is tipped in EK's favour because Dubai, its home base, will get a higher profile."

Singapore Changi Airport will lose four QF A380 and two B747-400 movements each day, but as QF is expected to focus on more flights between Australia and Asia through Singapore and



Walsh: seeking alternatives

Hong Kong, the airport's passenger throughput may not suffer too drastically.

Centre of Asia Pacific Aviation (CAPA) chief analyst and South-east Asia chief representative, Brendan Sobie, said: "The potential upside for Changi is the Australia-Singapore flights are going to be retimed so they connect with more Jetstar Asia Airways' flights to connecting destinations in Asia."

"QF's Australia-Singapore flights have predominately arrived late in the evening in Singapore, when flights to Europe depart but when options for connecting with Asia are limited. Changi will become an even more important hub in the growing Australia-Asia market although it will lose its lustre as a hub for kangaroo traffic, continuing a trend that has been going on for the last decade as Middle East hubs (and carriers) emerge."

The same cannot be said, however, for groundhandling agent, SATS. It is conceivable that QF may send its groundhandling needs to DNATA, partly-owned by EK and the second groundhandling agent in Singapore.

Chairman of Australia-wide House of Travel group, Barry Mayo, believed a non-loss making and financially stronger QF international network had to benefit passengers.

"Nothing less than this EK partnership or an equivalent partnership with a hub airline having Europe penetration, such as SQ, could achieve the results QF needs," Mayo said.

"Many passengers do not want to travel via London to the extent they have done in the past and prefer more convenient access to continental Europe and even regional Britain via Dubai, Singapore or Bangkok."

"Qantas has claimed its partnership with EK will enable it to delink its Singapore, Bangkok and Hong Kong flights to UK/Europe and provide more customer-friendly schedules to these ports with better connections



Rossi Hudson: it's good news

to other points in Asia, which presumably means linking into Jetstar Asia."

Speculation

Meanwhile, BA said there was no impact to its current flights into and out of Singapore and Sydney. Speculation is rife however, that it may take its Sydney-bound passengers to Hong Kong and let Cathay Pacific Airways fly them to Australia. Similar speculation involves Kuala Lumpur and soon-to-join-Oneworld Malaysia Airlines (MAS), but this will require BA to launch flights to Kuala Lumpur.

CEO of the International Aviation Group (IAG), BA's parent company, Willie Walsh, reiterated that "Asia has become a key market focus for IAG and we're talking to a number of airlines about alternative options for us."

Will Horton, CAPA's senior analyst-North Asia, noted: "BA is clearly impacted by the ending of the JSA, but it's of the view that Australia is no longer the key market it once was. It also has been considering other scenarios to reach Australia."

"It is a dynamic time at BA with possible new partners in the mix, new types of aircraft arriving and additional slots being obtained from its acquisition of bmi. These will influence its thinking on the future of its Sydney service."

Shukor said: "BA remains a strong entity, financially and competitively. It has an extensive international network and a good track record of cutting costs and (maintaining) operational efficiency. Its revenue concentration on premium leaves BA more vulnerable to some of its competitors, especially the Gulf carriers. Operations in Asia-Pacific will likely be reassessed if the EK-QF deal goes through."

Other partners ditched by QF include Cathay (resulting in the end of codeshare services between Hong Kong and Rome) and Air France, which has a successful codeshare to carry QF's passengers between Singapore and Paris. QF's Paris-bound passengers – and indeed most heading to other European capitals and secondary cities – will now most likely travel on EK.



Sobie: upside for Changi

The QF-EK alliance will open all of EK's destinations in Europe, the Middle East and Africa to QF via the Dubai hub. QF currently routes passengers heading to continental Europe via Heathrow Airport in London or Frankfurt Main Airport. Over the past decade, Heathrow has become increasingly unpopular.

While passengers in premium classes will certainly not begrudge travelling in EK's well-appointed premium cabins – which from April 2013 will include a chauffeur service if the flight duration is longer than 12 hours – economy passengers getting off at Dubai and connecting onto EK's B777s heading to Europe, the Middle East and Africa may not be elated about squeezing into a narrower seat. EK's B777s have 10 seats in each row in economy, compared to nine seats in most airlines. Also, depending on where they are heading, those getting off QF's London-bound flights in Dubai will have various lengths of transit times.

It remains to be seen if QF passengers in Singapore booked on its non-stop flights to London will be persuaded to accept a new itinerary on EK with a stopover in Dubai. Or if QF's customers bound for destinations beyond Dubai will agree to fly on its London-bound flight to Dubai to connect onto EK's services (giving QF a bigger share of the revenue) or fly all the way from Australia to Dubai and beyond on EK, a move which will bring less revenue to QF.

The alliance also throws various other questions, for instance, what changes will happen at BA, which has previously indicated that its Australian services were sustainable only because of the JSA?

Will EK leverage on QF's unused traffic rights into Germany to launch new services? EK has met with strong resistance from Lufthansa as it tries to increase its footprint in Germany. Will EK operate across the Pacific from Australia to North and South America, thereby ensuring its networks embrace the entire globe?

Only time will tell.

– Additional reporting by Warren Beaumont





@OneRobin's list

Robin Yap is the managing director of The Travel Corporation Singapore, which specialises in holiday experiences from escorted tours to river cruising. The avid blogger and Twitterer shares his travel wisdom in numbers

5 tips on picking a groundhandler

The past two weeks have been an extremely interesting time for me as I travelled across the region listening to the aspirations of business owners and managers. The desire to grow business profits is commonly expressed, and rightly so, as we are all engaged to grow our business and improve our bottom line. However, a reality check often reveals conflicting issues when discussions are narrowed down to pricing.

Quoting John Ruskin (1819-1900), a prominent art critic and thinker during the Victorian era: "It is unwise to pay too much, but it is unwise to pay too little. When you pay too much, you lose a little money; that is all. When you pay too little, you sometimes lose everything. Because the thing you bought was incapable of doing the thing you bought it to do.

"The common law of business balance prohibits paying a little and getting a lot. It cannot be done. If you deal with the lowest bidder, it is well to add something for the risk you run, and if you do that, you will have enough to pay for something better. There is hardly anything in the world that someone can't make a little worse and sell a little cheaper – and people who consider price alone are this man's lawful prey."

When picking a groundhandler, mutual respect, mutual benefits and win-win co-operation are the key ingredients to a successful partnership. Here, my thoughts on how to pick groundhandling partners in order to provide the best service to customers:

1 Go beyond price; look at quality

Relationships built on price are short-sighted and seldom end with satisfied customers.

