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# Full-house NAIA vexes travel trade

Stunted air access growth will hurt inbound business: Philippine trade

By Rosa Ocampo

**MANILA** The travel industry is clamouring for a speedy resolution to the congestion at the Ninoy Aquino International Airport (NAIA) in Manila, a situation that has disabled some airlines from flying or increasing their frequencies due to a lack of slots for landing and takeoff.

Data from the Manila International Airport Authority (MIAA) shows that while NAIA's runway has an average capacity of 36 landings and takeoffs per hour, actual events could reach 50 per hour in the day. These have a bearing on traffic at the check-in counters and arrival carousels.

Alvin Candelaria, officer in charge of airport operations department, MIAA, said due to the lack of slots, many foreign and local carriers could not increase



**Cabalza: limited slots for airlines**

their flight frequency.

India's Jet Airways, which could have replaced the Delhi-Manila service that Philippine Airlines stopped last June, appears to have given up connecting Delhi to Europe via Manila as it could not find a slot between 11.00 and 14.00 at NAIA.

To be able to fly daily from Shanghai to Manila starting October, China Eastern Airlines settled for a midnight slot, arriving in Manila at 03.40 and departing at 04.45.

Tigerair Philippines has a pending application for a new slot at NAIA while AirAsia Philippines, which has applied for a slot at the airport, was asked to utilise the existing slot of its partner, Zest Air.

"The robust growth of air

traffic is slowing down. Airlines cannot introduce new flights...

Not many new flights are created because there are hardly any available slots at NAIA," said Avelino Zapanta, president and CEO of SEAir International.

Zapanta added that airlines were busy fighting for additional slots instead of inaugurating new services and destinations, and criticised the rate of decongesting NAIA for being "so slow". John Paul Cabalza, president of the Philippine Travel Agencies Association, said more requests to fly to Manila could be expected, following the European Union's move to strike Philippine Airlines off its safety list of banned airlines earlier in July.

Although NAIA's congestion has perturbed the travel and tourism trade for the past five years, several sources from ho-

Continued on page 2

Willem Niemeijer, co-founder and CEO, Khiri Travel Group ventured into countries when they were just opening up, leading Khiri Travel to become one of South-east Asia's most innovative DMCs today. **Greg Lowe** speaks to the man at the reins – see page 6

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# Bright outlook for Japan's inbound

## Falling yen, recent visa waiver buoys Malaysian trade sentiments

By S Puvaneswary

**KUALA LUMPUR** Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO) has more than one reason to look forward to the second half of 2013.

The depreciation of the Japanese yen against the ringgit, sliding 25 per cent since January, the visa waiver for Malaysian travellers, which came into effect July 1, and the 71,500 Malaysian arrivals in the first half of 2013 has led to optimism on the NTO's part.

JNTO is banking on the current school holidays, which end on August 18, and the year-end holiday period, to meet its 160,000 arrivals targets for Malaysia. Susan Maria Ong, deputy director, JNTO Singapore Office, described the target as "very achievable".

Ong said JNTO will be working closely with the trade to provide funding to airlines and select outbound agencies, reaching beyond those located in the Malaysian capital to agencies in Penang and Sabah as well. Come September, consultants from these states would be invited to table-top sessions with Japanese suppliers, organised by JNTO.

Stepping up its consumer outreach, JNTO will lead a delegation of Japanese exhibitors at the upcoming MATTA Fair Kuala Lumpur in September, with twice the number of delegates hosted at the MATTA Fair in March and twice the number of booths this time round.

To entice Muslim travellers to Japan, the NTO will also run a special booth under the Japan pavilion to promote Japan's Muslim-friendly restaurants and prayer facilities.

According to Ong, while

JNTO will continue to promote the ever-popular Hokkaido, it will also introduce new destinations such as the Kyushu region and central Japan, home to UNESCO World Heritage site, Shirakawa-go.

With Japan now more affordable and accessible, Malaysian travel consultants *TTG Asia* contacted were also feeling upbeat about the last two quarters of 2013.



Ong: optimistic

Mayflower Acme Tours deputy general manager, channel management, Abdul Rahman Mohamed, said Japan was now more appealing to senior citizens and the young.

"We anticipate at least a 20 to 30 per cent increase in year-on-year sales during this August school holidays," he shared.

"A full-board tour to (Japan's main island) Honshu Island, including return airfare and sight-seeing tours, is priced from RM4,600 (US\$1,416) for seven nights in a four-star local hotel. A year ago, it would have cost at least RM1,000 more.

"We're seeing the sizes of families travelling together increasing. Previously, it used to be only couples, but now there are also senior citizens and children."

Abdul Rahman added that FIT travel was also gaining popularity, with small groups requesting personal, Japanese-speaking tour guides.

Cooper Huang, CEO, Malaysian Harmony Tours & Travel, said: "The real impact of the visa waiver will be seen over the

year-end school holidays, during which we anticipate more than 100 per cent growth in outbound to Japan.

"For this school holiday break, which coincides with the Hari Raya festive season, we predict 30 per cent year-on-year growth, as the visa waiver was only announced end-June.

"By then, many Malaysians had already made holiday plans for August," he explained.

Huang said package prices had fallen 10 to 15 per cent due to the yen depreciation and cheap airfares, resulting in a spike in demand. His company is also catering to the rising number of FIT bookings by selling sit-in-coach tours and free-and-easy packages.

Meanwhile, a new player to the Japanese market, Parlo Tours general manager, Kerry Tam, described Japan tours as "selling like hot cakes", with more than 50 lined up between September and December.

Tam added: "We are able to offer very good deals that are priced 20 per cent lower than the market rate, because of the good prices we received from airlines and our ground operators in Japan."

So confident in Japan's born-again appeal is Malaysian Harmony's Huang that the dearth of direct flights between Kuala Lumpur and Hokkaido has not deterred him from selling winter tours to the country's northern region.

Organising a charter service to Hokkaido for mid-December on a Boeing 747-499 aircraft, Huang is optimistic that response will be strong and is prepared to organise a further two additional charter flights with full-board tours.

## TTGmice bags third PATA Gold Award for travel journalism

TTG Asia Media's *TTGmice* has clinched the 2013 PATA Gold Award's Travel Journalism – Business Article Award for its July 2012 cover story, *A brighter shade of green*, which looks at the Asia-Pacific MICE industry's reception of environmentally-friendly convention centres, spotlighting notable green venues including the Cairns Convention Centre and the Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre.

"We are thrilled to have won this award," said Karen Yue, group editor of TTG Asia Media. "More importantly, I hope this will inspire meeting planners to push for sustainability, and to pay greater attention to the efforts venues put into green facilities and practices."

*TTGmice* had previously won the PATA Gold Award in 2011 and 2009 for the November 2010 cover story *Rebuilding the team* and September 2008 cover story, *DMCs defined: The real knights of creativity*, respectively.

