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80 days of summer woe for airlines

Airlines told to cut summer schedules ahead of Dubai airport upgrade



By Sim Kok Chwee

SINGAPORE Dubai International Airport, already one of the busiest in the world and home to the largest fleet of Airbus A380s, faces a major disruption to traffic as it undertakes an 80-day runway enhancement project beginning May 1, 2014.

The southern runway will be closed in May to facilitate the upgrading of runway lighting and construction of additional taxiways to increase its handling capacity. The northern runway is

in dire need of a completely new surface along with other modifications and will be closed from May 31 to July 20.

Hardest hit will be Emirates, which will have to trim its schedule by 22 per cent – the equivalent of 5,825 departures – during the 80-day period. It has already announced a slew of cancellations and reductions for the period from May 1 to July 20, representing a 15 per cent cut. Destinations in the Asia-Pacific region affected include:

- Bengaluru – reduction from three to two flights daily
- Bangkok – reduction from six to four flights daily
- Colombo – reduction from 17 to seven flights per week (including cancellation of through-flight to Singapore)
- Delhi – reduction from four to three flights daily
- Dhaka – reduction from three to two flights daily
- Hong Kong – reduction from three to two flights daily
- Karachi – reduction from five to four flights daily
- Kuala Lumpur – reduction from four to three flights daily
- Mumbai – reduction from five to four flights daily
- Singapore – cancellation of Dubai-Colombo-Singapore daily flight

Other destinations affected in Emirates' network include

Continued on page 3



WRS chief Lee Meng Tat, who joined in March 2012, admits he is not 'an animal kind of person', but he keeps his ear to the ground to bring fresh perspectives and expertise in helping the organisation. By **Lee Pei Qi** - see page 12

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'Heartware' in S'pore attractions

By Lee Pei Qi

SINGAPORE Show-and-tell is set to play an integral role in Singapore's attractions with the launch of a training programme, Attractions Contextualised Training (ACT), last week.

ACT, is jointly organised by the Workforce Development Agency (WDA) and the Association of Singapore Attractions (ASA) and targets workers in Singapore's attractions to guide them in delivering animated tours.

ASA chairman, Kevin Cheong, said: "Having the hardware of good exhibits and software of good management and opera-

tions are important, but attractions must sharpen their game through heartware.

"Show-and-tell aims to bring life to the static environment, exhibits and facilities."

Emphasising the importance of show-and-tell, he added: "It is more than just costuming and delivering the content, as hosts and guides become actors playing a certain role in the attraction."

According to Cheong, the course is targeting small- and medium-sized enterprises which may not have the training resources. He said attractions

which had signed up for the course included the ArtScience Museum, Gardens by the Bay, GoGreen Segway Adventure, Malay Heritage Centre, National Heritage Board and the Singapore Discovery Centre.

Peggy Chong, deputy CEO, Gardens by the Bay, said: "As a horticulture-themed leisure destination, our horticultural displays captivate visitors with the beauty and diversity of the plant kingdom, but it is the interpretation provided by our staff and through our programmes that

Continued on page 20

New tours to save Indian peak

With popular Genting Outdoor Theme Park closing soon, new itineraries are surfacing to retain Indians' love for Malaysia

By S Puvaneswary
KUALA LUMPUR The impending closure of the Genting Outdoor Theme Park, a hot favourite among Indian holidaymakers, on September 1 this year has prompted Malaysian tour operators specialising in the Indian market to create new tour packages to make the best out of the year-end peak season.

The attraction will reopen in 2016 with a Twentieth Century Fox theme park in place, boasting some of Fox's most recognised and powerful film brands including Ice Age, Rio, Alien and Night at the Museum.

Inbound agents concurred that Indian visitors were mainly drawn to Resorts World Genting's theme park and cool highland temperatures.

"The Genting Outdoor

Theme Park is the only attraction that draws both adults and children. The Indoor Theme Park and Snow World are catered mainly to children, while Indian adults are not interested in the casinos. With the closure of the Genting Outdoor Theme Park, Resorts World Genting will lose a major pull factor," said Adam Kamal, managing director of Tina Travel & Agencies in Malaysia.

Arokia Das, senior manager at Luxury Tours Malaysia believes that the closure of the theme park would impact Indian arrivals to Malaysia. He has, however, declined to offer an estimate on the potential effect on his business at press time, explaining that Indians are

generally last minute travellers.

He said: "Thailand and Singapore would mainly benefit from the diversions."

To keep Indian interest within Malaysian borders, both Adam and Arokia have developed packages combining Kuala Lumpur and Sunway Lagoon, and are selling Resorts World Genting as an additional option.

Adam said: "I see the theme park's closure as an opportunity to promote new destinations, as it is difficult to convince clients to choose packages other than the popular Kuala Lumpur-Resorts World Genting itinerary."

"This will also be a test to see how our new packages combining Kuala Lumpur and Johor's



Arokia: Malaysia may lose out on Indian business

Legoland Malaysia and the city-island combo of Kuala Lumpur and Langkawi will sell. The price for these itineraries will be 20 to 30 per cent higher than the Kuala Lumpur-Resorts World Genting package."

Nanda Kumar, managing director of Hidden Asia Travel & Tours in Malaysia, said: "We don't want to lose the Indian inbound business to Singapore, which has Universal Studios Singapore theme park, so we have created a three-night, all-in Kuala Lumpur-Sunway Lagoon package that works out to be US\$100 cheaper than a similar programme in Singapore. The latter sells for US\$270."

Hidden Asia Travel & Tours started pushing Kuala Lumpur packages that include Sunway Lagoon entrance for stays in Au-

gust, during the busy Malaysian school holidays and Hari Raya period when it was difficult and more expensive to secure rooms at the integrated resort in the highland.

Nanda told *TTG Asia* that the package had drawn a positive response from Indian travellers.

"There was a savings of 20 per cent for a three-night stay in Kuala Lumpur, inclusive of entrance to Sunway Lagoon, as compared to a two-night stay in Kuala Lumpur and a night in Resorts World Genting, inclusive of entrance to the Outdoor Theme Park," explained Nanda.

"We expect a similar positive response to the Kuala Lumpur packages, which will include Sunway Lagoon entrance tickets, for the Diwali and year-end winter holidays."

New wings for Asia take flight

By Greg Lowe

BANGKOK Asia Atlantic Airlines embarked on its maiden Bangkok-Tokyo flight this week, signalling the arrival of a new value-focused charter service for tour groups travelling in Asia.

The Bangkok-based alliance between Japan's H.I.S Group and Thailand's Baiyoke Group of Hotels has been in development since last September, while the launch of the charter service was strategically timed to follow Japan's waiver of travel visas for Thai nationals in July.

Shaun Son Pham, spokesman



with the new carrier, told *TTG Asia*: "A significant increase in the traffic from Thailand to Japan (as a result of the visa waiver) is expected since Japan is a top destination for Thais."

Although Pham declined to project business volume for the

route, saying it was too early to tell, he noted that the airline's inaugural flight between Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi International Airport and Tokyo Narita International Airport on August 20 was operated at full capacity.

Daily return flights from

Bangkok are scheduled until November 1, while daily services between Bangkok and Kansai International Airport in Osaka will commence on September 1.

Two Boeing 767-300ER aircraft will service these routes. The airline is targeting a peak season load factor of 90-95 per cent on both inbound and outbound flights.

Asia Atlantic Airlines plans to tap this travel segment by offering better value flights than traditional carriers without contending in the low cost carrier market.

"The airline will offer tour operators a more consistent and reasonable pricing compared to legacy carriers during the peak

travel season," Pham said, adding that leisure travellers who book through H.I.S Group and other tour operators formed the airline's target customer base.

Baiyoke Group of Hotels benefits from this partnership by supplying accommodation to tour groups using the charter airline.

From late November Asia Atlantic Airlines will roll out services to South Korea and China, with flights to Guam and Hawaii to be added once additional aircraft have been delivered.

The airline will provide passengers with access to a departure lounge and dedicated immigration counters at Suvarnabhumi International Airport.



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Continued from page 1

Emirates, Qantas most affected

Amman, Amsterdam, Bahrain, Beirut, Cairo, Capetown, Doha, Frankfurt, Johannesburg, Kuwait City, Lagos, Milan, Moscow, Muscat, Nairobi, Riyadh, Seychelles, Tehran and Vienna.

Emirates' strategic partner Qantas is likewise faced with the prospect of a reduced schedule, having been informed by Dubai Airports in April that it will need to downsize its services by 50 per cent. Qantas currently operates two flights to London through Dubai and accounts for 28 movements. Senior executives from the airline are lobbying to be spared the drastic cuts and retain all 28 take-off and landing slots during the start of the busy European summer season.

Qantas has since successfully increased the weekly slots from the initial 14, disclosing it is "much closer" to gaining the 28 slots needed.

So far, Emirates has not included any destinations in Australia and New Zealand in its service reductions but hinted that it would have to trim operations across its network. Emirates' and Qantas' woes during this busy period will be a boon to its many competitors on the popular Kangaroo Route.

All airlines operating into Dubai have been advised to trim their schedule during this period and will have to finalise their schedule in time for the data to be input into the Computer Reservation Systems in late October 2013 as part of the IATA scheduling cycle.

Dubai Airports has already taken steps to minimise disruption to passenger flights by diverting and directing all freighter, charter and general aviation flights to the Dubai World Central (DWC) Al Maktoum International Airport.

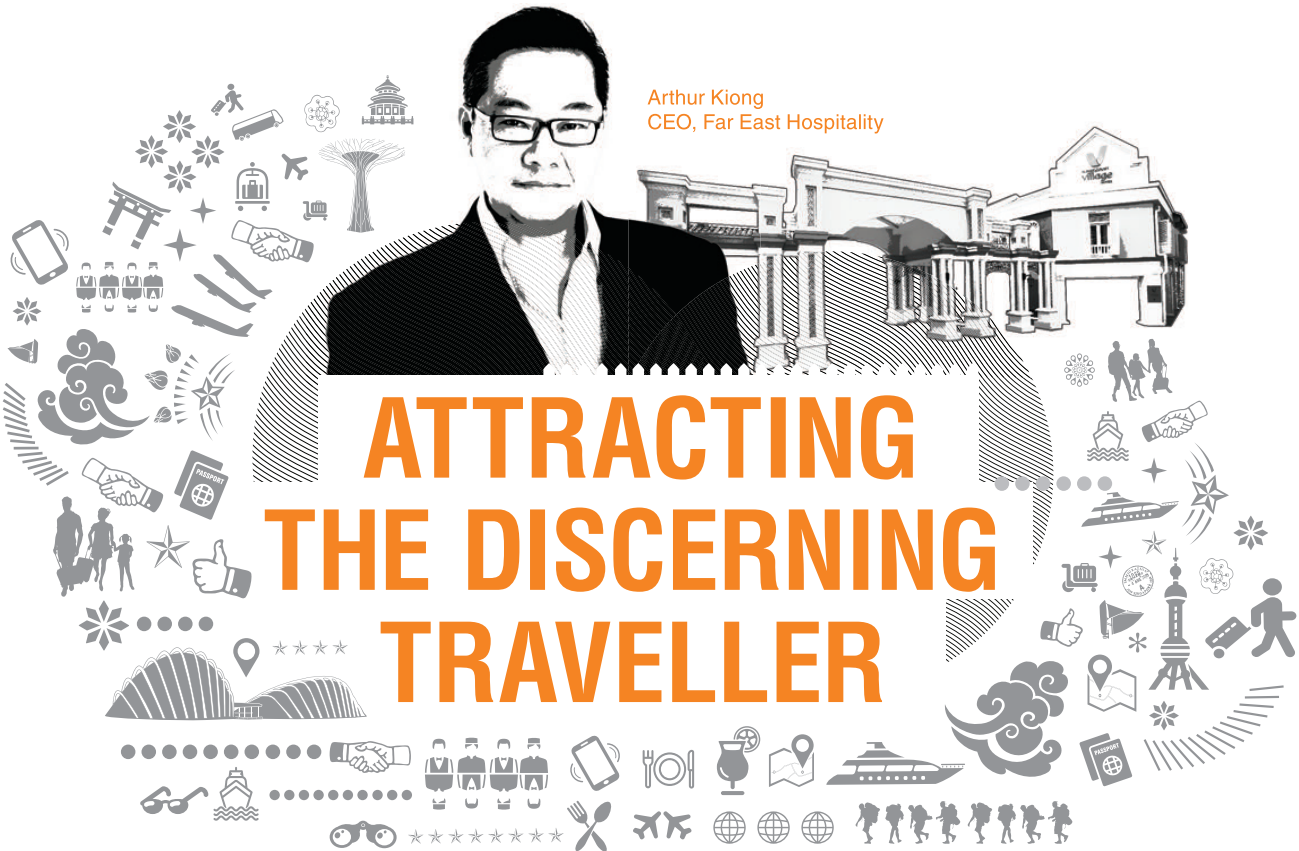
Said chief executive Paul Griffiths: "We have put a plan in place that mitigates risks to service and optimises the capacity we have available at both airports to minimise any impact on local trade, commerce and tourism.