2 Ensure there is commitment from top management

I am amazed by the insistence of my company's president/CEO to visit all our business partners personally and take notes of their feedback. That is a demonstration of strong commitment, and one should be assured that relationships built on such personal attention will result in win-win outcomes.

3 One should not bow to bullying and threatening tactics

Such relationships are the perfect recipes for poor delivery of service to customers.

4 Weed out those who over-promise and under-deliver

Most people are eager to cut a deal but when pricing goes wrong due to currency or underquoting, some will resort to cutting corners on product and service delivery. Clients deserve better.

5 Honesty is the best policy

It is not difficult to differentiate the big talkers from the serious service providers who speak with passion and commitment.

Yours Truly @OneRobin
(www.onerobin.com)

TTG Travel Pursuits Compiled by The Fox

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Iqbal Jumabhoy
MD and CEO
SilverNeedle Hospitality

The journey is just starting for this Singapore-based hotel company, which has undergone a consolidation in the last nine months and is now ready to expand in Asia-Pacific with its own business-focused brand, Next. Jumabhoy talks **Gracia Chiang** through the birth process

Building a house of brands

How did SilverNeedle Hospitality come about?

SilverNeedle didn't start as a hospitality company, but as a concept looking at certain gaps in the marketplace. The Nadathur family led by Anand (son of Nadathur S Raghavan, co-founder of Infosys) acquired a boutique hotel company in Thailand known as Ativa Hospitality, built a platform here in Singapore by hiring truly top people from major brands, and made an acquisition in Australia of Constellation Hotels, which is a fairly stable, much larger group with a number of brands spread throughout the Australia and New Zealand (ANZ) region. It's important to know where the name comes from. We're an Asian company and it's the best tea in the world; it's carefully selected. Tea is also hospitality.

How did you get involved?

I got to know Anand when I was leaving Rendezvous (Hospitality Group, as CEO). I was looking at an acquisition deal and needed an equity partner; he liked the deal and we liked each other, but the deal didn't happen in the end. We continued to look at other things together; the second deal we went all the way to the finish line, but it was a bid to buy a company.

Then he said you know what, I've already made commitments to invest in a platform based on my concept for hospitality, is there something that we should do together? After a lot of discussion, I agreed to come onboard early this year.

What have you been busy with?

Harmonising the platforms. The task was to create a single company out of all of these. I had to merge them and make sure that we ran on a common management system and had a common philosophy. We completely comingled people so it would not be organised as three companies but a single business with different divisions.

I joined in January, and by March I called a bunch of shakers and movers within the company into our hotel in Chiang Mai and said let's sit in a room and talk about corporate culture and DNA. From there we created a single vision, mission and set of values, as well as strategic pillars. That was quite a landmark event.

Then I realised they were running on different business plans, so we created a unified one by April/May to get through 2012. We kicked off our strategic planning process in early September and we're hoping to have a five-year plan by the end of October.

How will SilverNeedle grow?

First, we're looking very critically at the brands in Australia (Chifley, Australis, Country Comfort and Sundowner). We're also taking the Next brand into Australia (the purchase of Brisbane's Chifley was recently completed and the hotel is scheduled to reopen as the first Next property in 2014). Second, we'll also grow at least a couple of the brands in Asia; we believe there's room for our Chifley and Next brands. Third, we'll continue to grow our boutique hotel business, generally in Asia. We've already got four hotels operating (two in Bangkok, one in Chiang Mai and one in Luang Prabang).

Tell us about your flagship brand.

The Nadathur family and I felt there was an opportunity for a business-focused hospitality brand, i.e. hotels for you to do business and hotels for business people to have leisure time. This is a niche.

The product will be substantially different and fairly technologically advanced for the industry. We're still finalising the concept but what I can say is that Next is entirely business-focused in terms of its features,

"In the long term, I'd like us to be known as the brand of choice for the travelling professional for their business needs as well as their leisure needs."

concepts and services. It's geared towards the 20something-to-50-or-so age group. It will have some meeting facilities but a lot of facilities for travelling professionals to live and work comfortably. It will also have F&B concepts that service this market. Hotels will have approximately 200 rooms and the brand is positioned as four- to four-and-a-half-star.

Why not a five-star?

According to studies of business travellers, the highest repeat stays and the highest spend are not in the five-star category. It may sound really odd but it's because you have a fair spectrum of business travellers in the same company, so a product like (Next) actually brings them all together in the same location. I stay where my colleagues stay. It's rare that I would stay in a different hotel.

Is your target still 10,000 keys in five years?

I think that's feasible. We're already close to 5,000 keys, with almost all in ANZ except about 200 keys in Asia. It's heavily skewed but I foresee a more balanced portfolio. Within Australia, we continue to be growing fairly quickly. I think this year alone, we've added seven properties and we're hoping we'll add another two by year-end. The second part is bringing (the brands) into Asia, as we'll need to see how best to proliferate them. Outside of ANZ,

we're looking at South-east Asia, South Asia and Greater China. At the moment we have business development resources in the first three, and we're hoping to have some in Greater China too.

What are your lines of business?

Our business streams are in three areas: development, management and investment. The Nadathurs took a very refreshing attitude and built a very high-quality development team. So today we can parachute somebody in and develop a property ourselves. There will also be management of hotels with clear concepts. And if the opportunity comes about, we're not only prepared but like to invest.

What about distribution?

We're launching our own GDS code in early October and will be promoting this to the industry at ITB Asia. We aim to get more people to book directly with us. We already generate 20-25 per cent of business through GDS and booking engine platforms, about half through travel (consultants) and OTAs, and the remainder from direct and meeting planners.

What have you found most challenging during your time here?

Getting people to operate as a single entity. Regional cultures are only a veneer. The most difficult to change is the corporate culture where people have been doing things in a particular manner, but I think we're moving along that path quite nicely. The good news is that they were similar businesses and we have good people. Constellation existed for 30 years, my team here in Singapore was built up in under two years and the people in Ativa had worked together for five to six years.

What kind of boss would you say you are?

I would like to think that I'm reasonably structured. Once people gain my trust, I give them a fair amount of autonomy. I keep certain matters so that I can stay in touch with business. I travel, so I do a lot of MBWA (management by walking around). I think some of them think I'm a little too tough but I think I'm actually fairly benign. I give a lot, but I demand a lot as well because I want things done yesterday.