This year's awards saw 165 entries from 60 PATA and non-PATA organisations around the world.



Continued from page 1

## Spread traffic to Clark: Zapanta

tels, travel agencies and consultancy firms said the government had been "slow" in decongesting the airport.

They warned that this issue could cause the Philippines to fail in its attempt to achieve its tourism arrival targets of 5.5 million this year and 10 million in 2016.

Trade players told *TTG Asia* that they felt especially sore that NAIA was unable to keep up with the country's tourism growth, especially when Manila was being primed as a business and leisure destination, backed by investments in all hotel categories and new attractions.

Since the current NAIA site cannot be further expanded, suggestions have been made to move the airport to another location in Manila.

The government appears to be hemming and hawing over the decision to develop Clark International Airport as the country's

second gateway.

Zapanta, who supports the reliance on Clark International Airport, said: "It will happen anyway by force of circumstances, with or without the high speed railway (that will connect the airport to Metro Manila), when Emirates and Qatar Airways begin operating wide-body aircraft there in October."

Zapanta made four other recommendations to decongest NAIA, through the Management Association of the Philippines and the Philippine Chamber of Commerce and Industry, both of which he is a member. He has also recommended that the installation of night-landing facilities be expedited at eight provincial airports so that domestic flights to and from Manila can take after-dark slots, helping to alleviate daytime congestions. These lighting projects are currently in the bidding stage.

# Rebuilding Samet

Trade, media fam trips are part of TAT's plans to help the island

By Greg Lowe

**BANGKOK** Authorities will launch activities to revitalise tourism on Thailand's Koh Samet, where business has started to return to normal a week after resorts on Ao Phrao bay were forced to close when an oil slick washed ashore on July 28.

Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) will organise a public clean-up day on August 10 followed by a familiarisation trip for 25 travel consultants and media from August 14-15. Tourism and Sports minister, Somsak Pureesrisak, is devising the as-yet-unspecified Kok Kaek Tour, a package aimed at rebuilding tourism on the island.

For now, locals are pleased to get business back on track. An employee at Ao Phrao Resort, who did not want to be named, said Monday: "Some people

started swimming here again yesterday."

Satellite imagery of the oil slick showed its area had been reduced from 10km<sup>2</sup> to dispersed traces of oil film by Monday.

TAT said 70 per cent of the island's 2,000 rooms were occupied before the start of the recent weekend rush. This was a significant change from the situation on July 28 when Ao Phrao beach was turned black by a thick sludge of crude oil. Local operators were initially fearful the clean-up would take much longer than the one week promised by PPT Global Chemical, which was responsible for the 50,000-litre leak from an offshore hose in Rayong province on July 27.

While the situation has markedly improved, PTT and the central government were strongly

criticised for not providing enough information about the spill, clean-up operations or dispersants being used.

A resort manager on Ao Phrao beach, who requested anonymity, said neither party had directly contacted businesses on the island in the immediate aftermath of the spill. She said: "We've

had to find out what we can from the Internet."

Terry Butt-Gow, general manager of Hotel Novotel Rayong Rim Pae Resort, said the situation was similar on the mainland. "We have only been contacted by the local township," he said. "We only received updated information about the spill from the news."

Local media reported crude oil had started washing up on Rayong's Ban Pae beach at the end of last week. However, managers at nearby resorts said the local area was largely unaffected and business remained steady, save for a few cancellations.

"No crude oil has reached our shores and our beach is still looking pretty good," said Richard Wallace, general manager of Rayong Marriott Resort & Spa. "(However) we are seeing some soapy residue from the dispersant PTT is using to break down the oil being washed up."

"We do not expect any long term effects to our beautiful area or our business."

PTT has accepted full responsibility and will compensate those affected by the spill. Somsak told the media that damages were estimated at about 100 million baht (US\$3.2 million).

Tests for contamination by government agencies have declared the local environment and food chain to be within acceptable levels.



Clean-up underway at Ao Phrao bay

# Phuket hotels sharpen Chinese-friendly pitch

By Greg Lowe

**BANGKOK** Chinese arrivals on Phuket surged to a record half-million in 1H2013, a new report reveals, spurring hoteliers to enhance services to better accommodate the rising number of mainlanders.

One-in-four international arrivals to Thailand's largest island during the period were Chinese, according to C9 Hotelworks' *Phuket Hotel Market Mid-Year Update 2013*. This trend is changing the face of tourism from "west to east" noted Bill Barnett, the consultancy's managing director and author of the report.

However, Barnett said it was too early to determine how many mainlanders were repeat visitors, or if events such as the Amway China leadership programme last year, which brought more than 15,000 Chinese to the island, catalysed tourism arrivals.

The report, which excludes arrivals from Hong Kong, found

that 457,401 mainlanders arrived at Phuket International Airport in the first-half, up from a mere 37,948 in 2007. This accounted for almost one-fifth of the record 2.3 million Chinese who came to Thailand from January to June. Twenty-two Chinese cities now have direct flights to Phuket, up from seven in 2007.

Mass travel and group tours have fuelled the trend, but the Chinese market is diversifying and properties are seeking to tap big-spenders.

James Low, general manager of Point Yamu by COMO which opens this November in Phuket, said the resort would be targeting luxury travellers from the mainland, specifically Shanghai.

Outrigger Hotels & Resorts is focusing on the medium- to high-end market which is becoming increasingly Internet-savvy, according to Mark Simmons, vice president sales and marketing.

"We're seeing similar trends

in our (three) local properties," he said. "Mainland Chinese are going online, booking later, assessing social media and coming for shorter, more frequent stays. They are enjoying the beach lifestyle in small FIT groups and as couples."

The brand recently enhanced [outriggerthailand.com](http://outriggerthailand.com) to offer more languages to tap the rising Asian markets. It is also introducing Mandarin-speaking staff at its properties and engaging with Chinese social media to attract more guests.

Accor has also ramped up its capacity to handle Chinese guests. Said Paul Stevens, director of operations for Accor Thailand: "Any Accor hotel with at least 10 per cent of Chinese guests in any given month is required to send their frontline staff to the (Chinese Optimum Service Standard) training, which (teaches) basic Chinese greetings and cultural do's and don'ts."

## TERRUCE'S TIPS



Terruce Wang  
Vice President  
Sales & Distribution Marketing  
Hong Kong Disneyland Resort

## JOIN IN THE EXPANDED FUN AT HONG KONG DISNEYLAND

Hong Kong Disneyland enters its eighth year in 2013 and I love the Resort so much as there is always something new for us to enjoy. In addition to Tomorrowland, Fantasyland, Adventureland and Main Street, U.S.A., the Resort have added new attractions as part of a major expansion scheme.