"Safety and service are our two top priorities and while we regret any inconvenience caused to our airline customers and to our passengers, these upgrades are necessary to heighten safety, boost capacity and quite literally pave the way for future expansion."

Dubai Airports anticipates a 25 per cent reduction in scheduled flights into Dubai.

However, the drop in passenger volume will be less in percentage terms as airlines may elect to upsize to bigger aircraft and enjoy higher load factor on these flights.

Airlines also have the option of diverting affected flights to DWC airport.



Arthur Kiong
CEO, Far East Hospitality

The number of Asian travellers will grow as the region adds an estimated 2.5 billion people to its middle class by 2030. By 2020, approximately 40 per cent of global outbound tourism spend will come from Asia.

Arthur Kiong, CEO of Far East Hospitality (FEH) speaks to us on the implications of Asia's rapid transformation and the need for businesses to differentiate themselves in order to attract today's increasingly discerning Asian travellers.

The number of Asian travellers will grow as the region adds an estimated 2.5 billion people to its middle class by 2030. By 2020, approximately 40 per cent of global outbound tourism spend will come from Asia.

Travellers today are no longer blindly choosing run-of-the-mill itineraries. They want to be a part of local festivals and cultures unique to each destination. And they want to do so in comfort.

precincts such as Little India and Kampong Glam to give guests the added advantage of eating, playing and living the Singaporean way. We are also opening Village Hotel Katong later this year so that our guests can, literally, have a taste of the Peranakan flavours in the surrounding area.

Arthur Kiong, CEO of Far East Hospitality (FEH) speaks to us on the implications of Asia's rapid transformation and the need for businesses to differentiate themselves in order to attract today's increasingly discerning Asian travellers.

TOURISM BUSINESSES TODAY
THUS NEED TO ADOPT A
TARGETED, CUSTOMISED AND
MARKET-SPECIFIC APPROACH
TO BETTER ENGAGE CONSUMERS
SO AS TO OFFER RELEVANT
AND AUTHENTIC EXPERIENCES
THAT THEY VALUE.

Ultimately, we are a home-grown brand and we want to share our heritage with the rest of the world.

Last year, FEH participated in TravelRave as one of the exhibitors in ITB Asia. In your opinion, what is the value of a platform like TravelRave for the travel and tourism industry?

With over three decades of experience in the hospitality industry, what are the key changes that have taken place in the travel and tourism industry?

In my opinion, it is a country's unique heritage that appeals to savvy travellers. For instance, hotels can provide exclusive services like round-the-clock European-styled butler services but this may not necessarily translate to a meaningful or memorable travel experience especially for Asian travellers. Realistically speaking, how many of us in Asia grew up with such formalities and habits at home?

Although the travel and tourism industry in Asia is competitive, we appreciate the breadth of opportunities offered at platforms such as TravelRave. Last year, FEH exhibited at ITB Asia and will return this year with a larger booth to showcase a variety of new products and services. With many of the attendees coming from related sectors in the travel and tourism industry, we look forward to the opportunities to create new and stronger connections with potential business partners this year.

Thirty years ago, it was common for Western travellers to be the focus of many tourism and hospitality businesses in Asia. The priority for tourism businesses then was to create travel products and experiences that catered to Western travellers and their preferences – this would explain the style in which hotels were designed - full Western-style breakfasts and wait staff with napkins draped over the arm that many established hotels had.

While we should offer our guests exceptional service, it is the authentic local flavours, cultures and experiences of a destination that will attract today's travellers.

Today, a new generation of Asian consumers are quickly catching up, armed with larger disposable incomes along with bigger appetites for travel and authentic experiences.

We need to be proactive and shift our marketing mix to complement our unique selling point. Even within Asia, each market is different. We cannot all be selling Asian hospitality.

You mentioned that a new generation of affluent Asian travellers now prefer differentiated and authentic experiences over conventional options. Could you share how this has changed FEH's business approach?

At FEH, what we deliver is Singapore-inspired hospitality. What this means is that we offer our guests a little piece of Singapore's heritage every time they stay with us. For instance, our Village brand leverages our location at several cultural

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Sources: 1. The Abacus International Report 2. Consumer Insights: Profiling the Asian Middle and Affluent Traveller, a report by Boston Consulting Group (BCG) and Singapore Tourism Board (STB), Asia Travel Leaders Summit 2012



Haven't been to our website?

Here's what you've missed

Tourism Data

Online hotel reservations company Agoda polled travellers to 15 major Asian capitals, asking them to rate the destinations' airports on a scale of one (poor) to five (excellent). Unsurprisingly, Singapore's Changi Airport took tops with a score of 4.37, followed by the facilities of Hong Kong (4.13) and Incheon (4.01), while Manila's Ninoy Aquino International Airport came in last with 2.36 points, losing to airports in Yangon (2.81), Vientiane (2.74) and Ho Chi Minh City (2.91)

Hot Deals

Khiri Travel launched a special 15-day fam trip across Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia in September, promising to refund the cost of the trip for travel consultants who rack up US\$10,000 in bookings after. Consultants can choose to travel the entire itinerary or join in for specific countries



Luang Prabang

Hot Moves

Morgan Lin is now resident manager of Pullman Sanya Yalong Bay Resort & Spa; Mövenpick Resort & Spa Karon Beach Phuket has appointed Bertrand Margerie as resident manager; Dusit International has appointed Julia Alvaro director of sales and marketing at Dusit Thani Dubai and Thanos Lionsatos to the same role at Dusit Thani Maldives

How to catch a big fish



Two decades since Asian pioneer Star Cruises started, the number of Asians who cruise Asia is still tip of the iceberg. How frustrating.

Raini Hamdi
Senior Editor

[Signature]

Around 1.2 million Asians cruise today and a huge chunk of that pie comprises passengers who cruise Alaska or Europe, not Asia, although this is starting to change as more cruise ships homeport in Asia and offer regional cruises.

If it were a mere matter of having more cruise ships hubbing in the region to open the floodgates for millions of Asians to go on board, Asia would by now have the 3.7 million cruise passengers that it is eyeing in 2017 (see our cruise report, pages 7-9). This target speaks for itself: the journey to enlarge regional cruising is as slow as the movement of a big liner on the high seas seen from shore.

Asia's potential cruise market is 40 million passengers – going by just two or three per cent cruise penetration of its population – yet, two decades since Asian pioneer Star Cruises started its initiative to grow the region as a cruise destination (in September 1993), the number of Asians who cruise Asia still is tip of the iceberg. How frustrating.

Here's some food for thought:

• While Asia's tourism authorities have been able to switch the mindset that Asian markets are the present and future – and consequently switched marketing dollars and come up with Asian-centric marketing – most still think of cruising as 'white man's romance': Caucasians exploring exotic Asia, not Asians discovering the secrets of their own backyard. Are there strategies to attract the Asian cruise passenger specifically, and more marketing dollars to boot?

• The question, why would Asians cruise Asia?, needs to be asked. Why indeed, when Asia's land-based products (just think of its resorts, shopping havens, theme parks, integrated resorts, etc) are wonderful, easily accessible and far more immersive than the day tours offered by a ship?

The attractiveness of the cruise ship therefore is a competitive edge in this sea vs land equation. Yet, I've seen international cruise lines deploying their older ships to Asia as new capacity comes online. This is a big mistake. Ask the international hotel chains; they would tell you that Asian travellers are used to higher standards and they are building better hotels because of it. Some are even building Asian-centric brands from scratch. International cruise lines that want a loyal following of Asian clients should start with the best product possible, certainly not with a hand-me-down.

• Do ground operators for the Asian cruises offer exciting day trips? Do lines think of possibilities that could enhance tours – longer stops at a port perhaps – and work with ground operators to offer tours that are even more exciting than land-based?

• Port development too plays a crucial role. Currently, the itineraries of cruise lines homeporting in the region are more or less the same. To attract Asians to cruise Asia, new ports of call must open and every port should be a destination in its own right, having the right pull factors to attract Asians, be these unique shops, entertainment places, F&B venues, cultural icons, etc. Again, many tourism authorities do not yet have the Asian cruise market potential mindset and are thus not investing enough on port development for Asians.

• And my last food for thought: Don't we want Asians to be hooked for life on cruising because it is a unique, holistic product and one they are willing to pay a price for? Currently, affordability is the overriding reason for Asians to pick cruising. This does not speak too well for the product for, as soon as income rises, you can bet they will swim towards an aspirational leisure product.

That's no way to catch a big fish and keep it.

Most commented on www.ttgasia.com

Major revamp in the pipeline for Changi Airport

On Singapore's recently unveiled plans to add a mixed-use development and two terminals, MB Khadka from Kathmandu observed: "Changi Airport currently has capacity for 73 million (passenger movements a year) but still the Singapore government is trying to revamp it, looking ahead at future traffic flow. There is a lesson to learn from here – a nation cannot come up without the development of tourism."

New airline to boost Japan-Thai connections

Regional carrier Asia Atlantic Airlines was launched on August 7 at Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi International Airport, with the inaugural flight on August 20. Said Thailand's Manas Chakarphat Numn: "Asia Atlantic Airlines is good for mutual tourism between Thailand and Japan. I support and congratulate (the airline on its) coming success."

Chinese swarm to Phuket raises concerns

Responding to our article on the changing face of Phuket tourism as more Chinese tourists flock to the Thai destination, Adrian Mangiboyat from Tokyo commented: "Unfortunately, it is hard to control the flow of visitors, in as much as a destination tries to develop a mix of travellers.

"That is where Thailand is, wanting to draw as much visitors from a range of destinations. At this time, the boom from China cannot be controlled. Japan implemented visa requirements for the (Chinese) market that required Chinese to have a certain level of income, among other points.

"However, more than just having the right mix of travellers, the bigger issue is the cultural difference between the locals and visitors from China – and Russia as was mentioned – that is at play here. This has been an issue not just in Thailand but in other destinations that have seen a major surge in Chinese visitors. Education on both sides is needed to ensure a win-win situation."



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Travel Hall of Fame

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

At present, these exceptional organisations and their years of induction are:

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- Star Cruises (2008)
- Abacus International (2009)
- SilkAir (2010)
- Lotte Tour (2011)

TTG Asia Media is pleased to announce that it is setting up a virtual TTG Travel Hall of Fame, which will enable us to showcase the accolades, artefacts and memorabilia of the region's most exceptional travel organisations in a far more effective way and to a global audience.