Tailor-made just for you

As more customers demand personalised itineraries, travel agencies across the region are rushing to cut the cloth to fit, with many finding the effort worth the sweat, *TTG Asia* reports



Be it a private tour to the Antarctica or an audience with Santa in Lapland, Apple Vacations & Conventions' Lee (above, right) is happy to oblige

Apple Vacations & Conventions

■ Private corporate arrangement becomes the apple of Apple's eye, bringing in huge incremental revenues within just two years

WHO Kuala Lumpur-based Apple Vacations & Conventions started operations in 1996. Until 2010, it did only series tours and incentives. The company expanded last year with a special division catering to private tours, called private corporate arrangement.

WHY Apple Vacations & Conventions group managing director, Desmond Lee, set up the division after seeing increased demand for private tours.

Demand came from repeat clients who have been on series tours and from groups of like-minded people wanting to holiday together on a customised itinerary.

Private tours were also requested by individuals who wished to build a better working relationship with partners and did not want outsiders to be with them, said Lee.

HOW There are 10 staff working in this division.

Lee said popular destinations for private tours included Japan (Hokkaido), China (Kunming and Xi'an), Italy, Germany and Switzerland. But the company does not limit private tours to just these destinations and will do tours to any part of the world.

Some interesting requests the company has received include trips to Kenya to see the animal migration; to the Antarctica; to Egypt to visit the Great Pyramid Cave; and to Santa Claus Village in Rovaniemi, Lapland. In May next year, the company is leading a private tour for a group of 10 wanting to visit 90° north latitude for an adventure.

Most private tours are requested by professionals and those in the upper middle

income bracket.

"Private tours cost at least 50 per cent more than the usual series tours," said Lee. **TARGETS** Last year the company made RM10 million (US\$3.25 million) on private tours and RM150 million on group series, said Lee.

This year, Apple Vacations is targeting a 10 per cent increase in revenue from both segments.

Lee also plans to double the staff force of the private corporate arrangement division next year as he foresees demand increasing further. — **S Puvaneswary**

Quotient TravelPlanner

■ Now everyone can benefit from a tailor-made holiday as Quotient TravelPlanner's brings these programmes to the masses

WHO Established in May 2007 by Javiny Lim and Lim Hui-Juan, Singapore-based Quotient TravelPlanner specialises in bespoke travel. The firm consults clients to uncover their needs and wants before developing unique, personalised itineraries.

Javiny Lim said: "There is no set formula on how we plan itineraries. We want our clients to have experiences beyond the traditional tourist offerings."

WHY Quotient became a reality after its founders decided to follow their instincts.

Lim said: "I have always been interested in travel and started planning my own holidays from quite an early age. Through the years, numerous friends have requested my help in planning their holidays. This led me to thinking that there was a real gap in the market for customised travel planners."

HOW Quotient focuses on developing highly bespoke itineraries that incorporate soft adventure, cultural and gastronomic elements, such as vintage car drives, temple

visits, cooking classes, farm and market visits as well as exclusive access to vineyards. Itinerary lengths vary from as short as a week to up to a month.

Western and Eastern Europe have been the most popular destinations for Quotient since its inception, although the company does receive enquiries for numerous other destinations around the world, particularly Japan and Latin America.

As part of its strategic plans to expand its presence in the digital realm, Quotient is set to launch a portal that will enable users to build, customise and purchase trips online.

Lim said: "There's a whole host of trip planning sites and many online travel agencies out there. But I think we will be the first to bridge the two."

According to Quotient's head of media and marketing, Rufus Tan, the new site will consist of 100 base itineraries which users will be able to tweak to match their needs and interests. "On top of choosing a category of accommodation – be it comfortable, indulgence or luxury – users can book private or group tours, purchase sightseeing passes and extend trips or alter itineraries," he explained.

The site, which will officially launch in March 2013, will showcase itineraries for Europe, South Africa, the Middle East, Australia, Japan, South Korea, India, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Nepal, China, Tibet and Mongolia.

Tan said the online travel site had been in development since the company was founded. However, it only took off in the last 12 months.

"When it launches, customers can build a holiday which will be more customised than those offered by brick-and-mortar agencies. It will not be as bespoke as those developed on a case-by-case basis by our travel consultants, but it will sell at a reduced price point. We hope to bring customised travel to the masses," he said.

TARGETS Business has been robust. In

“

When (the new portal) launches, customers can build a holiday that is more customised than those offered by brick-and-mortar agencies. It will not be as bespoke as those developed on a case-by-case basis by our travel consultants but it will sell at a reduced price point. We hope to bring customised travel to the masses.”

Rufus Tan

Head of media and marketing
Quotient TravelPlanner



Quotient's super clients in super cars

CUSTOMISED TRAVEL

2011, the number of customised travel programmes jumped 35 per cent over 2010. From January to-date, Quotient has seen a 30 per cent year-on-year increase in revenue, according to Lim.

She said: “We hope to keep the momentum going with the launch of our new online portal, which is designed to accommodate different travel styles. We are also hiring more staff this year as we expand our product portfolio.

“On a broader perspective, Quotient TravelPlanner will continuously develop and design new products and services that can cater to as broad a spectrum of customers as possible.

“The purchasing power and requirements may differ from individual to individual, but we believe that everyone can definitely benefit from a tailor-made holiday.” – **Linda Haden**

Asian Overland Services Tours & Travel

■ Going deeper into cultures and doing good for communities is great for business, discovers Asian Overland Services Tours & Travel

WHO Kuala Lumpur-based Asian Overland Services (AOS) Tours & Travel has operated inbound tours since 1976. Beginning in 2008, the company started offering experiential, customised tours and corporate social responsibility (CSR) programmes to meet demand from a new segment of travellers.

WHY “Travellers have changed. People are not content with just sitting in a bus and sightseeing. They want to be part of the local community, experience the local culture and, wherever possible, give back to the local communities,” said AOS managing director, Yap Sook Ling.

The new tours are in line with the company’s philosophy of making a difference. “It also enriches the customer’s holiday experience, which is very satisfying,” said Yap.

HOW AOS’ new itineraries include CSR elements. For instance, it has adopted Kiau Village in the foothills of Mt Kinabalu in Sabah, where visitors can participate in programmes to improve the lives of the locals. The company also encourages its guides to give deeper explanations and to include real-life experiences at destinations.

Yap said these tours appealed to mature travellers who were looking for more than the “sit down and listen” type of holidays.

AOS has created a product and research department which is not just involved in finding new products and providing value-addedness, but also engages locals to see how the company can work with them better and meet international service standards.

TARGETS Business has grown 30 per cent year-on-year. “Our customised itineraries and experiential programmes are well received and through word-of-mouth, our clientele is also growing,” said Yap.