The most recent addition developed exclusively for Hong Kong Disneyland is Mystic Point, which marks the third chapter of the current expansion and is long-awaited by fans of the mysterious and magical. Mystic Point takes you through the stately Victorian mansion, Mystic Manor, on search of the private treasures by its owner, the eccentric explorer Lord Henry Mystic.

You may hop on the "Mystic Magneto-Electric Carriage" to view the collection and have some extraordinary encounters triggered by the wonders of Music Dust – it all happens when Lord Henry's trusted travel companion monkey Albert accidentally opens an ornate music box. To continue with your journey, you can take wonderful photos in the Garden of Wonders or explore the globetrotting exploits of Lord Henry in the Explorer's Club Restaurant.

Prior to the opening of Mystic Point, the expansion began with the much-anticipated Toy Story Land, which has something for everyone – whether you're brave enough to experience Andy's speediest toy car RC Racer or prefer the slightly gentler pleasures of the Slinky Dog Spin. There's also the fun of Toy Soldier Parachute Drop with Andy's troops.

The other new land, which is exclusive to Hong Kong Disneyland, is Grizzly Gulch. It offers you one of the most exciting rides- the Big Grizzly Mountain Runaway Mine Cars. The high-speed journey takes you through the gold mines but watch out for grizzly bears which guard the mines as they can accidentally send you off on a detour careering round the mountain!

Grizzly Gulch is also home to some great country & western style musical entertainment, plus there's Geyser Gulch where guests of all ages can enjoy some spirited water play.

And as you'd expected from Hong Kong Disneyland, all the lands are home to exciting and innovative eateries ranging from fast food to fine dining to suit all tastes. Plus there are everyone's all-time favorites like Flights of Fantasy Parade and the fabulous Disney in the Stars fireworks display that ends your day at Hong Kong Disneyland with a bang!

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Tourism Data

Travel prices will increase moderately in 2014, while hotels in Asia-Pacific's largest cities will continue to enjoy the highest occupancies in the world, says Carlson Wagonlit Travel's 2014 Travel Price Forecast

Hot Moves

Richard Schestak now helms Rafles Jakarta as general manager while Pieter van der Hoeven fills the same position at Raffles Hotel Le Royal Phnom Penh; the complex of Fairmont Singapore & Swissôtel The Stamford have promoted Ng Sok Hia to executive assistant manager, sales & marketing; Franco lo is now general manager of The Garden Hotel, Guangzhou



From left: Richard Schestak, Ng Sok Hia and Franco lo

Hot Deals

YTL Hotels is offering residents of Singapore, Malaysia and Brunei a Refreshed Residents Package for Pangkor Laut Resort and Gaya Island Resort, including a complimentary room upgrade and discounted spa treatments. The package is available for stays until September 30

TTG Intelligence

Analysis by Murray Bailey

Airline stock prices weaken

Nine out of the 14 main airline stocks listed in Asia-Pacific markets were lower at mid-year compared with end-2012. The comparison over the past 12 months is better – only six airlines were below their prices at mid-2012.

Perhaps most surprising is that almost the strongest growth was recorded by Japan's two main airlines, All Nippon Airways and Japan Airlines (JAL). This is because certain traffic figures indicate a weak first half for Japan (see Japan Slips in 1H).

Another surprise is the fall in prices of China's three main airlines. This may be a factor of sentiment related to a slowdown in growth for China's economy.

Fastest growth this year was JAL's 38%. Biggest fall was Malaysia Airlines' 57%.

Growth in prices of selected airline stocks\*, %

| Company                 | Over end Dec 2012* | Over end-1H2012* | Market      |
|-------------------------|--------------------|------------------|-------------|
| AirAsia                 | 16.4               | -13.8            | Malaysia    |
| Air China               | -14.8              | 22.9             | Hong Kong   |
| Air New Zealand         | 14.7               | 63.2             | New Zealand |
| All Nippon Airways      | 13.8               | 5.6              | Japan       |
| Cathay Pacific          | -4.6               | 8.8              | Hong Kong   |
| China Airlines          | -5.8               | -11.7            | Taiwan      |
| China Eastern Airlines  | -22.3              | -2.4             | Hong Kong   |
| China Southern Airlines | -19.9              | -7.9             | Hong Kong   |
| Japan Airlines          | 37.8               | 41.7+            | Japan       |
| Jet Airways             | -19.5              | 12.3             | India       |
| Malaysia Airlines       | -57.0              | -72.0            | Malaysia    |
| Qantas Airways          | -9.4               | 22.7             | Australia   |
| Singapore Airlines      | -5.7               | -2.8             | Singapore   |
| Thai Airways            | 11.8               | 18.2             | Thailand    |

Notes: \*Growth in prices at end-1H2013 compared with prices at periods shown. +From when relisted, Sep 12.

Source: Travel Business Analyst

European airlines into Asia-Pacific: little pain and gain

Passenger loads on routes to and from Asia-Pacific on Europe's three main airlines in 1H2013 fared both better and worse than 2012.

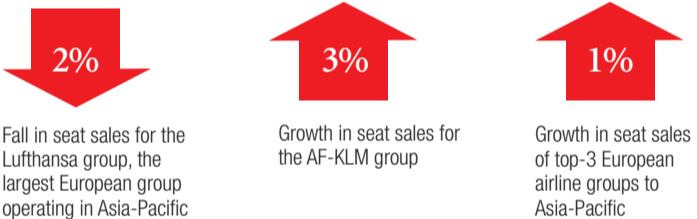
Seat sales at Air France-KLM (AF-KLM) increased 3% compared with 2% growth for all-2012. At IAG (which comprises mainly British Airways and Iberia), sales increased 5% compared with 2%.

But Lufthansa experienced a 2% fall in both periods. And at the Lufthansa group – which also includes Lufthansa's Aus-

trian and Swiss subsidiaries – its 2% fall compares with a flat 2012.

The largest operator to the region is the Lufthansa group, partly because it comprises three airlines operating into the region.

Next is the AF-KLM group, which comprises two airlines. Then some way behind is IAG which, to Asia-Pacific, comprises almost entirely British Airways.



Source: Airline companies

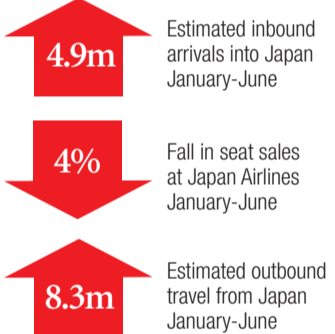
Japan slips in 1H

Data from Japan indicates that market growth achieved in 2012 is not being maintained this year.

Aviation: Total seat sales for Japan Airlines were down 4% in the first half, although international sales were flat (+0.3%). Flight numbers at Tokyo Narita International Airport – but for an earlier period – rose just 0.2%.