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Homeporting in Singapore since 2012, the 3,840-pax *Voyager of the Seas* has pumped up Royal Caribbean International's capacity in Asia

Charting Asian waters for growth

Prospects are buoyant as more Asians start to see the beauty of cruising. Written by **Xinyi Liang-Pholsena**, with reports from **Lee Pei Qi**, **S Puvaneswary**, **Greg Lowe**, **Mimi Hudoyo**, **Prudence Lui** and **Marianne Carandang**

While a string of disasters at sea recently has somewhat taken the shine out of cruising, particularly in the world's biggest cruise market North America, in Asia the waters are anything but murky. With cruise companies reporting healthy increases in the number of Asians getting onboard their ships, expectations that the size of the Asian cruise market will expand to 3.7 million by 2017 are looking within reach. Currently, there are around 1.2 million Asian cruise passengers, according to the 2012 *Cruise Industry News An-*





nual Report. Royal Caribbean Cruises Asia-Pacific regional director, Kelvin Tan, said: "The number of our Asian guests have increased by an average of 20 to 30 per cent year-on-year since 2007. As the region grows increasingly affluent, cruise vacations are being viewed as a fresh, alternative holiday option to the traditional land vacation." Ong Huey Hong, cruise director of Singapore Tourism Board (STB), said: "Our cruise business has been seeing a healthy year-on-year growth of at least 20 per cent. In 2012, the total sales figures generated from cruise packages grew almost twofold compared to 2011, largely spurred by increased take-ups in longer-haul cruises which cost an average of about S\$6,000 (US\$4,730) per person." Singapore-based Chan Brothers Travel's spokesperson, Michelle Yin, said: "On average, we see a 30 per cent year-on-year increase in demand for regional cruises from Singapore and fly-cruises from port-of-calls beyond Singapore. This trend was evident since 2010, when we started to focus on international or fly-cruises." Said Imam Syafii, president director of Menara Tudjuh Sembilan, Costa Cruises' GSA in Indonesia: "The regional cruise (business) increased 30 per cent in 2012 from 2011 since Costa Cruises deployed *Costa Atlantica* in Singapore last year. Between 30 and 40 per cent of the market are first-time cruise travellers." "Indonesia is a sleeping giant. While the longhaul (cruise) traffic will continue to grow it will remain niche, while shorthaul cruise destinations will be big (for Asian passengers)," added Imam, who projected the market to expand a whopping 40 per cent this year.

Multi facilities net diverse travel segments Michael Goh, Star Cruises' senior vice president of sales, said: "Asians enjoy holidays that bring them to several destinations, allowing them to experience different food and cultures all in one go. Cruising offers them the most convenient way of exploring multiple exotic destinations in a single holiday."

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TRAVELERS

Regional cruises are also well-received among Asian travellers who dislike long-haul flights or have tighter budgets. “Asian cruises are attractive to families with young children, first-timers and incentive groups with lower budgets and time limitations,” said Sukanya Rattanavadee, GSA general manager, Regale International Travel Thailand.

Added Cooper Huang, CEO of Malaysian Harmony Tours & Travel, which sold 100 per cent more South-east Asian cruise packages in 1H2013 than in first-half 2012: “You can take a three-night cruise for below RM2,000 (US\$614), inclusive of city tours.”

Huang continued: “Many families with children book these cruises during the school holidays whereas working adults travelling with small groups of friends may take a few days’ leave from work to go on a cruise. For the elderly, the attraction is visiting different places without having to lug around luggage.”

Abdul Rahman Mohamed, deputy general manager, channel management of Mayflower Acme Tours, promotes *SuperStar Libra*, homeported in Penang, for its easy accessibility. The Kuala Lumpur-based firm recorded a growth of between 15 and 20 per cent in South-east Asian cruising in 1H2013, driven mainly by the Muslim market since the ship launched two halal restaurants – Spices and Blue Lagoon – earlier this year.

He added that most cruise clients were either first-timers or had been on Star Cruises in the past, hence they were usually keen to experience shore excursions in a new destination and facilities on board a “moving five-star hotel”.

“Compared with the longhaul market, travellers in the region take cruises be-

cause they want to try new big ships which offer more facilities and entertainment on board than the destination itself,” noted Edhi Sutadharma, general manager of Golden Rama Tours & Travel Indonesia, which has set up a separate cruise division to tap the growing cruise market.

Shorter cruises in demand

As Asian travellers warm up to cruising, the trade is seeing a surge in interest for shorter and more affordable itineraries.



Ong: demand for shorter cruises

“Due to (Asians’) lack of familiarity with cruising, they prefer to cruise in South-east Asia as it is closer to home. As a result, they also prefer shorter cruise itineraries of three to five days for their first cruise,” said STB’s Ong.

Budget also plays a key consideration as many first-time cruise travellers in Asia do not wish to fork out prices beyond HK\$20,000 (US\$2,579) for European and American cruises, pointed out Kevin So, deputy general manager of Sightseer (HK).

He said: “It’s also typical to see experienced Asians cruise travellers sail in their backyard because they enjoy the cruising experience and look for affordable short-haul trips, for example a six-day journey under HK\$10,000.”

Menara’s Imam added: “The advantage of these short cruises is that travellers can decide on a short getaway at the last minute, provided the cabin is available, since there’s no need for a visa.”

He said short cruises of between three and five nights were a favourite among In-

donesian travellers, with the *Costa Victoria* roundtrip Singapore-Penang-Langkawi-Phuket itinerary departing on December 28 as the bestseller since it would berth in Phuket on New Year’s Eve.

As Asian travellers take to the seas in rising numbers, cruise lines are also venturing into more remote waters in the region, steering the course to hitherto less visited destinations like Sabah and Myanmar.

Apart from the popular 4D3N itineraries in its portfolio, Goh said that Star Cruises had rolled out a special 7D6N cruise departing from Penang to Krabi, Yangon and Phuket this month. It would also homeport the 1,511-pax *SuperStar Aquarius* in Kota Kinabalu from November, with calls at Brunei’s Bandar Seri Begawan and Sarawak’s Bintulu, he added.

Meanwhile, Silversea Cruises is developing new regional itineraries and experiences to attract more Asian travellers. “Three of our ships (*Silver Whisper*, *Silver Shadow* and *Silver Wind*) are returning to Myanmar in 2014 and will each incorporate a special multi-night stay in this mys-

tical and undiscovered destination,” said Asia regional director, Melvyn Yap.

Meetings market growth

While cruises are undeniably suited for leisure travellers, the trade also sees cruiseships’ strong potential for the MICE market, especially with the recent launch of

Marina Bay Cruise Centre Singapore and Hong Kong’s Kai Tak Cruise Terminal.

Star Cruises’ Goh said: “Many corporations see cruising as a great tool for team building, breaking free from traditional land-based venues. The setting out at sea is serene and perfect for brainstorming and exchange of ideas.

“A good number of sizeable corporations as well as special interest groups have organised MICE events onboard *SuperStar Libra*, such as a 4D3N destination cruise for 1,000 guests for an India-based incentive group,” he added.

Said Royal Caribbean Cruises’ Tan: “For Indonesia and India, MICE business makes up almost 50 per cent of our total sales. Incentive travel is a popular trend for companies in these markets.”

MICE cruises make up a small but growing segment for Jebesen Travel Hong Kong, according to cruise section assistant sales manager, Crystal Wong. Such cruises were particularly “hot” for investment banks, which would invite their clients and hold seminars on board” she added.



SuperStar Aquarius’ diverse facilities lure multi-generational cruise passengers in Asia

When faraway seas cast their spell

While Asia is set to be a hotbed for cruising in coming years, a significant number of South-east Asians, particularly the high-end segment, have passed over the opportunity to sail in their own backyard for the distant shores of the Mediterranean, Alaska and the Antarctica, according to cruise experts in the region.

Melvyn Yap, Asia regional director at Silversea Cruises, opined that the desire to explore exotic realms was a key motivator. “A holiday destination that offers a contrast in culture, cuisine and sightseeing than found locally can often appeal. Most South-east Asians are keen to explore a different world from what they are used to,” he said.

Added Sukanya Rattanavadee, GSA general manager of Regale International Travel Thailand: “Most experienced Thai travellers have been to most Asian coun-

tries by land, so they seem to lose interest in returning to the same cities, (where) they can easily travel by themselves probably at lower fares.”

Faraway destinations were deemed more fascinating, she said. “Our most popular cruise destination is Alaska. Thais like to enjoy cool weather, different scenery, especially glaciers and fjords and wildlife.”

Celebrity Cruises’ European and Mediterranean itineraries had sold well among Filipino cruise travellers, said Marilen Yaptango, president and CEO of Baron Travel. She added: “The US (market) is tired of Alaska, but Asians aren’t – they can’t get enough of it.”

Similarly, Alaskan and Mediterranean cruises are popular among high-income Malaysian travellers, with bookings typically made for one cabin (two people) and

duration lasting one or two weeks, according to Abdul Rahman Mohamed, deputy general manager, channel management of Mayflower Acme Tours Malaysia, which saw a five per cent year-on-year growth in cruises outside Asia in 1H2013.

He added luxury cruiseships such as Silversea, *Queen Elizabeth* and Princess were favoured by high-end customers, but the numbers were limited due to high cruise fees. He said: “To encourage high-end travellers to cruise within Asia, Asian NTOs have to attract more luxury cruises to make Asia their port-of-call.”

WITA Tour Indonesia director of sales and marketing, Rudiana, said: “To the Indonesians, Asian destinations like Singapore, Phuket and Penang are not new; they have been there a number of times before finally deciding on taking the cruise. Generally, people are trying the ships, enjoying the facilities and programmes (on board) rather than choosing a destination.”

More efforts are hence needed to promote regional cruises among Asian travellers, industry experts pointed out.

“Many Asians still have the mindset that cruises are more suitable for retirees or families with young children,” said Eileen Oh, head of marketing & communications at ASA Holidays Singapore. “We are exploring ideas with various stakeholders to reach out to different clientele such as the young adults and luxury travel segments.”

Urging greater efforts to demystify cruising, Tina Cortez, president of Travel People Philippines, remarked: “While pricing is always a key driver to attract

markets, awareness campaigns should address (misconceptions) by highlighting cruising’s unique value propositions: all-inclusive pricing, free entertainment, activities for all members of the family, etc.”

Ong Huey Hong, Singapore Tourism Board cruise director, concurred, adding that many Asians were “surprised” to learn of the diverse offerings available on board and considered cruises to be a “value-for-money vacation choice.”

But getting repeat Asian cruise travellers is a challenge. Rudiana said: “Indonesians want to see many places when they travel and spending more time on the cruiseship is not their type of vacation. Our surveys showed that while the majority of cruise travellers are satisfied and happy with the trip, the repeat level is low.”

Furthermore, it is not uncommon for experienced cruise travellers to opt for destinations beyond Asia for their subsequent vacations, noted Karl Wat, director of sales for Asia, Compagnie Du Ponant Yacht Cruises. “They started with Star Cruises or Costa Cruises from the outset, which helped nurture a group of mature clientele (heading further afield for their cruises),” he said.

Improving shore excursions is hence key to raise the allure of regional cruises. Ground operators could operate tours in various Asian languages, for example, Regale’s Sukanya suggested.

Developing supporting infrastructure and improving awareness of cruises and training across the travel trade would help convince more Asians to cruise within the region, added Silversea’s Yap.



Mediterranean itineraries such as a Silversea cruise of Italy’s Portofino appeal to Asian travellers for their novelty factor

What are cruise lines doing to woo Asians?



Michael Goh, senior vice president, sales, Star Cruises: “We have revamped and expanded retail space across our fleet and partnered with well-known retail brands such as China Duty Free and Milan Station.

Asian guests have developed a passion for themed cruises. Our ships adopt different themes every month to keep guest experiences fresh. For example, *SuperStar Virgo* launched a Korean and Thai theme in March and April respectively for guests to enjoy different activities and speciality cuisines.

During the Korean Wave promotion, we highlighted Korean food, pop music, arts & crafts and activities to offer guests an all-encompassing Korean experience.