“To further grow the business, we have to identify the right kind of agencies that also appreciate what we do.” – **S Puvaneswary**

Smailing Tour

■ Smailing creates Signature Products and Special Interest Products as competition intensifies within the series tour market

WHO Group series used to be Smailing Tour Indonesia’s strong suit. While it is still an

important part of the business, the travel company has created Signature Products and Special Interest Products programmes to diversify its business.

WHY Smailing Tour’s vice president-marketing & business development, Bernard Akili, said: “The competition is getting more intense in the series group tour market, therefore it is important to create new products to capture specific markets, products which other players have not explored but show promise.”

HOW Signature Products cater to those who want a luxurious travel experience, with unique destinations and itineraries, from learning tai-chi in China to enjoying a sunset camel safari in India. Unlike series tours, a Signature Product gives clients plenty of free time to explore the destination and flexibility in departure dates and number of travellers in the group.

Special Interest Products are focused on specific interests in connection to current lifestyle trends, be it culinary, sports or photography. Clients can learn to cook with celebrity chefs such as Indonesian renowned chef William Wongso, or be mentored by professional photographers such as Darwis Triadi during the tour. Destinations can be within Indonesia or abroad.

Smailing Tour creates a sample product, and travellers have the chance to meet a staff member and a mentor to customise the programme even further.

Products are targeted at niche markets with higher disposable incomes, i.e. people who have “been there, done that”, and travellers with special interests.

TARGETS The business is growing with a considerably higher profit margin. “We launched these programmes about a year ago and the response has been very good,” Akili said.

Smailing Tour is developing partnerships with niche communities such as Bike2Work, photography schools and credit card issuing banks to create joint programmes for their members. – **Mimi Hudoyo**

Dove Travels

■ Dove soars higher by listening to repeat clients who are no longer content with same old programmes and want more options

WHO Amritsar-based Dove Travels is a tour operator handling FIT and leisure group itineraries that are aimed at budget (or marginally higher) clients, primarily catering





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William Wongso

to incentive groups of FMCG (fast-moving consumer goods) manufacturers which offer annual trips to high performing dealers, retailers and stockists.

In 2009, the company started receiving requests from repeat clients for additions and options to itineraries.

WHY Internet searches and word-of-mouth from friends and colleagues are creating a new genre of Indian outbound travellers. Clients have bigger purses but more personal preferences.

HOW Dove began offering individualised itineraries, including hot-air ballooning in Australia and South Africa, whale-watching in Alaska, and scuba-diving in the Philippines and Indonesia, but always customised to the client's needs and budget.

TARGETS Dove Travels had 8,000 outbound clients in 2011 and claims to have had 5,400 customers in the first half of this year.

The company intends to devote its energy to researching new products and itineraries in new destinations so that these programmes are ready when the increasingly well-informed client requests or asks for advice on exciting new options. It attends tradeshow globally and is often on familiarisation trips to all parts of the world. It is also looking at high-end corporate meetings and incentive groups to offer them once-in-a-lifetime adventure and luxury travel experiences. — **Shekhar Niyogi**

Carnation Travel Services

■ From selling air tickets, Carnation sells dreams to affluent Indian travellers with insatiable appetites for unique experiences

WHO Carnation Travel Services New Delhi began operations in 1995 as a ticketing agency and sold airline seats until 2003.

In 2004, owner Rajesh Sethi, an entrepreneur with a successful tenure in the construction business, started operating series tours with fixed departures to destinations such as Thailand, Hong Kong/Macau, Singapore and Malaysia. Although Carnation accepts that these would continue to be sold, it notes that in the age of the Internet, well-informed clients are demanding better service and that profits are also much higher in this segment, even during economic downturns. So it has reinvented itself as a specialty travel solutions provider.

WHY As the demographic profile of the Indian

tourist transforms into affluent, upwardly mobile professionals who work hard and play hard, budgets have become less restrictive while demands have become limitless.

HOW The company has hired more experienced travel consultants, expanded the number of destinations and acquired a larger office space in a posh south Delhi locality.

It developed itineraries that include helicopter rides from Cape Town to vineyards in Cape Winelands for wine-tasting and culinary experiences, safaris in the Masai Mara, helicopter rides over Niagara Falls, Ferrari rides in Emilia Romagna, gastronomy tours in Tuscany and Sicily, swimming with sharks and scuba-diving in Lakshwadeep Islands, honeymooning in New Zealand and trips to Mount Fuji and onsens in Shizuoka.

TARGETS In 2011, the company claimed a 100 per cent year-on-year growth. Its target for 2012 is to grow at least 30 per cent year-on-year. — **Shekhar Niyogi**

Tour Flair

■ A flair for survival sees Tour Flair branching into food safaris to mitigate a drop in business from its traditional Australia and US markets

WHO Tour Flair Philippines is a luxury and bespoke concierge services tour operator that brings groups and FITs from Australia and the US to the Philippines (Manila, followed by luxury resorts in Boracay, Bohol and Palawan). It has ventured into food safaris – tours that showcase the cuisine

of heritage locations in Luzon such as Laguna, Pampanga and Vigan – which have been successful with the domestic and local expat markets.

WHY Business was affected by the August 2010 tour bus hostage crisis that took place in Manila. “Whole groups cancelled their tours with us. People were afraid to come. They felt it was not safe,” said Lory-Vi Valdes, Tour Flair's director.

HOW Tours of heritage churches, museums and historical sites are included, but the meals are the cherry on the cake. For its latest food safari to Ilocos, it brought along accomplished chef Sau del Rosario, who has worked with Michelin-starred chefs abroad and operates a number of restaurants of his own, to interpret the cuisine of each region.

“We don't do buffets. Our guests get a feel of the area and the food, with sit-down plated meals, and the history of the food (is explained to them),” said Valdes. Group sizes are limited to 30 people to maximise the experience.

TARGETS Several tour companies operate culinary tours but Tour Flair's knowledgeable guides, customised touches and the presence of a renowned chef cooking private meals appear to be the tipping point, giving Tour Flair the edge in this premium niche.

Tour Flair continues offering its concierge luxury travel services, but culinary tours are now its focus.

With success in the domestic and local expat market, it plans to attract a wider foreign market in the coming year.