Inbound: Growth appears good – we estimate 21% over January-June. However, this would still be a rebound from the triple-hit in March 2011 because figures for January-February this year compared with pre-disaster January-February 2011 showed almost no growth (+0.3%). This indicates that not until 2014 will there have been a full recovery – which, in turn, would mean the triple-hit caused a three-year dip for the inbound travel business.

Outbound: Estimates by Travel Business Analyst (based on data from Japan Tourism Marketing) indicate a 7% fall in outbound travel in the first-half, to 8.3 million. Although the total fell more than expected, it was above that of 2011.



Source: Japan Tourism Marketing, Travel Business Analyst

Most commented on www.ttgasia.com

CLIA adopts passenger bill of rights

Responding to a reader who asked if the passenger bill of rights (PBOR) was now a condition of membership to CLIA Asia, Kevin Leong, general manager, Asia Cruise Association (ACA), said: "It's not very clear at the moment as we are in a transition mode from ACA to CLIA Asia. For cruise lines that are members of CLIA, it's not an issue, obviously.

"There are cruise lines in regional associations like ours that are not CLIA members and we're working with CLIA Global on the various tiers of membership, which will include global as well as regional levels. We do not have a conclusion yet.

"On the PBOR, Star Cruises, which is the only cruise line member we have that is not a CLIA member, has its own Passage Terms."

Why it's still morning in the evening in Vietnam

Kai Marcus Schröter from Vietnam agreed with guest columnist Kai Speth, who opined that Vietnam's nightlife left a lot to be desired. Wrote Schröter: "Well written and all true, sadly. Ho Chi Minh City, the former 'notorious' Saigon, has a decent nightlife. But how about Hanoi? The capital of Vietnam shuts down at 22.00. It's altogether ruled by a bunch of people from yesterday."

Air India rolls out holiday packages online

In response to a report on Air India's tie-up with MakeMyTrip to launch Air India Holidays packages, BRK from Chennai, commented: "Air India had been offering holiday packages earlier on its own. Now it has joined hands with a leading travel portal to serve the budget travellers, which is a welcome move."

Changi passenger traffic unclouded by haze

Mask from Singapore disputes the assertion that the increase in passenger traffic at Singapore Changi Airport in June indicated that local tourism was unharmed by the haze, pointing out: "Passenger arrivals includes local residents escaping from the haze and returning subsequently? (These arrivals are) rather obviously not just pure tourists."



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

- Singapore Airlines (2002)
- Singapore Changi Airport (2002)
- Hertz Asia Pacific (2005)
- Royal Cliff Hotels Group (2006)
- 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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# A passion for frontier markets

Willem Niemeijer, co-founder and CEO, Khiri Travel Group

He ventured into countries when they were just opening up, leading Khiri Travel to become one of South-east Asia's most innovative DMCs today. **Greg Lowe** speaks to the man at the reins

### What were the key milestones for Khiri over the past 20 years?

Our real first break came in 1997 with the Asian financial crisis. In the early days we were uncertain what would happen, but after a couple of weeks it dawned on us that it was a really good opportunity. Business really took off.

Other key developments were the opening of our Chiang Mai office in 1998. The following year, we opened in Cambodia with our own company. We officially incorporated (in Laos) in 2007, but we had been working out of our own office since 2003.

The most recent major change was reorganising the company about one-and-a-half years ago.

### How and why did you restructure Khiri?

We were very much centrally managed out of Bangkok. It was me, my then partner and one or two other people who would develop products for all the countries. We felt there was a need to totally reorganise the business so that each country office was the specialist for their country. The passion for the country is strongest within the country itself, so we decided to capitalise on that. Each of our countries now has its own management team and own foreign and local leadership when it comes to product development.

### Khiri has always been a B2B business. Why was that decision made and would you do things differently if you opened up shop today?

Right now it is much more obvious to go B2C and if I were to open an office now that's

probably what I would do, with social media, direct bookings and all that. But in the early 90s, people didn't understand the destinations at all, especially Asia. Almost everybody we dealt with back then came as a group.

I still very much believe that we add a lot of value for (overseas) tour operators. Everybody is going much more into niche markets. As a tour operator, the more you are pushed into niche markets and away from the hotels booking model, the more you need added value and the more you need people on the ground. That's what we provide.

### How are your products developed?

We give the ideas for tour operators. We come up with new ideas about what to do. We then craft and customise them for every agency's niche.

The movers and shakers of Khiri Travel Group are speaking with each other about what they have tried, what works and what does not. We officially meet three times a year so we can share best practices and ideas. Every time we meet it's better. It's very inspirational. I think we are getting back to the heights of our creativity.

### What are your key source markets?

Our main source markets are North America, Canada and Western Europe, especially the Scandinavian countries, Benelux and Germany. The UK is also growing.

Regional markets are also growing for us. Again, it's not the mass market we're after. We're

more about smaller quality tours from Singapore, Hong Kong, Shanghai and Beijing.

### Do you have any plans to expand your source markets given the growth in inbound tourism from the likes of Russia and China?

Obviously volume is important, but we always need to look at how we can differentiate, how can we open up even more remote locations. So we look for a different type of traveller and that traveller is definitely not from the mass Russian or Chinese markets. So we have deferred our decision to go into those markets for now.

### You started Khiri, operating out of a hotel room in Bangkok in the early days. What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of starting out the way you did?

During the first 12 years or so we didn't really see it as a business. We still do it for the love of travel and the region, but once you grow you have more responsibilities and so many staff that you have to start seeing it as a business.

I wouldn't change much, though it would probably be a better idea to do things with a little more investment, more planning and targets.

### How do you manage your team?

I try to stay very much hands-on and local. I visit all of our countries. I wish I could do more, but with five countries and 11 offices, there's only so much you can do.

I also try to help out on product innovation and make sure that our brand has the right vision. Of course, there are the

budgets, but I have a new partner who is also our CFO (Mark Remijan) and he's a real star on that front.

### You've worked in a number of South-east Asian frontier markets over the years, entering when they first opened. What were the key similarities and differences?

Each case is different. If you look at Cambodia, when I went there first in 1992 there was basically no infrastructure. There were only a handful of hotels and they were generally pretty crappy. Roads were non-existent; security was a major issue. This really was a country which felt unsafe.

improvements in northern Laos but they have been very slow. It is very much a rural agricultural country and I think it will remain so for some time.

Vietnam is totally different. When the US lifted the (travel and trade) embargo in February 1994 it started booming. I think there is a stronger parallel between what happened in Vietnam then and what is happening in Myanmar now, than with how things started in Cambodia or Laos.

In Vietnam there was infrastructure. It really wanted to grow but couldn't because of the embargo. Once that embargo

**"We still do it for the love of travel and the region, but once you grow you have more responsibilities."**

Destroyed. There was no human capital. You could only find a few people who spoke a few words of English. It was very difficult for the country to start up. Fast-forward to the mid-2000s and you can see how this country had made tremendous progress.