SuperStar Virgo also collaborated with Tourism Authority of Thailand to invite Thai guest chefs on board the vessel and create authentic Thai food for our guests.”



Kelvin Tan, regional director, Asia-Pacific, Royal Caribbean Cruises: “Royal Caribbean has enhanced a number of elements on our cruises to suit our Asian guests. We offer language assistance with crew on-board who are fluent in Asian languages like Chinese, Korean and Japanese. Our signages and daily programme sheets are available in these languages as well.

Our menus also offer a wide selection of Asian cuisines from Chinese to Indian and Indonesian, and include dishes like fish curry and Asian duck. Our entertainment programmes on board are also suited for Asians’ tastes, like karaoke with Asian songs, Bingo games and line dancing classes.”



Marnie Whipple, regional sales manager, Asia-Pacific, Crystal Cruises: “Crystal Cruises is doubling its visits in Asia next year with two ships – *Crystal Symphony* and *Crystal Serenity* – deployed to the region. For those who prefer shorthaul flights, we have many local choices including Hong Kong to Singapore on February 22, 2014.

With the tremendous success of our group promotions this year, we will continue to offer in 2014 the Family Memories Programme, in which one guest sails free for every 10 full-fare adults, and guests receive US\$200 shipboard credit per person in the Share the Experience shipboard credit promotion.

We have planned more segmented voyages to cater to Asian travellers as they have shorter holidays compared with Europeans or Americans.

We have planned more segmented voyages to cater to Asian travellers as they have shorter holidays compared with Europeans or Americans.

For example, we have arranged two segments for a 12-day itinerary in 2014 as a seven-day voyage from Yokohama to Shanghai and a five-day voyage from Shanghai to Hong Kong.

With increasing numbers of mainland Chinese travellers on board, we have added ‘Chinese comfort food’ to *Crystal Serenity’s* Tastes café, serving a menu of traditional Chinese food such as steamed dumplings, noodles, soups, fried rice and vegetables.”

Buhy Bok, senior vice president Pacific Asia & China, Costa Cruises: “Costa Cruises offers shorter options for Asian guests to cruise the region without taking long flights. For example, *Costa Victoria* offers



three-, four-, five- and seven-night itineraries from Singapore to Bali, Lombok, Semarang, Penang, Kuantan, Malacca, Langkawi, Koh Samui and Phuket.

We also offer a range of complimentary cuisines featuring uniquely Asian dishes and staple food such as kimchi, chicken rice and fried noodles in our fine-dining restaurants on board. Service staff speak-

ing Korean, Japanese and Chinese are available; menus and daily programmes are also translated into local languages. Local entertainment such as mahjong is also available. Culture and needs are priority considerations for Costa Cruises. We look at shorter itineraries and choice of food, and we tailor both onboard and offshore activities.”

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- Ports-of-call: Kuala Lumpur (Port Klang)

4-NIGHT BEST OF MALAYSIA CRUISE MARINER OF THE SEAS

- Singapore Departures: 2013 Dec 16, 2014 Jan 7, 16, 29
- Ports-of-call: Kuala Lumpur (Port Klang), Langkawi

4-NIGHT ISLES OF SOUTHEAST ASIA CRUISE MARINER OF THE SEAS

- Singapore Departures: 2013 Nov 18, 25, Dec 2*, 9
- Ports-of-call: Kuala Lumpur (Port Klang), Phuket
*Penang replaces Port Klang

5-NIGHT SPICE OF SOUTHEAST ASIA CRUISE MARINER OF THE SEAS

- Singapore Departures: 2013 Nov 10, Dec 23, 2014 Jan 2, Feb 7
- Ports-of-call: Kuala Lumpur (Port Klang), Phuket, Penang

5/6-NIGHT PHUKET & MALAYSIA CRUISE MARINER OF THE SEAS

- Singapore Departures: 2013 Dec 28, 2014 Jan 11, 23*, Feb 2*, 22
- Ports-of-call: Kuala Lumpur (Port Klang), Phuket (overnight)

*Similar 6N cruise with additional ports calling at Langkawi and Penang.
*CNY festive sailing.

7-NIGHT THAILAND AND VIETNAM CRUISE MARINER OF THE SEAS

- Singapore Departure: 2014 Feb 15
- Ports-of-call: Bangkok (Laem Chabang, overnight), Ho Chi Minh City (Phu My)

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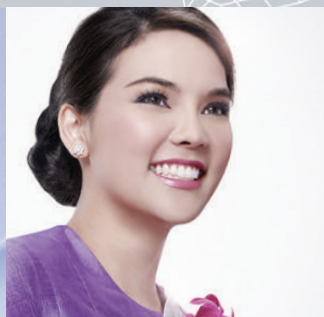
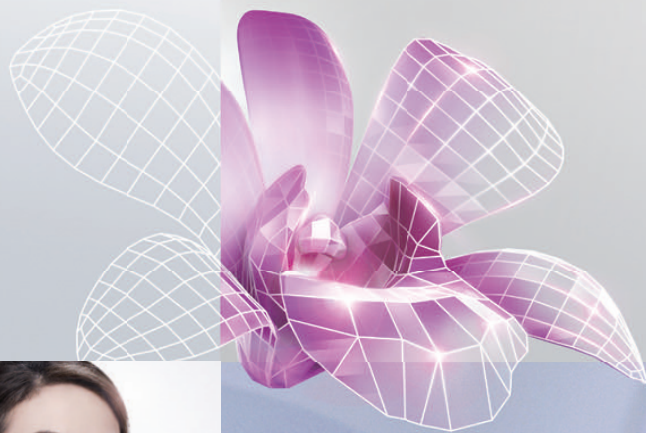
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A STAR ALLIANCE MEMBER 

Lee Meng Tat
CEO, Wildlife Reserves
Singapore (WRS)

The WRS chief, who joined in March 2012, admits he is not 'an animal kind of person', but he keeps his ear to the ground to bring fresh perspectives and expertise in helping the organisation. By **Lee Pei Qi**

Walk on the wild side

Did you imagine you would be helming WRS?

No. I have never been an animal kind of person. But I believe things always happen for a reason and the previous appointments were opportunities that (led me to the present job).

So how did you land this job?

After 12 years at F&N (Fraser & Neave), I felt it was time to move on and started looking out for opportunities.

When the headhunter first put this portfolio on my table, I told him he must be joking and said: "Let's have a good laugh and move on." But I decided to really take a look at it and it took me a weekend to decide that I wanted to take this up.

You were at F&N for 12 years. How has that helped your current role?

At F&N, it was about getting the right product and brand across. Here, I am working with the marketing people to get our branding right.

We have four parks under the WRS umbrella brand that promise everyone the ultimate wildlife

experience in a safe and controlled environment.

If you want a day experience, we have the Singapore Zoo and the Jurong Bird Park for bird lovers; for the night experience, we have the Night Safari. Now, with our latest River Safari, you can see giant fishes in a freshwater environment.

We have a mix of everything for everyone. So this is the brand I want people to know when they think of WRS.

How has the past year been?

In the beginning, it was all about learning and getting to know the people. You can't get going until you know the people and what they have done.

It is important for me to understand the business first. Apart from my weekly staff lunches, I also make it a point to walk around the park to put my ear to the ground.

WRS has been very well-run and has done a great job. The key thing is not to be a CEO who comes in to

change everything. We continue what works and tweak what needs to be improved. Over the past year, we have been busy getting our River Safari up and running so that is where I have been spending most of my time on.

How do you ensure your parks stay as Singapore's top attractions?

I am currently looking at a 10-year masterplan to refresh and rejuvenate our parks. We have just agreed on the framework and a timeline so we are now at the first stage of implementation.

What we are doing first is to review our animal and exhibit collection in the parks, which has been around for 40 years. We want to look at which are the ones to keep, why, and what is the conservation value. Then we want to make sure we can create an immersive experience.

This masterplan has a 10-year cycle so when I talk about change, it is not a dramatic reconstruction but a programme that will introduce things in phases so we can have a continuous refreshing experience to bring

people back after their first visit.

What makes WRS stand out from the other attractions?

We already have the product, but the differentiating factor is our service excellence. This is something simple to say, but difficult to execute. The product is always there but how you deliver it is our winning edge. Our people are the difference. We do not pay the best salaries but we get the most committed and passionate people who love animals and service.

What else is new in the parks?

We are now inviting our guests to come backstage to see how we care for animals and to have rare, close encounters with our reptiles or baboons.

We did not show them before but these are actually fascinating experiences that we can share and which we are promoting now, to much success.

What are the challenges with handling animals?

These living exhibits move around, so you may not see them all the time.

We do try to design our spaces in such a way that visitors can see almost everything, but if the animals want to rest in a hidden spot, we need to give them the space to rest. We cannot be poking the animals to wake them up because they have a right to sleep too.

The animals are living their lives and we should appreciate the fact that they may be asleep. People need to understand we are not showcasing an exhibit that is always there and that we are participating in the animals' way of life.

How do you measure success at WRS?

We are a self-funded organisation, which means we must (earn) our own keep. All the revenues we get must go back to taking care of our animals, exhibits and staff, so we need to balance

between doing good and doing well.

If you talk about doing well, we look at the commercial part and it is of course about visitor arrivals. For the financial part, are we making enough money to be self-sustaining?

But on doing good, it is not about money but about the types of conservation projects we have and how we are contributing to the sustainability of wildlife. It is a bit harder to quantify the doing good part because there is no monetary value; it is more about making sure all animals are well taken care of.

Some have commented that your entrance tickets are too expensive.

As a self-funded organisation, we have to make sure that whatever we earn is sufficient for whatever we spend and that we have enough left over for the rejuvenation of the parks.

We need to make a profit but the key thing is we are not profiteering. We have done benchmarking exercises on entrance tickets with the rest of the attractions in Singapore and we compare well in terms of pricing and the experience we provide.

Where do some of the costs go?

We need to feed our animals. You won't believe the amount of fruits and vegetables that come through our zoo everyday. We have more than 13,000 animals in all four parks and each of them must get their nutrients. We need to buy the right food for the animals because they are living things too and they cannot just eat anything.

How do you cultivate a relationship with travel consultants?

There is definitely a lot of dialogue going on and we like their valuable input and innovative ideas. We have good relationships with the consultants to make sure their programmes dovetail well with what we can offer. And we make sure we invite them for fam trips and provide them with updated information (for their) packages.

So having been a non-animal lover, has that changed now?

(Laughs) No, it's a bit hard to change that given that I have not been an animal kind of person all my life. But I can say that coming here has provided me a new perspective and taught me how to appreciate animals better.





How to be the best employer

Royal Plaza on Scotts' general manager, Patrick Fiat, shares the initiatives that make the hotel win Aon Hewitt's Best Employer and Best Employer for Commitment to Engagement 2013 awards

Chillax Lounge

Why it's needed Royal Plaza on Scotts (RP) recognises the importance of upgrading the organisation's hardware for associates to feel at home. This has spurred the hotel to create Chillax Lounge, a space equipped with a projector for associates to unwind while watching movies or television programmes and bond with each other. Massage chairs are also available for them to relax and pamper themselves during their free time. Those who prefer to spend quiet moments can surf the Internet, read books, newspapers and magazines or simply enjoy the view of the live aquarium. Associates were also involved in the logo design creation for the new lounge.

Key results Many associates expressed their happiness in having a space to chill out during their breaks and even before or after work. The happiness index at the workplace has increased as associates feel recognised by the management for their passion and efforts. We have been able to better retain our current associates, instead of using resources to attract talents.

Friday open-door sessions with the general manager

Why it's needed RP's tagline – *What Can We Do For You* – reflects our service and this is demonstrated from the management to associates first. Engagement sessions with different age groups are conducted on a regular basis to find out what RP associates are looking for in an organisation. The highly-connected younger generations are enthusiastic and full of passion to make differences and bring new ideas into the company.