— **Marianne Carandang**



Asian Overland

1. A balsamico special with Quotient TravelPlanner
2. To each his own: hot air ballooning appeals to some
3. Smiling Tour takes clients to a specialty restaurant that serves only the angler fish
4. AOS gets clients to do some good by planting sapplings at Kiau Village in Sabah
5. Tour Flair's clients learn pottery-making in Vigan

4



Marianne Carandang

5

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The impressive Kapaleeshwar Temple is one of Chennai's major landmarks

V S Anandha Krishna

Beating to a new rhythm

Expanded airport and surge of flights deliver a boost to the south. By **Shekhar Niyogi**

Arrivals Tamil Nadu was the second-most popular Indian state among foreign tourists in 2011, beating Delhi and losing out only to Maharashtra, whose capital is Mumbai.

The southern state welcomed 3.3 million international tourists last year, compared to 2.8 million in 2010, according to government statistics. In 1Q2012, international visitors posted an 11 per cent year-on-year rise.

Meanwhile, Tamil Nadu received 13.7 million domestic tourists in 2011 versus 10.3 million in 2010.

NTO Tamil Nadu Tourism Development Corporation (TTDC) joint director, S Bakthavachalam, said: "We are mapping out an aggressive marketing strategy that will ensure larger numbers of international inbound tourists."

TTDC has earmarked Rs4 billion (US\$72 million) to improve tourism infrastructure in the state. It is encouraging three-star and budget hotel development through private-public partnerships, while concessions are given for the development of four- and five-star properties

and convention facilities.

Tamil Nadu's tourism department has set up hospitality standards by defining rules for hotels across all star categories, homestay establishments and Ayurvedic spas.

Hotels Chennai is seeing a surge of hotel development, with the addition of 1,998 rooms in 2012 and 1,622 rooms by 2013 to its existing inventory of 29 hotels with 4,656 rooms.

The 162-key Radisson Blu Hotel Chennai City Centre was launched earlier in May, while the 600-key ITC Grand Chola and the 202-key Park Hyatt have just debuted in recent weeks. The 326-key Leela Palace Chennai and the 215-key Westin Chennai Velachery are expected to open their doors later this year.

Rates Chennai has shown stable room rates over the past few years, partly due to the small addition in hotel inventory.

According to the Jones Lang LaSalle Hotel Intelligence Report, Chennai's average room rate (ARR) rose marginally from US\$110 in 2011 to US\$112 in 1Q2012, while achieving a higher



"Healthy growth of hotels is envisaged in the next three years, while foreign direct investment in the industry is looking bullish. With the new initiatives planned, tourism numbers will rise significantly by 2013."

Padmini Narayanan

Managing director
Akshaya India Tours & Travels

rate in 2Q2012 of US\$120. Similarly, RevPAR increased to US\$90 in 1Q2012 from US\$86 in 2011.

Hotel occupancy climbed from 63 per cent in 2011 to reach 67 per cent in 1Q2012. This year, occupancy is expected to reach 68-70 per cent.

Access Chennai airport is undergoing a Rs20.2 billion expansion that will see a new domestic terminal, an expansion of the international terminal and an extension of the secondary runway across the Adyar River, according to a report by Airports Council International. Expansion works, which started in October 2008, are expected to be completed anytime now.

After modernisation, passenger handling capacity at the airport will rise to some 24 million, double of what it now handles. It will be able to handle 40 aircraft movements an hour, while the number of parking bays will number 84.

Currently home to 25 airlines, Chennai's air connectivity is likely to grow with the completion of the airport expansion. It is already said to be the fifth-busiest airport in India.

Malaysia Airlines added four

weekly daytime flights to its daily evening service between Kuala Lumpur and Chennai from September.

According to reliable sources, Air Seychelles is resuming flights from Mahé to Chennai by end-2012, while Emirates is expected to step up frequency on its existing Dubai-Chennai route from three to four daily flights. South African Airways is also likely to start direct flights to Chennai by early-2013.

Access to the Chennai airport will be further boosted when the Metro Rail Project connecting various parts of the city is completed in 2014.

MICE Recent events in Chennai include Aahar - The International Food Fair in August and Chennai Gift Expo in September, while upcoming events include India International Yarn & Fabric Show in October, Wind Power India in November and India International Leather Fair in January.

The Chennai Trade Centre, located close to the airport in Nandambakkam, is the prime MICE venue in the city, while smaller meeting facilities can be found in hotels too.

Checking in

Vivanta by Taj – Connemara



Shekhar Niyogi is charmed by this heritage property that is brimming with magnificence and ideal for business guests

LOCATION Founded in 1854 as The Imperial Hotel which later came to be known as Connemara in 1890, this historic property's art deco facade has remained the same although its interiors have been revamped. Possibly South India's oldest hotel, it is nestled in the heart of the city, just off Anna Salai (or Mount Road) and a 45-minute drive from the Chennai International Airport in Meenambakkam.

ROOMS All the 150 rooms and suites (67 Superior Charm, 61 Deluxe Delight, 17 Premier Indulgence, two Deluxe Allure Suites, two Premier Temptation Suites and a Presidential Nirvana Suite) are designed to meet the needs of both corporate and leisure travellers. Each room category, while appointed differ-

ently, is reminiscent of old-world grandeur.

I stayed two nights in a 70m² Premier Indulgence room in the heritage wing. The room was adorned in earthy colours, with a queen-size bed that afforded me comfortable and undisturbed sleep, a well-stocked mini-bar, and a work table overlooking the lush courtyard dotted with palm fronds and coconut trees. The bidet in the bathroom is rare in Indian hotels, as is the variety of reading material available. However, in-room Wi-Fi was chargeable though.

F&B The Verandah is a 24-hour multi-cuisine restaurant offering 90 seats amid abundant natural light, contemporary decor and views of the swimming pool. It pays homage to India's colonial history by replicating specialties from Anglo-Indian cookbooks, such as lamb cutlet with devil's chutney.

This busy eatery features an expansive buffet breakfast, an eclectic à la carte menu and a scrumptious Sunday brunch that

has a reputation of attracting the who's who of the city. The bread basket came with herb butter, olive oil, balsamic vinegar and several types of cheese, and the grilled fish, Mongolian squid and broccoli soup were delicious.

Open only in the evenings, Raintree is a 106-cover restaurant with al fresco seats, serving delicious Chettinad (mainly non-vegetarian) cuisine alongside live music and dances. Must-try dishes include the prawns, *ap-pams*, *parathas* and the restaurant's wide array of condiments.

Hip Asia is a 78-seat pan-Asian restaurant offering tepanyaki set, sushi and a wide array of South-east Asian food, while the 64-seat Distil bar serves a range of alcoholic beverages and cocktails from around the world. I spent an evening at the bar with good company over single malt whisky and finger food.