In Laos, there is a much more ideological government which came into power in 1975. You also have a larger country with a smaller population, only a small proportion of which is connected to any kind of grid, electrical or otherwise. There is now a road between Luang Prabang and Vientiane. There have been

was lifted things took off.

### What do you think will happen in Myanmar?

If it continues in the way it's going now, I fear it will end up like Vietnam where there is not a lot of development for the rest of the country. (Development) all happens in the cities.

I'm hoping that as a way out the Myanmar government will make it much easier to invest in some off-the-beaten-track places. It is already trying to do this to some extent. If it is difficult to get a hotel permit in a key destination, it could make it relatively

easy somewhere in the boondocks. This is really important in a huge country like Myanmar, rather than just saying, 'We already have Yangon, Mandalay, Bagan and Inle Lake, so these are where we're going to develop.'

**What role can the private sector play to make tourism development in Myanmar more sustainable?**

The best lessons probably come from Laos and Cambodia. Let's take Cambodia first. For a long time people would only go to Siem Reap to see Angkor Wat, just flying in and out of one place. It's only recently that people have started to look at Phnom Penh. More tourists are going there now, but the rest of the country is really lagging behind in development.

Laos is quite similar. People go to Luang Prabang and Vientiane because there is very little infrastructure in places like the Plain of Jars; southern Laos is only now starting to develop.

Once the world knows Laos equals Luang Prabang and Cambodia equals Angkor Wat, it becomes very difficult to get out of that mindset, even for the travel trade.

**What are the outcomes for the travel trade if it focuses on a single destination within a country, rather than developing and promoting tourism over a larger area?**

Siem Reap is probably the best example of this. In typical Cambodian fashion, anyone can build a hotel there. You get a permit very easily. So now when you go to Siem Reap there are hotels everywhere. In high season they are full, but the average occupancy is not great the rest of the time, save for a few of the larger international chains. You see a lot of price competition there but development does not spread across the country. Even with the price competition people think Siem Reap is still the place to invest.

**What role do you think the arrival of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) in 2015 will have on the region's travel industry? Will it be a bang or a whimper?**

I'm not sure the AEC will have the huge impact some people are expecting. There will be some impact and most of it will be positive. People are looking for opportunities to fill in gaps. The movement of labour, which is what most people are worried about, usually takes place because there is an economic benefit to move. So overall I think it will result in a more even spread of talent. There will be some very short-term commotion but it will settle down.

**What would you change across the region?**

Visas, immigration systems, TM cards (for Thai immigration), visa on arrival queues, etc – if these could be eradicated it would really help.

They really diminish the travel experience.



Neeta Lachmandas  
Assistant Chief Executive,  
Singapore Tourism Board

# LEADING IN ASIA'S NEW TRAVEL AND TOURISM LANDSCAPE

The Asian travel and tourism industry is expected to face a significant labour shortage of about eight million jobs in the next 10 years, mostly at the managerial level, which poses a critical challenge as businesses expand and grapple with more complex demands from increasingly discerning consumers.

Ms Neeta Lachmandas, Assistant Chief Executive of the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) shares her views on what it takes for travel leaders and tourism businesses to succeed in the region. This is the first in a thought-provoking series featuring the change-makers in Asia's travel and tourism industry.

**How is the leadership imperative key to leveraging the region's growth potential and what does it take for leaders to be "Asia-ready"?**

Navigating the region's fast-growing and diverse environment requires the right strategies and a healthy appetite for innovation. A global perspective is essential – thinking beyond traditional business models, coupled with sensitivity to the specific needs and cultures of local markets.

**Are Asia's travel leaders ready to play a leading role in driving further transformation and growth of the industry?**

Asia has an increasingly important role to play in the future. In 2013, Asia is projected to see growth of 5 to 6 per cent, outstripping the global average of 3 to 4 per cent.

By 2020, two out of every five travellers are expected to be Asian and will account for nearly half of global tourism expenditure.

A new generation of leaders is introducing a level of energy and ideas that is creating waves across the travel and tourism landscape.

THE OPPORTUNITY LIES IN BRINGING TOGETHER THE RIGHT PEOPLE – THOSE WITH THE ABILITY AND DESIRE TO DRIVE CHANGE - WHO CAN MAKE A MATERIAL IMPACT.

From the past few editions of TravelRave and the Asia Travel Leaders Summit (ATLS) in particular, we have seen healthy discussions among travel industry leaders on key issues that cut across the entire industry. 2012 participants included

Pak Budi Tirtawisata, CEO of Panorama Group and Mr Deepak Ohri, CEO of Lebua Hotels & Resorts.

**One of the key challenges discussed at TravelRave 2012 is that many companies are not keeping pace with Asia's growth potential, in terms of organisational development. What were some of the relevant findings and insights that were shared?**

Firstly, there is a need to develop managers with broader competencies to compete in a more complex and dynamic operating environment. Secondly, existing programmes and initiatives are unable to meet the development needs of the industry.

Increasingly, business success is driven by leaders who possess a global outlook reinforced by well-rounded experience and market exposure. Addressing the gap in existing training and development platforms, especially for middle and senior management executives, requires a paradigm shift in the way businesses operate. Companies need to empower Human Resources to play a more strategic role in driving talent and executive development.

More importantly, business owners need to move from a competitive to a cooperative mindset especially in "non-competing" areas such as joint cross-sector initiatives aimed at raising the quality of the entire industry.

**How can a platform like TravelRave facilitate longer term collaboration?**

Following ATLS 2012, leaders have re-convened in working groups involving

representatives from companies such as VFS Global Group, TAUZIA International Management, and Patina Hotels & Resorts to explore concrete ways to cooperate on strategic HR and talent issues discussed at the last summit.

Recognising the importance of engaging Gen-Y talent, ITB Asia partnered The Singapore Association of Convention and Exhibition Organises and Suppliers (SACEOS) to launch the inaugural Future Leaders initiative in 2012, targeting the top travel and tourism students from Singapore.

The programme served to cultivate a better understanding of the travel industry so as to attract and groom the next generation of talent.

TravelRave is a key platform that gathers business leaders and industry professionals to explore the potential for cross-sector cooperation, share relevant insights and best practices of conducting business in Asia. TravelRave 2013 will see an exciting line up of eight events across the travel and tourism spectrum from hospitality, tourism investment, technology to aviation.