During these engagement sessions, associates can communicate directly with me. I would address their concerns and

makes improvements in the hotel for both guests and associates, based on feedback or suggestions from associates. There is also an allocated timeslot for an open-door session every Friday, during which any associate may simply walk in and have a chat with me.

Key results Initiatives directed at the needs of RP associates are very welcomed, especially among the younger members. Associates feel more appreciated knowing that their voices are heard and their comments are taken in consideration and actualised. Some initiatives brought about include flexible benefits, children education subsidies and birthday leave.

Quarterly people's engagement forums

Why it's needed Associates are invited to attend quarterly people's engagement forums, where the management will provide updates on the hotel and individual departments. Associates' personal achievements and milestones such as graduations, marriages, birth of newborns and even successful attempts to quit smoking are also shared during these sessions. After each session, associates will be treated to a spread specially prepared by Carousel's culinary team as a gesture of appreciation for their efforts.

Key results Associates feel a sense of ownership and belonging through these forums, where they are able to share the joy of their milestones and achievements. This has helped to foster more personal interactions between associates and better interpersonal relationships in the hotel.

Implementing activities to maintain a balance of work and play

Why it's needed Associates are looking for fun in the workplace to keep their passion for work burning. Weekly delights which bring surprises to our employees could be a cup of fresh fruits hand-delivered to the offices or the back of the house area for all associates to indulge in or an additional signature dish on the canteen's menu by

Carousel's chefs.

Key results These weekly delights bring joy to the workplace and associates become more inspired and motivated. With the fun environment that RP has created, associates shared that they look forward to come to work every day.

Celebrations

Why it's needed During special occasions such as Valentine's Day, Halloween and Christmas, the hotel engages associates to join in the fun. Earlier this year, I specially geared up as God of Wealth to convey my well wishes to associates by distributing mandarin oranges and red packets in celebration of the Lunar New Year.

It is essential to continue to build on the organisation's culture as associates are also looking for an emotional connection with their employers.

Key results We believe that all associates will be able to give back to the organisation through their service for what we are giving them. Associates feel regarded by the management as its internal guests and are more inspired to create positive and extraordinary experiences for our external guests. Ultimately, happy associates make happy guests.

Omitting clock-in, clock-out practices and submission of MCs

Why it's needed RP is committed to "trust and respect" its associates, an important value in the workplace. We are the only hotel where everyone across all ranks is not required to clock-in and clock-out. The submission of MCs was also omitted recently; associates just need to ring in and let their supervisors know that they are unfit for work.

Key results By demonstrating the level of trust and respect in our associates, they feel a greater sense of responsibility towards their work. In the first two months of implementation, we saw an increase of 10 to 15 per cent more medical leaves being taken – this was within our expecta-

tions. It has since decreased to only about two to three per cent more than the previous level before the implementation.

Empowering associates

Why it's needed Empowering and entrusting RP associates to make decisions in their line of work makes them feel valued as every individual is able to make a difference at the workplace.

Key results Associates are inspired as they are able to make a difference in the organisation. As associates find fulfilment in their work, they put in extra effort to deliver seamless experiences for our guests. They are also more motivated to customise the experience for guests such as preparing thoughtful amenities to celebrate special occasions and milestones with them. These have helped to leave lasting impressions on our guests and keep them coming back to the hotel.

Star programme

Why it's needed Associates who provide service beyond expectations are awarded the "Star" title. Personalised posters of these individuals will be shared via various platforms, with a picture of them and the extraordinary experiences they have created for our guests. They will also receive shopping vouchers of their choice during the people's engagement forums.

This programme allows the management and fellow colleagues to recognise how each individual can make a difference in creating refreshing guest experiences.

Key results Associates have embraced our brand values to heart and are committed to creating positive and extraordinary guest experiences whenever possible. As associates feel appreciated and valued for what they do, they are encouraged to go the extra mile to 'wow' our guests.

Engagement on a more personal level

Why it's needed The hotel is engaging associates on a more personal level using Facebook. Associates of all levels are able to comment or simply "like" in response to initiatives that the organisation is rolling out.

The ability to continuously engage, stay current and respond quickly to evolving trends is fundamental as a long-term human resources strategy for RP.

Key results Initiatives to retain associates with our engagement efforts have been effective. We are pleased to share the honour of being Singapore's Best Employer with our committed employees and guests. The hotel will continue to strive to create a fun organisation, where employees look forward to come to work and extraordinary experiences are created for hotel guests every day.

Case study

Charity spin on wellness holidays

WHO Launched in April this year, Soul Sanctuaries is a Hong Kong-based luxury wellness travel company that specialises in yoga and meditation retreats, detoxification, weight-loss and fitness holidays, and spa breaks in stunning destinations across Asia.

It targets professionals between 35 and 65 years old, mainly females, and has seen interest arising from markets such as Singapore, Hong Kong, Australia, the US, Italy and Spain.

In its first year of operations, Soul Sanctuaries will focus on working with luxury wellness sanctuaries and providing healthy holidays with private villa accommodation.

Come 2014, it will strengthen Soul Retreats, a collection of experiences designed and executed by the company.

WHAT Along with its specialisation in luxury wellness experiences, Soul Sanctuaries has created a programme called *Give a Little Soul a Sanctuary*. Through this programme, a portion of the client's payment is channeled directly to a charity partner in the holiday destination.

Fees will not be inflated to serve this purpose, and clients will pay the same rate another operator or the property will charge, according to Joanne McFarlane, one of the

two brains behind Soul Sanctuaries.

Selected charities are personally screened by the owners. The company is presently working with Angels for Orphans in Hong Kong and Bali Kids in Indonesia.

WHY McFarlane described *Give a Little Soul a Sanctuary* as being "central to our business plan and core to our mission".

"We want to create a company that empowers people to give back to credible charities. Although we are giving away a part of (our earnings), we are empowering clients who book with us (to do good)," she said, adding that five and 10 per cent of payment for tours and Soul Retreats programmes respectively are donated.

"The more we grow the business, the

more we can give away," she said.

To ensure transparency in the programme, Soul Sanctuaries will publish a half-yearly report on its website to provide updates on how the money is being used.

– Karen Yue



Bali Kids is one of the audited charities supported by Soul Sanctuaries



Best Western debuts in dynamic Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar

By Glenn de Souza
Vice President International
Operations – Asia & the Middle East
Best Western International

Best Western International held a ceremony in Myanmar recently to celebrate the signing of our first ever hotel in the country's capital, Nay Pyi Taw.

Dignitaries, VIPs and local and international media joined together in Yangon on July 18, 2013, to mark the signing of the **BEST WESTERN PREMIER The Grand At Nay Pyi Taw** project, which is due to welcome its first guests in the second quarter of 2014.

The 205-room hotel will become one of the first internationally-branded hotels in the central city, and also becomes the second hotel Best Western has signed in Myanmar in recent weeks, following the Green Hill Hotel in Yangon.

Nay Pyi Taw will host several major events in the coming months, including this year's Southeast Asian Games. And with the signing of this new hotel, Best Western is perfectly placed to help the city grow.



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Travel consultants are set to enjoy greater choices from more openings in Manila, continuing low room rates in Bangkok and Jakarta, prospects of lower rates in Kuala Lumpur and New Delhi, and possible service and product upgrade in Hong Kong and Singapore. Here's your guide to the five-star market in seven key Asian cities



BANGKOK

Supply overview

As at end 1H2013, there were 23 luxury hotels in Bangkok with a total of 6,800 rooms, up 12 per cent from the same period last year, according to CBRE Thailand. Hilton Sukhumvit Bangkok and Park Hyatt Bangkok are due to open in the coming months, while Waldorf Astoria Bangkok and Edition Hotel Bangkok are due in 2014 and 2015 respectively.

According to Jones Lang LaSalle (JLL), most of the 5,918 rooms to come online in Bangkok from now until 2015 will be concentrated in the upscale and luxury segments, the latter comprising 36.9 per cent or more than 2,180 keys.

Andrew Langdon, executive vice president-Thailand and Indochina at JLL's Hotels & Hospitality Group, said: "The market has seen a strong recovery in international tourism arrivals over the last two years on the back of a return to political stability. The anticipation is for the strong demand recovery to continue over the next few years. The expected growth in room supply, particularly in 2013, should be absorbed by continued recovery in demand."

Demand overview

Luxury hotels in Bangkok performed strongly in 2012 with RevPAR rising to 3,396 baht (US\$108.14), up 25.3 per cent from the year before, according to JLL. It rose a further 6.9 per cent to 3,987 baht during the first five months of this year, while average occupancy climbed 3.7 percentage points to 68.4 per cent. However, ARR nudged up a

mere 1.2 per cent to 5,832 baht, compared with the same period the previous year.

While RevPAR currently remains below par, James Pitchon, executive director of CBRE Thailand, said: "It looks like the rate of supply (of new hotels) is finally starting to slow, so we're expecting a record high season this year and we may start seeing room rates rise soon. Of course, that depends on whether rooms have already been contracted out or allocated at current market prices."

Key challenges

Bangkok offers the lowest luxury hotel room rates in Asia, outside of Malaysia. The fact that one can stay in a Bangkok luxury property for a third of the cost of a hotel run by the same brand in Singapore or Hong Kong is great news for tourists. However, it dampens the sector's earnings.

Pitchon said higher operational expenses, especially labour costs, would weigh on the sector's bottomline, especially if properties maintained their current rates in a market where the local currency had weakened against the greenback and sterling in recent months.

The city's over-reliance on key mass markets such as Russia and China also poses a risk to the accommodation sector's profit. – **Greg Lowe**

HONG KONG

Supply overview

As of 1H2013, there were 34 properties (17,522 rooms) in the High Tariff A category.

According to Victor Chan, chairman of Hong Kong Hotel Association, the number of luxury hotels in Hong Kong has not changed in the last couple of years, and the overall business environment in the city is not expected to cause noticeable fluctuations in the sector's performance.

Currently, the conversion of Murray Building into a luxury hotel is expected to take a few more years to complete, while another new hotel might be expected at Disneyland.

Yet another, Rosewood Hotel, was also under construction, added Frank Sorgiovanni, vice president of Research Asia, Jones Lang LaSalle, who also expects no major new developments in the short-to-medium term in the five-star sector.

Demand overview

According to Hong Kong Tourism Board (HKTB), in 1H2013, High Tariff A category hotels registered an average occupancy of 84 per cent, up two per cent compared with the same period in 2012, and ARR of HK\$2,368 (US\$305), down 2.3 per cent.

Sorgiovanni projects strong arrivals from China to continue, but points out that arrivals from the majority of short- and long-haul markets are declining, based on latest data released by HKTB.

"Trading performance has been weak as at May 2013, but gaps in MICE demand are expected to be filled by strong Chinese leisure demand that typically arises in 3Q2013. Given the benign supply scenario in Hong Kong, upscale and luxury hotel performance is expected to remain stable," he said.

Sherona Lau, director of marketing at The Peninsula Hong Kong which has just completed a major renovation, shared: "We were able to maintain the top RevPAR position in the city from 2012 until early 2013, showcasing a 22 per cent increase, with ARR up by 14 per cent. As we are now working with a full inventory, we expect a healthy performance, subject to the usual market conditions."

Key challenges

Manpower remains the key challenge for Hong Kong as it impacts the consistency of high service standards. Chan said that staff turnover and the changing work habits of the new generation also made human resource management more difficult.

He summed up: "It's about recruiting, training and retaining talented staff, which in today's environment requires a great deal of leadership and management. F&B is another area where competition among new signature restaurants for the best chefs is ever increasing. Overall, operating costs are rapidly rising and profit margins are under pressure." – **Prudence Lui**

JAKARTA

Supply overview

Room inventory growth for upscale accommodation in Jakarta has been minimal in the last decade. The city currently has 13 luxury hotels, with 3,773 rooms.