FACILITIES Leisure facilities include a swimming pool, a gym, a beauty salon and Jiva Spa, which provides treatments based on ancient Indian therapies.



On the conference front, the hotel boasts some 780m² of venue space. The 270m² ballroom can accommodate up to 270 guests in theatre style, while the adjoining garden can be used to host outdoor dinners and events for up to 600 guests. Four other rooms, ranging in sizes between 50m² and 200m², cater to smaller meetings and functions.

SERVICE So friendly and enthusiastic were the service that I felt very at home. When I requested for a jacket to be ironed, it was swiftly done in 10 minutes. The hotel has many long-time employees, which for me, is a feath-

Name Vivanta by Taj – Connemara
No. of rooms 145 rooms, five suites
Rate From Rs7,000 (US\$126) per night, inclusive of breakfast
Contact details
 Tel: (91-44) 6600-0000
 Email: vivanta.connemara@tajhotels.com
 Website: www.vivantabytaj.com

er in the management's cap.

VERDICT An excellent five-star hotel that pampers its guests like royalty. Its central location – most offices are situated in the vicinity – and adequate meeting facilities will benefit business travellers.

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Blend is a contemporary lounge bar that buzzes with live music and energy at the Taj Club House – the Taj Group’s fifth hotel in the city – located just off Mount Road. Setting this bar apart from other F&B outlets are its trendy decor and ambience, live DJs playing electrifying music, innovative cocktails and delectable array of culinary delights, making it a popular watering hole among the city’s trend-

setters. Open from 17.30 to 23.00 daily, Blend can be contracted for groups and MICE events.
Contact
Tel: (91-44) 6631-3131
Email: clubhouse.chennai@tajhotels.com

Margazhi Festival
Dating back to 1927, this festival was first started to commemorate the founding of the Madras Music Academy, but has since

evolved into an annual music-and-dance event held at different venues by various organisations across Chennai.
For four weeks between December and January each year, some 2,000 artistes from around the globe descend on Chennai to participate in this cultural extravaganza, putting up performances ranging from instrumental music to classical dance to songs sung in Southern Indian languages. A sensory delight, this colourful event offers visitors a chance to learn more about the vibrant Tamil culture.
Contact
Tamil Nadu Tourism Development Corporation
Tel: (91-44) 2538-3333
Email: ttdc@vsnl.com

Chennai Trade Centre
Located close to the airport and several five-star hotels, the centre in Nandambakkam is spread across 10 hectares, offering 6,220m² of air-conditioned space and 6,970m² of open paved area. With inter-linked halls – two measuring 4,400m² and one 1,760m² – as well as a convention hall that can seat 2,000 delegates, it can accommodate both exhibitions and conventions with ease.
Contact
Tel: (91-44) 2231-6033
Website: www.chennaitradecentre.org

Chennai beckons foreign tourists

The Tamil Nadu Development Corporation (TTDC) is rolling out various initiatives to attract more tourists, including an aggressive marketing strategy and focusing on niches.
TTDC has earmarked Rs4 billion (US\$72 million) to improve Chennai’s tourism infrastructure, while potential sites like Thanjavur, Mamallapuram, Gangaikondacholapuram and Darasuram have been identified to promote the state’s heritage, pilgrimage, sustainable tourism, beaches and festivals.
“We have stepped up campaigns at international and national tradeshows,” said R Sundaramurthy, TTDC assistant tourism officer.
“The expanded Chennai airport should lead to increased airlines and flight capacity, while the Metro Railway is being built to facilitate the movement of tourists,” he added.
TTDC expects a 15 per cent growth in overall arrivals this year, Sundaramurthy added. Prime foreign source markets are the UK, France, Germany, the US, with Singapore and Malaysia looking up. Domestically, sources are Bengal, Gujarat, Kerala, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Delhi. – **Shekhar Niyogi**



Sundaramurthy: greater publicity

My choices

Chennai

Compiled by Shekhar Niyogi

What is your biggest challenge right now?

What must be done?

What do you need from...

What are the prospects for 2012?



Vijay Shrikent
General manager
Vivanta by Taj – Connemara

Chennai is an emerging market beginning to show signs of growth. Unlike a few years ago, it now has no off-peak season. However, there is a severe lack of MICE events and infrastructure to market it as a leisure and MICE destination. Chennai is growing outward to form several business districts, which will eventually decide the spheres of activity for hotels in the city.

Room inventory is rising exponentially and demand will eventually keep pace. By 2015 it is expected that branded rooms in the city will double. More exposure should be given to the heritage, cultural and medical tourism aspects of the city and state. Cross-selling will have to be reduced and segments have to be targeted to increase occupancies and ARR.

government? The government must upgrade infrastructure to international standards. Better marketing is required to grow international inbound and MICE arrivals. The stakeholders in the hospitality sector need a cohesive marketing strategy, while the shortage of skilled manpower must be addressed.

2012-13 will see significant growth. We expect a year-on-year growth of 15 per cent.



Smitha Prasad
Regional manager – South India
RezLive.com

Maintaining the sustained growth of our dedicated B2B plan. Competition is growing in a market that is moving away from orthodox travel consultants to quicker, more efficient booking engines like ours. As a wholesaler, we have to pick up a larger market share as increased capacity and marginal growth make it challenging to maintain a healthy bottom line.

Service quality must be impeccable – the standards achieved so far must be maintained so we cannot let our guard down. Our reach must grow effectively to bring wider products under our umbrella of offers. We must retain all existing clients, while at the same time, market ourselves aggressively to increase our market share with new accounts.

travel experts? They must decide on a buying plan with a corresponding selling strategy, which will enable them to tell us their medium- and longer-term plans. Based on that, we can then expand our inventory and increase long-serving relationships.

We expect more rooms to be added in the five-star and mid-market categories. There might be a temporary decline in ARR but that will correct itself soon with the targeted growth in business. We expect a healthy growth.



M Ravi
Assistant manager
Cox & Kings

The lack of flight connections from Chennai to second- and third-tier cities in India. Many tourists wish to fly to smaller destinations that may be of specific interest to them, so better flight connections will encourage their travel to South India.

The airlines must introduce regular flights connecting smaller cities with Chennai, and also between the cities. This will increase international inbound numbers as many foreign tourists prefer to fly rather than travel long distances by road or rail.

government? The government should build more airports, entice smaller regional airlines to set up operations and lease out state-owned hotels to private hospitality companies. Unless the infrastructure and quality standards are improved, we will get mostly low- and medium-end customers who are repeat travellers. The high-end segment is not growing.