**Get connected with the best travel minds ahead of TravelRave 2013, the most influential travel trade festival in Asia.**

**Follow us @TravelRaveSG, find us at the TravelRave LinkedIn group or visit [www.travelrave.sg](http://www.travelrave.sg) for the latest industry updates.**



Sources: 1. HVS, ILO, WTTC, CNTA, IIFL, Cygnus, Great Places to Work Institute, Industry Interviews, Boston Consulting Group (BCG) analysis 2. EIU, BCG analysis in 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 3. UNWTO World Tourism Barometer

# What's on the shelves

In this section, we round up the latest product news in the marketplace, from hotel openings and airline developments to new tours and tech solutions

[ HOTELS ]

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <p><b>Holiday Inn Express Singapore Orchard Road</b></p> <p>InterContinental Hotels Group has opened Holiday Inn Express Singapore Orchard Road, the first of two Holiday Inn Express hotels planned for the city-state. The 221-room hotel is located within walking distance of shopping malls and is easily accessible from Somerset and Orchard MRT stations. Free Wi-Fi is available and facilities include an express breakfast bar and a laundry room.</p>  | <p><b>Best Western Premier the Grand at Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar</b></p> <p>Best Western International has signed a franchise agreement with Eden Palace Company for a new project, the 205-room Best Western Premier the Grand at Nay Pyi Taw. The hotel, due to open by 2Q2014, will be one of the first international-brand hotels in the city, which is also the seat of Myanmar's government and one of the world's fastest-growing hotel markets.</p>  |
| <p><b>dusitD2 Fudu Binhu Hotel Changzhou, China</b></p> <p>Dusit Fudu Hotels and Resorts has soft-opened the dusitD2 Fudu Binhu Hotel Changzhou. The hotel is 30 minutes from Changzhou Benniu Airport and railway station and 15 minutes from downtown Wujin. The 35-105m<sup>2</sup> rooms have floor-to-ceiling windows. There are three F&amp;B outlets, a 518m<sup>2</sup> pillarless ballroom, four multi-function rooms and a 100m<sup>2</sup> foyer.</p>   | <p><b>YOTEL, Singapore</b></p> <p>Luxury cabin concept hotel, YOTEL, is planning to open a 600-room cabin hotel in Singapore's Orchard Road in 2018. Cabin sizes will vary from 16m<sup>2</sup> for a premium cabin, to 102m<sup>2</sup> for a VIP suite. The hotel will also have a Club Lounge with 'Club cabins' that double up as meeting and work spaces during the day, but transform into a restaurant/bar space in the evenings.</p>  |

[ ACTIVITIES ]



**1 Grand Prix Season** Grand Prix Season Singapore will descend upon the Lion City from September 13 to 23, 2013, with a host of festivities to accompany the annual Formula 1 Singtel Singapore Grand Prix.

This year's in-circuit concert will boast big names such as The Killers, Rihanna, Justin Bieber, Big Bang and Tom Jones. The Bacchanalia Brunch Series and Artichoke's menu of 'dude' food dishes will satisfy travellers' taste-buds. Nightlife highlights Amber Lounge and Podium Lounge will return, while events such as *Zouk presents I Am Hardwell*, *Bed Invasion: 50's Miami White* at Tanjong Beach Club, and *Parc Ferme 2013* will make their debut. Other events include a pop-up exhibition by art historian Marc Restellini at Fort Canning Centre, night golfing at Marina Bay Golf Course, and shopping deals along Orchard Road.

**2 Spice up biking with a pro guide** SpiceRoads Cycle Tours has rolled out a new eight-day tour, starting from Bangkok on January 31 and ending in Phuket on February 7 next year.

The *Ride with Sean Kelly* tour is for cyclists who can sustain a minimum speed of 30kph. Participants will ride alongside former professional cyclist Sean Kelly, with opportunities to get training tips and first-hand account of tales on the cycling circuit. They will cover 700km across six cycling days, with overnight stays at resorts and afternoons free to spend at their leisure.

Priced at US\$2,750 per pax and limited to 20 participants, the tour will provide beverages and snacks, as well as air-conditioned vehicles. Riders can use their own bikes or rent a Trek 2.1C from SpiceRoads for US\$200.

**3 Mekong photography experience** Secret Retreats has launched *The Mystic Mekong Exclusive Escape* for photography enthusiasts, accompanied by renowned photographer Andrew Lim, from October 19 to 26, 2013.



Guests will explore 'old Bangkok' by boat in Luang Prabang, visiting ancient temples, monasteries and the sacred Pakhou Caves. On the hills in Northern Laos, they can capture original works of art 1,000m above sea level. In the evening, an authentic Baci Ceremony will refresh souls, following ancient tribal beliefs. At the end of the week, the Nam Ou cruise to Muang Khua proffers visits to the Tai Dam village and stunning views of limestone cliffs, majestic waters and caves. Accommodation includes Secret Retreats' Cabochon Hotel & Residence in Bangkok, as well as Satri House and Muang La Resort in Laos.

Cabochon Hotel & Residence in Bangkok

[ TRANSPORT ]

**SIA steps up India services** Singapore Airlines (SIA) is introducing a third daily flight to New Delhi. With the beginning of the Northern Winter season on October 27, 2013, the carrier will launch the additional flight with Boeing 777 aircraft.

From October 27, SIA and SilkAir will operate a total of 107 weekly services to 11 destinations in India. Destinations served include Ahmedabad, Bengaluru, Chennai, Kochi, Kolkata, Mumbai and New Delhi.

**New, better Medan airport opens** The new Kualanamu International Airport in Medan,

which replaces the congested Polonia International Airport, has opened, with airlines flying out of it since July 25.

LCCs such as AirAsia, Valuair and Firefly have moved over to the new facility in the Deli Serdang regency in North Sumatra, about 42km from Medan city centre.

**Tigerair Philippines launches Kalibo-Singapore service** South East Asian Airlines (SEAir) kicked off its first service on July 18 under its new identity, Tigerair Philippines. The Kalibo-Singapore flight departs Kalibo daily at 08.00 and leaves Singapore at 12.25, until September when Singapore-

bound flights take off from Kalibo at 10.00.

The service targets Singapore's beachgoing travellers. The aircraft also has fewer seats to increase legroom space, ideal for European passengers flying into Singapore.

**Emirates to open Barcelona-Dubai service** Emirates will launch a daily service between Barcelona and international transit hub Dubai next February. Route capacity will increase 44 per cent, thanks to the deployment of the 517-seat A380. Through Dubai, the service links to 12 other A380 routes to Australia, the Middle East and Asia.

[ TECHNOLOGY ]

TripAdvisor will launch an online platform in late 2013 that will enable independent hotels and bed-and-breakfast properties of all sizes to access services previously available only to major OTAs, booking engines and hotel chains.

*TripAdvisor Connect* will enable accommodation owners to manage their online promotion themselves, via online tools that help them analyse their advertising results, as well as encourage more user reviews through automated post-stay review collection emails via their Internet booking engine.

To participate, accommodation owners must be TripAdvisor Business Listings subscribers and must provide real-time availability and the ability to book online via a certified Internet booking engine.