Banyan Tree Bangkok's Presidential Suite

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However, in view of Indonesia's growing economy, at least seven new luxury properties are expected to enter the scene within the next three years, adding nearly 1,900 rooms.

Both Raffles and Fairmont Hotels & Resorts will debut in the city, with the 180-room Raffles Jakarta targeted to open this



year and the 488-room Fairmont Jakarta, Senayan Square next year. Marriott International will add the 275-room JW Marriott Jakarta Kemang Village (2014) and the 208-room JW Marriott Jakarta West St Moritz (2015), while the 480-key InterContinental Jakarta Pondok Indah Hotel & Residences will open in 2015. Starwood Hotels & Resorts will follow with its 250-room W Jakarta and 125-room St Regis Jakarta, both in 2016.

Demand overview

Average occupancy has been stable in the last three years at about 64 per cent, while ARR and RevPAR in 2011 and 2012 saw double-digit growths, according to STR Global.

In 1H2013, ARR grew 9.5 per cent and RevPAR, 12.9 per cent, compared with the same period last year, the highest growth rate in South-east Asia. As at June, the year-to-date ARR was US\$192.09 and

RevPAR, US\$124.29.

The Ritz-Carlton Jakarta, Pacific Place saw a successful first half and expects business to be strong till the final quarter. Grand Hyatt Jakarta is upbeat about the second half, noting a significant rise in rates and the market's buying power this year. C9 Hotelworks managing director, Bill Barnett, notes that Jakarta's hotel rooms are relatively underpriced. Citing STR Global's data 2012, he said Jakarta's RevPAR was similar to Bangkok's US\$90, lower than Kuala Lumpur's US\$94 and Manila's US\$99, and way behind Singapore's US\$234.

Key challenges

Barnett said Jakarta hotels were business-centric, so they needed to lower rates to fill rooms on weekends. He added that rates of the upper tier would not move up much "until Jakarta can diversify with a convention centre, strong infrastructure or demand generators like world-class amusement parks".

Jakarta hoteliers are also seeing infrastructural limitations and increasing costs of labour and electricity.

Barnett said the future game changers would be the mass rapid transit and the skytrain the Jakarta government was now working on. – Mimi Hudoyo

NEW DELHI

Supply overview

According to HVS India, New Delhi is the second largest hotel market in the country in 2012/13, after Mumbai. It has around 11,500 rooms, of which 60-65 per cent are luxury and upscale.

Vivek Shukla, general manager of The Lalit New Delhi, said the supply of luxury hotels had been stable in general for the last few years.

Going forward, HVS India's chairman, Manav Thadani, tracks close to 6,000 new rooms being planned for the next five years, with luxury and upscale hotels accounting for 40 per cent of this proposed supply.

Some of the new hotels to open include JW Marriott, MGM, Aloft, Dusit D2 and Hyatt's new brand, Andaz. All these hotels are part of the Delhi Aerocity project.

Demand overview

According to HVS India, the average occupancy rate of Delhi's luxury and upscale hotels in 2012/13 was about 60 per cent, with ARR at Rs8,000-8,500 (US\$132-US\$140). These hotels recorded a marginal decline in occupancy and a six to seven per cent decline in ARR in 2012/13 over the previous year.

The Lalit's Shukla said currently, the average occupancy of luxury hotels in the city was 53.7 per cent while ARR and RevPAR stood at Rs8,362 and Rs5,000, respectively.

He said: "There has been a marginal increase in occupancy. However ARR has shown a decline of four to five per cent over last year."

Key challenges

Industry players said the depreciating rupee, rising inflation and economic downturn in European countries had dulled business a little.

Gitanjali Singh, head-sales of The Royal Plaza New Delhi, said: "Rising costs and a decline in occupancy and room rates will shrink operating margins by 16-20 per cent in 2013 and 2014."

In the last two years several high-end hotels have opened in East and West Delhi. Coupled with additions to supply in Gurgaon and Noida, traditional city-centre hotels have thus seen demand bottoming out. This trend is expected to continue in the short-term.

Going forward, the pressure on occu-

pancy and ARR over the next two to three years remains imminent with the entry of the Aerocity hotels. – Rohit Kaul

KUALA LUMPUR

Supply overview

According to the Malaysia Association of Hotels (MAH), as of May 2013, there were 25 five-star hotels in Kuala Lumpur providing a total of 10,544 rooms.

Ganneesh Ramaa, manager of Luxury Tours Malaysia, said: "Over the last few years, the trend has been the opening of more five-star hotels rather than the lower-category hotels in the city."

Moving forward, inventory for the five-star category is expected to increase by 12.2 per cent, or an additional 1,283 rooms between 2014 and 2016. New brands debuting in Kuala Lumpur include St Regis Kuala Lumpur, scheduled to open in December 2014 with 208 rooms and 160 residences; Banyan Tree Signatures Pavilion Kuala Lumpur with 50 suites, scheduled to open in 2015; and W Kuala Lumpur with 150 rooms, scheduled to open in 2016.

Adam Kamal, managing director of Tina Travel & Agencies, said these new brands would grow the number of meeting spaces.

He added: "It is also a bonus that these hotels are located a short distance from the Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre, which would help the destination attract more high-end conferences."



Demand overview

According to MAH, the average occupancy of five-star properties in Kuala Lumpur in 2012 was 71.6 per cent, while their ARR and RevPAR were RM297 (US\$93.75) and RM213 respectively. In 2011, average occupancy stood at 74.5 per cent, ARR at RM315 and RevPAR at RM235. Up-to-date statistics are not available as MAH is no longer collecting them due to the Competition Act.

But going forward, Christina Toh, MAH's vice president, expects a positive outlook for all hotels in Kuala Lumpur, as Malaysia Airlines, AirAsia, AirAsia X and Malindo Air continue to expand their network from their hubs in Kuala Lumpur International Airport. Average occupancy is expected to rise with an expected increase in arrivals from India, China, South Korea, Australia and Dubai.

Key challenges

Anna Olsson, director of sales and marketing at YTL Hotels, said: "The main challenge would be the ever-increasing competition from neighbouring countries, particularly from Bangkok whose MICE initiatives are becoming strong. Locally, stiff competition is also expected with the addition of more five-star properties over the next few years."

Another hotelier said five-star hotels in the city tended to drop rates to capture the MICE business. The source said: "As a result, the gap narrows between five- and four-star hotels. Once rates drop, it becomes difficult to raise them again."

Luxury Tours' Ramaa said the service level of front-office and F&B personnel of some five-star hotels was not up to five-star standard due to inadequate training.

Manfred Kurz, managing director, Diethelm Travel Malaysia, agreed: "There are many independent hotels in Kuala Lumpur that have received a five-star rating, but (their service standard) does not benefit this category and are thus disappointing to tourists." – **S Puvaneswary**



JW Marriott Kuala Lumpur's lobby

MANILA

Supply overview

Manila's luxury hotel sector is growing at an unprecedented rate as the Philippines continues to enjoy economic and political stability. Data from the Department of Tourism (DoT) show that from 22 deluxe properties last year, Metro Manila now has 26, augmenting room inventory by 12.4 per cent, from 9,040 the previous year to 10,165 rooms this year.

Newcomers 500-room Solaire Hotel & Casino, 280-room Fairmont Makati and 32-suite Raffles Makati debuted in the first quarter while the 313-room Marco Polo Ortigas will be launched late this year.

Deluxe rooms are projected to expand by nearly 50 per cent to over 5,000 rooms by 2017. Of the glitziest will be the four integrated resorts at the Entertainment City. Aside from Solaire, which will open 300 more rooms next year, each of the three resorts will build a minimum of 800 hotel rooms by 2017.

Within the Bonifacio Global City (BGC) business district, the Ascott BGC service residences will open next year, followed by Grand Hyatt and Shangri-La at The Fort in 2015.

In Makati, Worldhotels and Residences will debut next year while Movenpick Hotel & Residences is targeted for opening in 2016. Newport City near NAIA will have a Hilton and a Sheraton by 2016.

Demand overview

Manila's hotel industry showed mixed results in 1H2013, according to STR Global. Average occupancy dropped to 69.6 per cent from 73.9 per cent in 1H2012. However, ARR stood at US\$138.76, or 6.3 per cent more than US\$130.57 in 1H2012.

While the expanding hotel supply could have caused the drop in average occupancy, hotels nevertheless were able to maintain – and even increase – their ARR. Influenced by the occupancy and ARR, RevPAR increased ever slightly by 0.1 per



Dusit Thani Manila's Grand Ballroom

cent to US\$96.81, from US\$90.59 a year ago. Eugene Tamesis, director of sales and marketing, Raffles Makati and Fairmont Makati, said the rising RevPAR could be attributed to "stronger demand from the business segment, leisure travellers and domestic tourism or 'staycation' bookings especially on weekends, helping boost the demand during otherwise quiet periods".

For the rest of the year, RevPAR is expected to continue rising on the heels of the latest DoT report which shows a year-on-year 10 per cent growth in foreign arrivals.

Key challenges

Since a substantial number of hotels in the pipeline are also coming from the mid-market segment, the challenge is growing competition between deluxe and four- and even three-star hotels.

"There's not much difference between the published rates of deluxe and four-star hotels and the gap will be narrower," said Karlo Pobre, manager of research and advisory services, Colliers International.

Pobre added DoT's *It's more fun in the Philippines* brand was directed more at middle-income leisure travellers who were inclined to stay at limited-star hotels.

Tamesis cited infrastructural challenges, especially the need to address Manila's congested international airport if the country's arrival targets were to be achieved. – **Rosa Ocampo**

SINGAPORE

Supply overview

As per OCBC Investment Research report published in June, as at end 2012, 57 per cent of the total hotel supply in Singapore belongs to the upscale and luxury tier, with a total of 28,845 rooms. The report forecasts another 3,981 upscale/luxury rooms from 2013 to 2015 and growth of 4.4 per cent per annum during this period.

One new property is Patina Hotels & Resorts, a luxury hotel chain, which will debut with a 157-key property in The Capitol, Singapore end-2014. Other upcoming developments in the next two years include The Westin, Sofitel So and

an extension of Raffles Hotel.

Frank Sorgiovanni, vice president of Research Asia, Jones Lang LaSalle, said: "The proportion of five-star rooms has been down in recent years, with midscale and up-scale (properties)

seeing stronger demand. We forecast 633 five-star rooms over the next 12 months. One entrant is the 301-room Westin Marina Bay, opening end-2013."

Demand overview

As per Singapore Tourism Board's (STB) preliminary statistics for January to April, ARR for luxury hotels moved up slightly to S\$423 (US\$334), from S\$421 last year. RevPAR rose to S\$372, from S\$344, while average occupancy registered 88 per cent, up from 82 per cent.

Chuck Abbott, regional vice president-South-east Asia of Starwood Hotels & Resorts, said Starwood hotels in Singapore had seen a steady increase in occupancy in the last few years and with the growth of the middle class in Asia-Pacific, the group had confidence in the Singapore market.

Similarly, Peter Mainguy, general manager of The Ritz-Carlton, Millenia Singapore, said the hotel's ARR and RevPAR had been on the rise since 2010, adding that there was a large demand for luxury travel from emerging markets such as China and India.

Alicia Seah, senior vice president of marketing and PR, CTC Travel, said: "The luxury hotels in Singapore appeal especially to FITs and incentive groups as normal tour groups find the prices too high."

Key challenges

Heng Li Lang, director of hotels, STB, highlighted manpower crunch as the key challenge.

"Luxury hotels have the delicate task of optimising lean manpower without compromising service standards," Heng said, suggesting that hotels explore innovative ways to improve efficiency.

Another challenge, Mainguy opined, was the need to continually refresh the hotel's products and services to live up to the five-star standard.