2012 and 2013 will be good years – 30 per cent growth is achievable. However, airlines’ reduction of travel consultants’ commissions to one per cent will impact the bottom line.

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The Maldives is readying its third five-year master plan for tourism, with air access at the heart of it

Tiding over difficulties

Bouncing back from political unrest, the Maldives is looking ahead, says **Feizal Samath**

Arrivals

Total arrivals to the Maldives reached 535,034 visitors from January to July, creeping up 2.8 per cent, placing the country on track to meet the targeted one million visitors despite earlier political unrest in Malé, which led to about 6,700 cancellations in February.

China accounted for 22 per cent of the total market share in the first seven months with 118,801 arrivals, up 14.5 per cent year-on-year, while the UK fell by 12.4 per cent to 53,431. Visitors from Russia, the fifth largest source market and with big spenders, totalled 37,604, up 7.4 per cent.

“Thankfully we were isolated from the unrest, having a ‘one island, one resort’ concept, where visitors go straight to the resorts from the airport, bypassing Malé,” said Mohamed Umar Maniku, veteran hotelier and chairman of Universal Enterprises, which operates the largest chain of resorts in the Maldives, Universal Resorts. But he believes the test of the market lies in the winter season.

Sanne Wesselman, marketing director of travel firm Voyage Wave, said current bookings were good for the winter, and arrivals

from the Middle East, Russia and Australia had led to a diversified market.

However, Taj Exotica Resort & Spa general manager, Ranjit Phillipose, said the recession had hit Europe, with the UK being the most affected market.

Maleeh Jamal, deputy minister of tourism, arts and culture, said that though market dynamics were changing, the country still depended on European travellers, as the Chinese market was as volatile as the Japanese market. Europe accounts for close to 60 per cent of the market to the Maldives.

NTO

The Maldives is preparing its third five-year master plan for tourism, which will run from 2012 to 2016. Developing new airports would be key, while the vision, goals and broader policies for tourism would also be detailed.

Another international airport is being developed from a domestic one at Hanimaadhoo in the north, paving the way for three international airports serving the south (Gan), central (Ibrahim Nasir International Airport) and north. “Hanimaadhoo is close to In-



“Local travel (consultants) are starting to rely on the Chinese market more. China is definitely important, but we are also seeing a rise in visitors from the Middle East, Russia and Australia.”

Sanne Wesselman
Marketing director
Voyage Wave

dia and Sri Lanka – just 30 minutes away – and this will shorten travel time,” said Jamal.

Domestic airports are also being developed in each of the 20 atolls, with some islands having more than one, such as Baa and Gaafa Alifu. The development of zones is a key strategy, in which different atolls would be promoted as a destination within a destination.

Meanwhile, plans to replace the 11-year old tourism slogan *Sunny Side of Life* and position the Maldives as a mid-market destination have also been abandoned. The Maldives would be promoted as a premium destination to the mid-to-upper-range market, said Jamal.

Hotels

The total operating inventory in the Maldives has risen this year. As of July, room inventory stood at 24,977, up from 24,206 during the same period in 2011.

Occupancies dropped by 0.9 per cent to 63 per cent by end July, after March and April saw a sharp drop of 5.8 per cent and 4.5 per cent respectively. Bed-nights rose marginally by 1.7 per cent to 486,670 by end July. New resorts and develop-

ments due to open include the JW Marriott, Radisson, Radisson Plaza, Louis Vuitton (the group’s second resort in the world), Centara Ras Fushi Resort & Spa, a floating golf course to be built by Dutch Docklands and shariah-compliant luxury villas by Lootah Hotel Management.

Access

National carrier Maldivian is planning to introduce thrice-weekly flights between Malé and Mumbai from November 15, and will ramp up the frequency of the service to five times a week this winter. It also plans to start flights to New Delhi by March 2013.

Turkish Airlines will start flying into Malé in November, while daily flights are due to begin shortly to and from Mumbai, Chennai and Delhi.

Mega Maldives Airlines has announced plans to develop new routes to Malé from Seoul, Melbourne, Johannesburg and Tokyo. It is also considering services to at least one point in Germany. The airline is adding a third aircraft to its fleet, a Boeing 757-200W, to support existing services between Malé and Hong Kong, Shanghai, Beijing, Chongqing and Chengdu.

MALDIVES: INSIDER



From left: Anantara Kihavah Villas; Angsana Velavaru; Shangri-La's Villingili Resort & Spa

10 luxury indulgences

Drink like a fish and holiday like a star. Feizal Samath has tips for your clients with deep pockets

1 Get married on Turtle Island
For out-of-this-world weddings, Angsana Velavaru guarantees the nuptials of a lifetime. Situated in the lagoon of the South Nilandhe Atoll, the resort comes equipped with facilities for underwater weddings, including a photographer and a recently constructed underwater coral venue. Alternatively, couples can tie the knot in a Castaway Island Beach Wedding on a deserted island.
Velavaru means 'turtle island' in Dhivehi, the national language of the Maldives. Navigate coral reefs in the company of turtles and dolphins here, swim to the depths of the Velavaru lagoon, or hold a private barbecue dinner on the beach for a holiday combining romance and adventure.

2 Explore nature Crusoe-style
Described as a "firm favourite with back-to-nature billionaires", the Soneva Gili experience lets guests get in touch with nature without straying too far from their comfort zones.
An unspoilt destination, Soneva Gili is a 20-minute speedboat ride from the international airport at Malé, and prides itself on environmental conservation and reducing the carbon footprint of its visitors. It is probably one of the few places in the world where guests walk barefoot from the time they arrive, travel by bicycle and are encouraged to explore the sandy jungle paths.
Polo shirts, summer dresses and sarongs are ideal for this tropical resort, which has seven Crusoe Residences

only accessible by boat. These wooden villas are built over water without any plastic or metal used in their construction.
3 Spend the night in a tree house
Shangri-La's Villingili Resort & Spa's tropical tree house villas offer an opportunity to those who want to indulge their childhood fantasies of living in a tree house. Some 17,000 coconut trees, 6km of coastline and nearly 2km of white-sand beaches can be found on the resort's premises.
Five neighbouring islands are open for exploration on bicycle, connected by a 17km road, for the sporty. Those who want to take things slow can enjoy a cruise on a luxury yacht, with

lunch on the equator.
The luxury resort also has a selection of fine-dining choices and spa treatments designed to entice the most sensitive palates. Alternative accommodation options, in the form of private ocean retreats, are open for those who would rather not sleep in the trees.
4 Sleep tight on the ultimate mattress
Guests get to pay back their sleep debt in full and sleep tight at this resort in the South Ari Atoll.
Lux* Maldives collaborated with Johan van Vuuren, a trained aeronautical engineer and founder of the Ultimate Mattress Company, to design its very own mattress for guest rooms.
The resort is also the host of

the Maldives' first underwater festival, which claims to be 100 per cent carbon neutral.
5 Have an underwater spa treatment
HuvaFen Fushi, which claims to have the world's first underwater spa, is just the place for weary travellers to recharge their batteries.
The resort recently reopened after closing for refurbishment earlier in May. A four-night package includes a 75-minute underwater treatment, a 60-minute spa treatment, a 90-minute facial and a private yoga session.
Accommodation-wise, choose between rooming on a sleek designer yacht and a traditional Maldivian *dhoni* (sail boat) fitted with modern amenities.