Courtesy of Janet Tan-Collis

# Novel nuptials

TTG Asia selects the most creative ways to tie the knot and honeymoon in the region. By **Feizal Samath, Lee Pei Qi, S Puvaneswary, Hannah Koh, Mimi Hudoyo, Rosa Ocampo, Greg Lowe, Prudence Lui and Rohit Kaul**

## ➔ Red carpet action

**What's the idea?** Inject touches of glamour à la Hollywood with weddings at the Universal Studios Singapore. The couple will be driven into the park's New York zone in a luxury sedan, making a grand entrance as they walk down the red carpet with guests cheering from the sides. Dinner will be served on the streets of New York, which will be cordoned off on the big day. A cast of iconic characters from Sesame Street and Kungfu Panda will join guests on the exhilarating rides to end the night on a high note.

**Contact** Universal Studios Singapore; Tel: (65) 6577-6868; Email: weddings@rwsentosa.com

## ➔ Encounters of the feathered kind

**What's the idea?** Get married amid lush greenery and a riot of colours at Jurong Bird Park's African Waterfall Aviary, home to a 30m waterfall and over 600 birds of Africa. Bestow the honourable role of the ring bearer upon the specially-trained birds and after the exchanging of vows, lovebirds can be released to commemorate the beautiful occasion. Guests will then be treated to a banquet at Lakeview Ballroom, with glass walls offering views of flamingos strutting their stuff.

**Contact** Jurong Bird Park, Singapore; Tel: (65) 6661-7807; Email: event.sales@wrs.com.sg

## ➔ Ethnic Iban flavours

**What's the idea?** Follow the age-old traditions of East Malaysia's indigenous Iban people with a longhouse wedding in Lemanak, about 220km from Kuching city in Sarawak. The bride and groom will first be introduced to their foster parents in the longhouse, after which they will receive separate advice on how they should behave after marriage according to Iban customs. During the ceremony, the couple will be dressed in traditional attire, while the Iban elders will give their blessings by touching a steel knife with their teeth so that the newly-weds' souls will be as strong as steel.

**Contact** Panch Sammy, Diethelm Travel Malaysia; Email: panch.p@my.diethelmtravel.com

## ➔ Aboard a yacht on the sea of love

**What's the idea?** Set sail aboard the YTL Lady I, a 20m luxury yacht, and anchor at the magnificent Emerald Bay for an intimate ceremony at sea. As the sun sets on the Straits of Malacca, the couple exchanges vows on the petal-strewn deck in the presence of a pastor or a wedding celebrant, then followed by a champagne toast as the band serenades guests with their romantic tunes. Cruise back to Pangkor Island, where a sumptuous five-course seafood banquet on the beach awaits.

**Contact** Pangkor Laut Resort, Malaysia; Tel: (60-18) 799-9000; Email: events@ytlhotels.com.my



Release of lovebirds at Singapore's Jurong Bird Park

Wildlife Reserves Singapore



A rickshaw ride through Kyoto's quaint streets

The Sodo Higashiyama Kyoto

## ➔ On the Kyushu express

**What's the idea?** Set to launch operations on October 15, the *Seven Stars in Kyushu* luxury train will take honeymooners on a comfortable and intimate journey through Kyushu, with a maximum group size of 30 pax per trip. Guests can choose between a 4D3N or 2D1N itinerary, with the longer trip bundling a night's stay at an exclusive ryokan. Also included in the programme are unique activities such as visits to the Aso caldera, a traditional Kagoshima kiln and plenty of hot springs – perfect ways for newly-weds to begin their marital journeys.

**Contact** Kyushu Railway, Japan; Tel: (81-92) 474-0221; Email: cruisetrain@jrkyushu.co.jp

## ➔ Under the cherry blossom trees

**What's the idea?** The picturesque grounds of The Sodo Higashiyama Kyoto, the former residence of a master painter turned restaurant, makes an exquisite backdrop for a Kyoto-style wedding. Coiffed in ceremonial Japanese wedding wear, the bride and groom will enjoy a scenic rickshaw ride through Kyoto's quaint streets to Yasaka shrine, where the couple's union will be blessed in a traditional ceremony. Returning to The Sodo via rickshaw, the couple then proceeds for a photo session around the charming venue. A post-wedding dinner or lunch can be arranged for an additional charge.

**Contact** The Sodo Higashiyama Kyoto, Japan; Tel: (81-70) 5568-5628; Email: pds-sd@plandosee.co.jp

## ➔ The alchemy of scent

**What's the idea?** Ayana Resort and Spa Bali's Something New wedding package allows lovebirds to create their own personalised fragrance at the L'atelier Perfume Studio, very much the same way John Lennon and Yoko Ono used to create their own rose oil scent. Besides a three-night stay at the 3,000m² Ayana Villa on a cliff-top, the couple can also look forward to a wedding celebrant, acapella choraleists, Balinese flower girl attendants, homemade canapés and welcome drinks during their wedding reception, as well as a private table at Rock Bar with two glasses of sparkling wine as part of the package.

**Contact** Ria Kentjono, chief wedding planner, Ayana Resort & Spa Bali, Indonesia; Tel: (62-361) 702-222; Email: weddings@ayanaresort.com

## ➔ Cast adrift on remote waters

**What's the idea?** Enjoy a honeymoon on the remote waters of Indonesia aboard a *phinisi*, the traditional ship of the Bugis seafarers from South Sulawesi. Staying in one of the five suites of *Alila Purnama*, a luxurious 46m, three-deck liveaboard *phinisi*, couples can opt for seven-day expeditions around Komodo Island or Raja

# WEDDINGS & HONEYMOONS



Auberge Discovery Bay Hong Kong

Ampat archipelago, while private charters for customised itineraries are available year-round too. Honeymoon packages can be tailor-made to include couple spa treatments on board, candlelight dinners for two, romantic BBQ dinners by the beach, champagne upon arrival and flower arrangements.

**Contact** Taufik Racman, director of sales and marketing, Alila Purnama, Indonesia; Email: [purnama@alilahotels.com](mailto:purnama@alilahotels.com)

## Of saree, tea and metti

**What's the idea?** Heritance Tea Factory, a tea factory turned luxury hotel located amid tea plantations in Sri Lanka's cool hills, offers a traditional Hindu wedding package at a local temple, complete with full ceremonial regalia for the couple – saree, *thali* (gold pendant) and *metti* (silver toe ring) for the bride; traditional outfit and headdress for the groom – and rituals overseen by a Hindu priest. In addition, the couple can enjoy a dinner in a 1930s railway-carriage restaurant, and pick their own tea and process it at the on-site factory to take home as souvenirs.