For Abbott, Singapore's hotel prices can be a stumbling block. He said: "There is some price resistance when competing against destinations such as Bangkok. Our priority is to focus on personalising guests' experience and maximising the overall value for them." – **Lee Pei Qi**

Luxe hoteliers Luible and Gnagi team up to launch VIVE Hospitality

TWO hoteliers who worked with luxury hotel brands are involved in a new start-up that provides white label hospitality solutions to independent hotel owners with distinctive assets in South-east Asia and beyond.

Michael Luible and Stephan Gnagi have launched VIVE Hospitality, whose first project is a 271-room hip four-star hotel in Kuala Lumpur's affluent district Damansara, to be named Qliq Hotel. VIVE is conceptualising, managing and operating the hotel, which is part of a mixed-use development that includes residential and commercial areas and a performing arts centre.

Said Luible, VIVE's executive director: "We believe there is a demand for owners to create their own brand instead of developing the brand of international management com-

panies. Owners don't have to communicate through corporate layers. Due to our lean structure, we are able to offer attractive fees and light overheads."

Luible opened and repositioned One&Only Reethi Rah in the Maldives and Capella in Singapore. He was also involved in rebranding and upscaling One&Only Kanuhura, Maldives, and was regional director of One&Only Resorts. Luible also served as general manager of Le Touessrok Mauritius and Raffles Hotel Singapore, and was managing director of Karma Resorts.

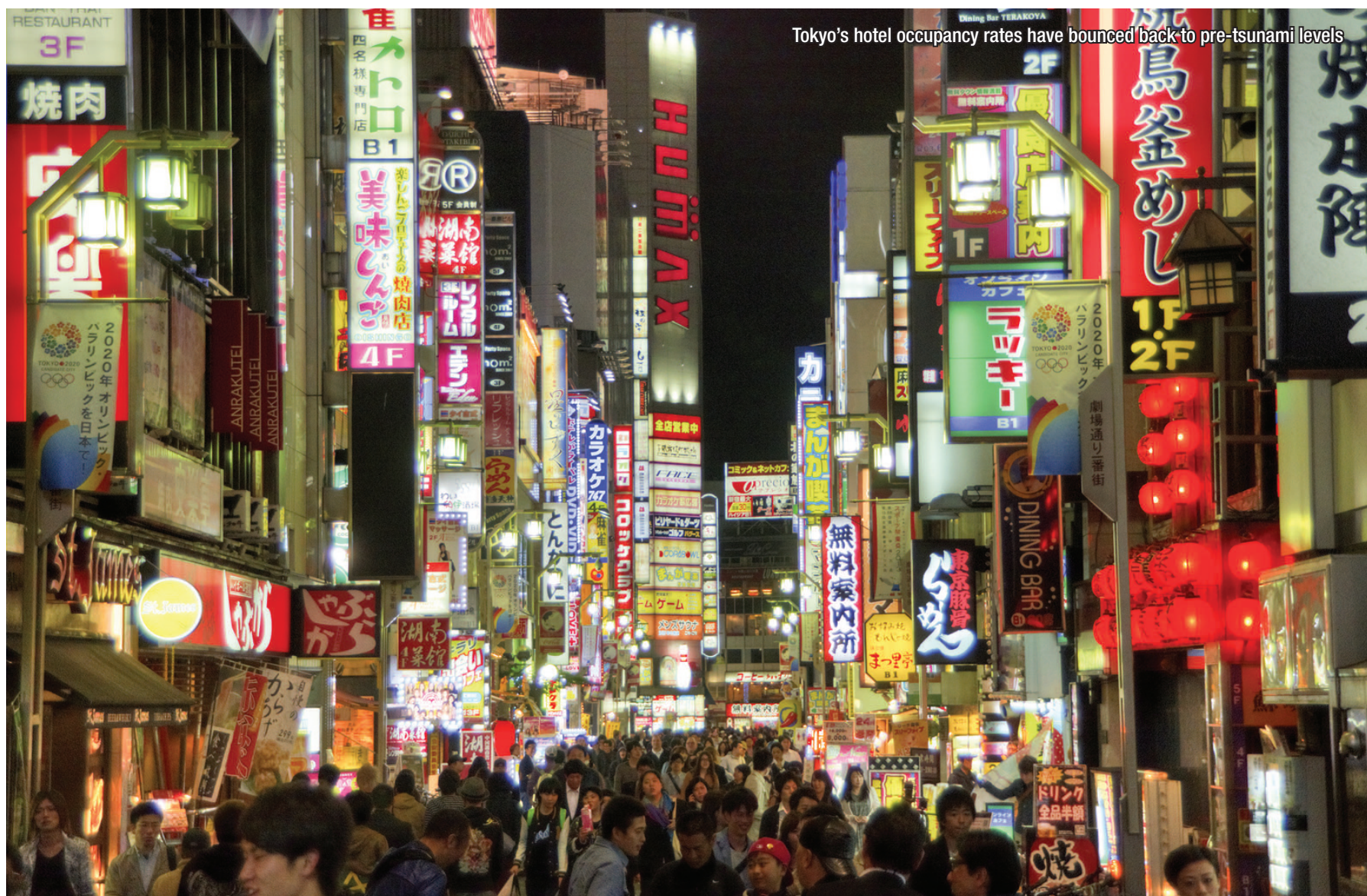
Gnagi, VIVE's managing director, held senior management positions with The Savoy Group, Hilton Hotels, One&Only, Mandarin Oriental Hotel Group and Raffles International. Also on board are investment banker Tatang

Tabrani; Linda Wong, specialist in M&As, real estate and commercial transactions; and Susie Cheah-Gnagi, specialist in sales and marketing and the development/distribution of wellness products.

Luible said VIVE aimed to be unique by providing bespoke and tailor-made white label solutions for each property, its geographies and market. It hopes to build up a portfolio of properties that are "distinctive in design and branding, always genuine and consistent in service, developed at exceptional locations, focused on smart utilisation of land and space, and are integrated with the community and environment-friendly". The type of properties include urban-iconic hotels and residences, resort getaways and heritage landmarks. – **Raini Hamdi**



Luible: "There is demand for owners to create their own brand."



Open arms for SE Asia

With eased visa policies, Japan's tourism sector is gearing up for a bountiful year ahead. By **Hannah Koh**

Arrivals Japan's tourism sector is experiencing a reversal of fortunes, clocking just slightly below five million arrivals in 1H2013 to post an impressive 22.8 per cent year-on-year rise, according to Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO).

The country's six main South-east Asian markets of Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam and the Philippines sent more than 500,000 visitors, a 25.6 per cent year-on-year hike.

South Korea remained the top source market with arrivals surging 38.4 per cent to 1.3 million in the first half of this year, while Taiwanese arrivals leapt 49.4 per cent to cross the one million mark during the same period.

However, the political tussle between China and Japan took its toll on Chinese arrivals, which plunged 27 per cent to 536,200 this year from 734,861 last year.

NTO On July 1, Japan lifted visa requirements for Thais and Malaysians, granted multiple-entry visas for Vietnam and Philippine nationals, and extended the visa validity period for Indonesians to 30 days.

The relaxed visa rules are part

of Japan's efforts to woo more travellers from South-east Asia. To the same effect, JNTO held the inaugural Japan-ASEAN Travel Mart in Tokyo earlier this year in May, and will establish a Jakarta office by year-end to tap the burgeoning Indonesian outbound market and the Muslim segment (see page 19).

JNTO has also teamed up with the NTOs of South Korea and Taiwan to roll out twin destination itineraries and promotional fares for flights and accommodation in February and March respectively.

The Kimchi and Sushi Project, as the South Korea-Japan partnership has been dubbed, was two years in the making before grounding to a halt in the aftermath of the March 11 tsunami.

Access Earlier this year, ANA and JAL were forced to ground their Boeing 787 Dreamliner fleets due to concerns over the aircraft's battery. A check with both carriers confirmed that all Dreamliner flights were resumed since June 1.

In June, Emirates started daily Dubai-Tokyo (Haneda) flights while All Nippon Airways (ANA) bumped up its Tokyo (Narita)-



"Japan is confident of (meeting) its target of 10 million arrivals for 2013. With the low exchange rate for the Japanese yen and the visa waiver...this upward trend looks set to continue."

Susan Maria Ong
Deputy director
JNTO Singapore Office

San Jose frequencies from five-times weekly to daily.

Japan Airlines (JAL) has started daily flights between Tokyo (Narita) and Helsinki on Boeing 787 Dreamliner from July 1. Finnair has also announced plans to join fellow Oneworld partners, British Airways and JAL, in their joint business on flights between Europe and Japan.

ANA will increase Tokyo (Narita)-Yangon flights from thrice-weekly to daily from September 30, and up seat capacity on the Tokyo (Narita)-Chengdu route from October 1.

Meanwhile, AirAsia Group and ANA have announced the termination of the AirAsia Japan joint venture. The AirAsia Japan brand will be in operation until November, after which the LCC will resume services with a new brand – to be announced this month – from end-December.

Rates According to a *Nikkei* report, average occupancy rates at Tokyo's 19 major hotels hit 83.9 per cent in May this year, shored up by an influx of South-east Asian and domestic tourists. A 5.7 percentage point increase over rates was recorded in May 2013, marking the highest rate

for May in the last seven years, according to the report.

Occupancy rates for Fujita Kanko's Washington Hotels in the Tokyo area averaged 90 per cent in 1H2013, while Hotel Chinzanso Tokyo recorded 70 per cent average occupancy over the same period, said Yukitsugu Ishikawa, chief representative, Singapore representative office.

"We are seeing an increase in visitors mainly from South-east Asia this year, with a 60 per cent year-on-year increase in visitors from Thailand, most of whom use our flagship Shinjuku Washington Hotel," said Ishikawa.

Hotels The 248-key Gotenyama Garden Hotel Laforet Tokyo is currently undergoing a major revamp to relaunch as Tokyo Marriott Hotel this December.

Hilton Tokyo has also kicked off a multimillion-dollar renovation earlier this year, which will be completed in 2014 to give its 630 rooms a new look.

Hyatt Hotels' Andaz brand will land in Japan when the 164-room Andaz Tokyo debuts in summer 2014. Fujita Kanko will open its second property, a 970-room hotel, in Shinjuku in 2015.