Checking in

Taj Exotica Resort & Spa

Feizal Samath unwinds in the tranquility of Taj Exotica, while being waited on by his very own butler

LOCATION Situated on the Emboodhu Finolhu island, the Taj Exotica Resort & Spa is surrounded by one of the largest lagoons in the Maldives. The resort is 8km and 15 minutes away by speedboat from Malé International Airport.
ROOMS The resort has 64 well-furnished villas, including a presidential suite and 31 Deluxe Lagoon Villas, the latter with its own plunge pool and private sun desk which provides a breathtaking view of the ocean.
Welcomed at the resort jetty

with a garland of shells by a team led by the front desk manager, I'm driven in a buggy by my very own butler Vinitha straight to a lagoon villa to be checked in.
The resort aims to provide a sense of security, privacy and tranquility. Walking along the 736m-long island, you don't bump into a single soul even though the resort is filled with 150 guests and 250 staff.
F&B This is the crème de la crème of Maldivian resorts, claim many travel consultants. Fine-dining options abound, including the all-day dining restaurant 24 Degrees, where the cuisine is said to be the best in the Maldives owing to its variety of food, wines and specialist chefs catering to European and Asian tastes.
Menus are changed regularly and innovation is the name of

the game. A pizza dish worth US\$200 was introduced in late August as a complete dining experience. The chef personally comes to the room, beach or restaurant, lays out the table and serves two complimentary glasses of champagne, and explains the ingredients that went into the nine-inch pizza.
FACILITIES The exotic Jiva Grande Spa provides body, mind and soul therapy through holistic Indian treatments at the resort's Yoga and Meditation Pavilion, mud treatment suite or in one of the two luxurious over-water Couple Spa Suites.
The resident yogi conducts free sessions of yoga and meditation every morning for six days a week. Dining on a deserted sandbank, sunset cruises, fishing, snorkelling and visiting a Mal-



divian fishing village are among the activities available to guests.
SERVICE The staff here are well trained; their instant recognition and warm reception of repeat guests, who make up 30-40 per cent of the clientele, being a pleasant surprise. Repeat visitors are welcomed by traditional *bodhu beru* drummers and the personal butler from their previous visit – a wow factor indeed.
VERDICT A haven for hon-

Name	Taj Exotica Resort & Spa
No. of rooms	64 villas
Rate	From US\$1,550 (rack rate)
Contact details	
Tel:	(960) 664-2200
Email:	exotica.maldives@tajhotels.com
Website:	www.tajhotels.com/Luxury/Exotica-Resort-And-Spa

eymooners, couples and those seeking to recharge and bask in quiet, unpretentious yet value-for-money luxury.

An added attraction is the thousands of wine bottles in the Maldives' most impressively stocked wine cellar in an underground cave.

6 Live large at this resort

Bigger is better at the One&Only Reethi Rah, set on one of the largest islands in the country.

This one-of-a-kind resort targets the jet-setters and vacationers for whom money is not an issue. The resort is huge, with numerous beaches and vast hacienda-style villas offering private pools and plenty of privacy.

The 130 private villas are among the biggest in the world – detached, expansive and luxurious. One-bedroom villas are 257m², while two-bedroom villas are 319m². Each villa comes with separate dining and sitting rooms and a bathroom.

7 Get a taste of Hawaii and safari

Ideal for clients who prefer a luxury island safari experience, the Banyan Tree Madivaru offers 150-minute Hawaiian Lomi Lomi treatments, said to be an ancient healing art mimicking the rhythmic movement of the Hawaiian hula dance.

The treatment includes a soothing pineapple and coconut scrub, followed by an invigorating rub with the abundant use of fingers, palms and elbows by the resort's therapist, all while listening to the gentle sounds of hula hula music and the ukulele.

For an even more exotic experience, stay in one of the six tented pool villas, a first in the Maldives. Combining African influences with Asian architecture, the villas' mahogany and leather top brass furniture are foldable. Outdoor furniture are made of teak wood and outdoor fabrics.

8 Cosy up to the fishies over dinner

The Conrad Maldives on Rangali Island takes dining to a whole new level – underwater – with their restaurant Ithaa, which means 'pearl' in Dhivehi. The 14-seater allows diners to stay dry while eating among marine life, offering a 270° panoramic view of life below the surface through the restaurant's acrylic panels.

More impressively, Ithaa can also be converted into a luxurious suite, if you don't mind the prying eyes of the local underwater inhabitants or having to shell out US\$11,710 per night. The experience has been described as "living in a fish bowl".

9 Savour wine in an underwater cellar

If you can dine underwater, you can certainly enjoy wine underwater too, surrounded by sting rays, reef sharks and moray eels.

Wine connoisseurs can enjoy their sips at Anantara Kihavah Villas' octagonal Sea underwater wine cellar and restaurant, one of few underwater wine cellar-cum-restaurants in the world.

Guests can pick from what the resort claims to be "one of the most balanced and diverse wine collections in the Maldives", boasting some 250 labels from 14 different countries, then savour their selections while watching the world swim by through the wine cellar's acrylic panes.

10 Holiday like a celebrity

A getaway for the rich and famous, Rania Experience provides top-grade amenities for celebrity prices – over US\$10,000 per night.

The private island residence is a 30-minute flight from Malé, and can accommodate up to 12 guests. It must be booked by one group at a time.

Its sole Rania suite comprises a master bedroom, two guest bedrooms and three beach villas



One&Only Reethi Rah



Rania Experience

with king-size beds.

Everything you could want is all here – great food, good wines, expansive white beaches, and snorkelling and diving facilities. The house yacht, a Gulf Craft luxury speed cruiser, can be rented out at US\$2,000 per hour.

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