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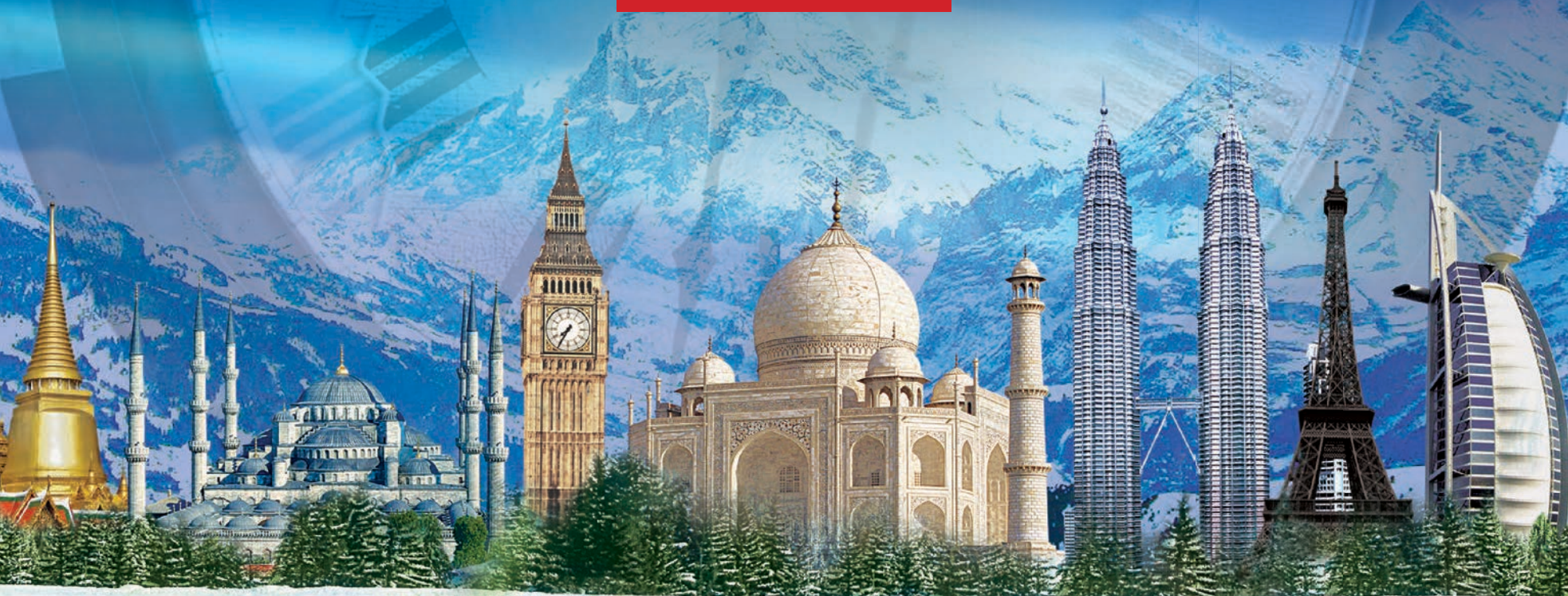
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Gearing up for Muslim travel boom

As Japan rises as a destination for Muslim travellers, the country's tourism industry has responded with a growing interest to tailor services to the unique needs of this increasingly affluent market. By **Hannah Koh**

Caught between a shrinking domestic market and weaker Chinese arrivals amid shaky political ties, Japan has turned its gaze to the Muslim market, an increasingly affluent force in the travel landscape today.

Based on the *Global Muslim Lifestyle Travel Market 2012* report, the global Muslim travel segment accounted for US\$126 billion in outbound expenditure in 2011 and is forecasted to hit US\$192 billion, or 13.4 per cent of global tourism expenditure, by 2020. Of particular interest is Indonesia, now the fourth largest outbound Muslim source market after Saudi Arabia, Iran, the UAE and Kuwait.

According to Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO) figures, Malaysian arrivals for 1H2013 numbered 71,500, a 16.5 per cent rise year-on-year, while Indonesian arrivals grew a significant 50.1 per cent over the same period to reach 65,200.

Japan has since rolled out a slew of marketing measures targeting South-east Asia's Muslim travellers. JNTO has launched a Muslim travel guidebook on Japan earlier this year in March followed by the inaugural Japan-ASEAN Travel Mart in Tokyo in May, while its Jakarta office is set to open by year-end.



A group of Muslim tourists was shown the art of bento box making in Japan

Speaking during a presentation at the Japan-ASEAN Travel Mart, Apple Vacations Singapore executive director, P S Cheong, said: "Over the last two years, more and more restaurants (in Japan) are handling halal food and offering halal products, making it easier for us to put together packages."

Some 60 per cent of incentives handled by Apple Vacations were outbound to Japan. "There are different ranks of Muslim travellers, with some more fixed in their requirements. Some will accept eating at an alcohol-free restaurant, others will prefer to have



Tortona: Muslim tours growing

completely halal food," Cheong observed.

"Indonesians are flexible and tolerant. If they can experience authentic Japanese food, (they do not mind eating in non-halal establishments and) will just order food without pork in it," said Hernita

Tri Laksmi, chief manager of Japan Airlines subsidiary, Jalan Tour Jakarta, which sent 10,000 corporate travellers and 2,000 travellers on series tours, incentives and FIT package tours a year to Japan.

However, Dennis Tortona, senior sales and marketing supervisor of Okinawa Tourist Ser-

vice's (OTS) foreign inbound department, still saw a gap between Japanese inbound operators' awareness and interest in attracting Muslim travellers and the country's potential.

"We want hotels and restaurants to be aware of the Muslim market, a new market for Japan which requires study, research and flexibility," he urged.

"In lieu (of getting halal certification immediately among dining outlets), we are promoting Muslim-friendly tours that feature hotels and restaurants that are little by little adjusting their establishments to cope with the needs of our Muslim brothers and sisters during their tours in Japan."

The company has so far hosted about 200 Muslim travellers from Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia on its JATA Grand Prix-winning Muslim Okinawa 5D4N tour as well as small incentive groups from Malaysia.

Tortona also shared that travel consultants in Singapore and Indonesia have already started selling charters for Muslim tourists from these two countries to Okinawa scheduled for October.

Meanwhile, OTS is also taking its successful Muslim tours to Hokkaido on request by Malaysian travel consultants to handle a group of between 40 and 60 Muslim travellers from Malaysia in December, revealed Tortona.

"I've talked to hotels and restaurants (in Hokkaido) and they are willing to cooperate in servicing the Muslim tourists. I will be going to Hokkaido to do some seminars and training on handling this market," he remarked.

Asked if OTS intends to roll out Muslim tours beyond Hokkaido and Okinawa, Tortona replied: "Yes. My primary target for this market is to give all consultants, tourism entities, hotels and restaurants in Japan a proper understanding of how to handle the Muslim market."

He added: "Other prefectures in Japan have also become more interested in promoting and handling Muslim tourists. Hotels, restaurants and stores are now joining seminars about Muslim tourism and these new developments will help boost the tourism market in Japan."

Products

Memoirs of an exotic empire

All smiles at Disneyland

To mark its 30th anniversary, Tokyo Disney Resort is celebrating *The Happiness Year* through March 20, 2014. Visitors can enjoy a new daytime parade featuring 13 floats, a special fireworks display and the recently reopened Star Wars ride. The 3D attraction, called Star Tours: The Adventure Continues, comprises several randomly selected scenes for more than 50 possible story combinations, which will entertain even those who have

not watched the movie franchise. **Contact**
Website: www.tokyodisneyresort.co.jp

Of samurais and geishas

Billed as "traditional Japanese drag queen entertainment", Roppongi Kaguwa serves up dinner and samurai and cross-dressing geisha entertainment during its two evening shows every weekday. On weekends, the 186-seater theatre recreates the red light districts of Yoshiwara in

17th century Japan and the lives of the *oiran*, or courtesans, who inhabited the city during the Meiji period. English narration is available only on weekends.

Contact
Tel: (81-3) 5414-8818
Website: www.kaguwa.com

On the Kyushu express

Beginning operations on October 15, the *Seven Stars* in Kyushu train by Kyushu Railway Company offers travellers a luxurious journey across Kyushu. The seven-car train features 12 suites and two deluxe suites with a total capacity of 28 passengers.

Travellers can choose between a 4D3N or 2D1N itinerary, with the longer trip bundling a night's stay at an exclusive ryokan and excursions to the Aso caldera or a traditional Kagoshima kiln.

Roppongi Kaguwa serves up food and cross-dressing geishas



Prices start at 155,000 yen (US\$1,533) per person for a 2D1N itinerary, based on a twin-sharing suite.

Contact
Tel: (81-92) 474-0221
Email: cruisetrain@jrkyushu.co.jp
Website: www.jrkyushu.co.jp

sightseeing cruise with rides on the ropeway, cable car and train. The area is also famous for its hot springs and spectacular views of Mount Fuji.

Contact
Website: www.hakonenavi.jp

Andaz lands in Tokyo

Due to open in summer 2014, the 164-room Andaz Tokyo hotel will occupy the 47th to 52nd floors of Toranomon Hills. Equipped with an open-air rooftop bar, a fitness centre, a spa, an infinity pool and views of the Tokyo skyline, the hotel will also offer flexible event and meeting space with terrace seating at Andaz Studio on the 52nd floor.

Lake cruise in Hakone

Modelled on old European pirate ships, the *Royal II* made her debut on Lake Ashi in Hakone, a mountainous area west of Tokyo, in March this year. Like sister vessels *Vasa* and *Victory*, *Royal II* sails around the lake, stopping at three points along the way.

Travellers can take a day trip around Hakone, combining a



Star Wars takes over Tokyo Disney Resort for its 30th anniversary



Virtual tours are a reality now

Providing a dose of reality

SINGAPORE Augmented reality (AR) is no longer a pipe dream for the trade, with Asiatravel.com having inked a deal with Beijing-based AR technology player, Senscape Technologies, to provide travel content for the latter's mobile application.

Senscape Tour, to be launched later this year, scans the environment around the user and serves as a virtual guide, providing images, web links and information on what the user is looking at. Destinations in China will be the first to benefit from this application, although there are plans to feature other countries later on.

Fred Seow, vice president marketing at Asiatravel.com, said: "Independent travellers will be more assured and confident when they have more information on hand and thus will be encouraged to venture more, farther away and longer, which in turn benefits travel operators and suppliers." – **Lee Pei Qi**

Supply, rates on the rise

Bangkok's popularity, fall in hotel building permits may spur rate increases

By Greg Lowe

BANGKOK Travel specialists are mixed over how Bangkok's burgeoning hotel supply, which grew 12.1 per cent to 37,500 rooms in 1H2013, could affect business as potentially higher room rates and increasingly strained manpower may weaken the city's pull on tourists and business travellers.

Room inventory is forecast to grow a further 11.9 per cent by the end of 2015 when the addition of another 4,400 keys will expand supply to nearly 42,000 rooms, according to new research from CBRE Thailand. More than half of that additional growth will take place from June to December this year when some 2,250 rooms will come online, distributed over the luxury (13 per cent), first-class (eight per cent), mid-range (46 per cent) and economy (33 per cent) segments.

Yet, surging tourism arrivals from Asia and declining applications for hotel building permits, which would limit future supply, could see hoteliers significantly increase room rates this peak

season for the first time in five years, said James Pitchon, executive director and head of CBRE Research & Consulting, Thailand.

Pornsri Visava-chaipan, deputy managing director of Jetour Thailand, said most of the new supply was in the luxury sector which was beyond the budgets of many Asian visitors. Furthermore, rising rates could erode Bangkok's position as a value destination, even though increased supply boosted the negotiating power of travel specialists with hoteliers.

"Can the rates go up? Sure. But will there be a high enough volume of tourists to meet demand. There are so many factors affecting performance at the end of the year," said Pornsri.

Even though Chinese arrivals doubled in 1H2013, there is no guarantee this trend will continue as Beijing recently issued a new law limiting zero-base tours to Thailand, which



Smith: invest in hospitality education

will come into effect October 1.

"We're waiting to see how that will affect our business. It could be very bad if (China) limits Chinese tourists coming here or what they can spend on shopping, which is a key attraction in Bangkok," she said.

Deep-pocketed visitors were unlikely to be affected by rising room rates, although excessive supply could lead to price competition during low season and a greater number of rooms would strain limited manpower in the sector, said Richard Smith, director of events at AsiaWorld Destination Management.

"Hotels will need to invest much more in the hospitality education and training sector both offsite and onsite. If this is not acted upon then I do fear that service standards as a whole will drop dramatically or hotels will have to consider (hiring) more skilled manpower from overseas to meet the demand," Smith said.

Continued from page 1

Show-and-tell is the way to go

helps to bring to life the story of the plants."

Likewise for the ArtScience Museum, guides are key in delivering stories behind the exhibits.

ArtScience Museum associate director, Ross Leo, said: "Docents have always been in our frontline delivering the absolute-best museum visitor experience, and the additional training will help us enhance the experience further."

According to WDA, the ACT comprises various modules. Its classes cater for up to 15 participants and each module consists of full-day sessions, ranging from one to three days in length. Trainings cost between S\$200-\$500 (US\$158-\$394), with up to 90 per cent subsidised by WDA for Singaporeans and permanent residents.

WDA tourism division director, Janice Foo, said the ACT also served as a good platform for people working in the attractions sector to come together.

"These classes will be a good avenue for the sharing of best practices, for people within the respective attractions to learn from one another," she added.



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