**Contact** Heritance Tea Factory, Sri Lanka; Website: [www.heritancehotels.com/teafactory](http://www.heritancehotels.com/teafactory)

## A sandy proposition

**What's the idea?** Simplify, a Sri Lankan charter operator, has a helicopter ride proposal package. Flying over the stunning coastline of Sri Lanka, the helicopter ride will take the couple to a particular location on the beach. As the helicopter descends to a lower altitude, the couple will see the message "Will you marry me?" written on the sand, at which point the man can pop the question to his girlfriend. On landing at the site, stewards will serve cold towels and a bottle of Champagne to mark the special occasion.

**Contact** Simplify, Sri Lanka; Website: [www.simplify.com](http://www.simplify.com)

## Back to the aristocratic 1920s

**What's the idea?** Travel back to the 1920s of the British colonial era and get married according to the traditions of the Mudliyar, an aristocratic class created by the Portuguese colonial rulers. The wedding will be held at the 17th century Galle Fort in south-western Sri Lanka, where the bridal couple and guests will be dressed in the ceremonial attire of the 1920s. The groom and groomsmen will arrive on caparisoned elephants while the bride and her retinue travel in a refined *thirikkale* (bullock cart).

**Contact** MICE.lk, Sri Lanka; Website: [www.mice.lk](http://www.mice.lk)

## A fiery fiesta in the desert

**What's the idea?** With the pristine dunes of Rajasthan's Thar Desert as a majestic backdrop, the experience begins in the late afternoon with a jeep and camel caravan taking the wedding entourage through the sand dunes. On arrival at Samsara Luxury Resort & Camp, the couple and guests will be greeted with garlands by local villagers. Surrounded by bright lanterns and torch lamps, a lavish wedding dinner with cocktails and Rajasthan's most signature dishes will be organised in the outdoors, while local folk singers and dancers entertain the guests and add to the festivities. A wedding ceremony will follow, after which the tranquil desert sky will be lit up with firecrackers to mark the celebrations.

**Contact** Samsara Luxury Resort and Camp, India; Email: [reservation@samsaradechu.com](mailto:reservation@samsaradechu.com)

## Nuptials amid the rolling hills

**What's the idea?** The remote Batanes Islands in the Philippines make a novel wedding destination, with no lack of awe-inspiring venues such as the Tukon Chapel and the Basco Lighthouse nestled amid the rolling hills with sweeping views of the Pacific Ocean. During the wedding ceremony, the groom will present his bride with 13 gold coins to symbolise his dedication to her and their children. For the wedding feast, traditional Ivatan delicacies like banana blossom piths are served with local *palek* wine, while Ivatan merrymaking songs called *laji* are incorporated into the music.

**Contact** The Wedding Agency by The Rebellious Brides, the Philippines; Email: [rebellious.bride@gmail.com](mailto:rebellious.bride@gmail.com)

## Go local, go Filipiniana

**What's the idea?** Incorporate Pinoy warmth and charm into a wedding by opting for Filipino-inspired details. The bride and bridesmaids are clad in terno gowns while the groom and groomsmen are attired in sheer button-up shirt called *barong* – both embroidered garment of the Philippines. The jeepney, the country's most iconic transportation mode, serves as the bridal car. During the wedding dance, the couple's respective families will try to outdo each other by pinning peso bills on their garments, after which the bills will be unpinned and counted, and the winner pinning the bigger amount will be announced. The entire amount collected is given to the newly-weds to herald a prosperous beginning to their married life.

**Contact** The Wedding Agency by The Rebellious Brides, the Philippines; Email: [rebellious.bride@gmail.com](mailto:rebellious.bride@gmail.com)



Clockwise, from top: a chapel wedding at Auberge Discovery Bay Hong Kong; tea picking at Heritance Tea Factory in Sri Lanka; the Alila Purnama offers a lavish cruise experience for honeymooners



Heritance Tea Factory

## Checking in

# Stairway to heaven



An omnipresent GM, seasoned staff, stylish and unique settings for a wedding or romance, and its biggest facelift since opening in 1996, make **Raini Hamdi** fall in love again with The Legian Bali

**LOCATION** Not only does it have a long, long stretch of golden sand on the shores of Seminyak Beach, the resort is blessed to be located a stone's throw from the island's chicest shops (just the thing to please her) and creative bars and restaurants (just the thing to please him).

General manager Kevin Abramowicz was waiting to welcome me personally at the hotel porch; it would not be the last I saw of him. Throughout my three-night stay, I was struck by how he was always around, supervising every corner of the property, and finding the time to talk to guests. For an important occasion such as a wedding or honeymoon, where attention to detail is crucial to bowl hearts over, an omnipresent GM is a good sign. His

leadership caught on with the staff, who were equally hands-on and interact splendidly with guests.

**WHAT'S NEW** A new 30m infinity lap pool was built closer to the shoreline than two other existing pools. The effect was a picture-perfect cascade of three pools and, along with a new beachfront sundeck, a new semi-open lounge-by-the-sea and freshly landscaped gardens, The Legian had never looked sexier. The refurbishment enhanced what's clearly a GHM-style hotel whose design stands the test of time.

I didn't remember the one-bedroom suite looking that spacious, inviting and airy when I stayed previously in 2007.

More windows were created to bring natural light into the room and bathroom. I never encountered any air-con draft anywhere, be it in the bedroom, living room or dining room, and the in-room amenities were first-class – 32-inch HD LCD TV with Blu-Ray DVD player, free high-speed Internet, Bose sound system, iPod dock, PLOH pillows, Delonghni cappuccino machine, and the list goes on. The balcony terrace with a huge day-bed is the private place from which couples can enjoy a stunning sunset before heading out for cocktails/dinner.

As part of the facelift, the hotel will also sport a new spa, fitness centre and a boardroom, although these additions were not ready at the time of visit in April.

**WEDDING IDEAS** What can be more propitious than a Sunset Garden wedding with the ceremony starting at the hotel's Stairs of Heaven, a magnificent outdoor stairway inspired by the Borobudur Temple.

A three-piece Balinese gamelan orchestra, eight flower girls in Balinese costume, Balinese gong to announce bridal procession, white Tiffany chairs and white ash with flower, one hour cocktail and canape and a Spa Love package for the newly-weds, among a long list of inclusions, promise to make this an exotic, dreamy wedding.

The hotel also offers a Luxury White Wedding featuring a two-night stay for the couple at The Beach House, with full Club



Top: a couple exchange vows during an underwater wedding in Trang, Thailand; right: the Philippines' Batanes Islands have breathtaking venues for weddings



Jayson and Joanne Arquiza

## Strings attached

**What's the idea?** To celebrate a couple's union, Villa Maly will organise a *baci* ceremony – an ancient Lao tradition performed to mark important occasions – as part of its Romancing Luang Prabang honeymoon package. The officiating monk or elder will recite chants calling for the blessing and well-being of the newly-weds, while knotting white cotton strings around the bride and groom's wrists, symbolically sealing in the benefits of the ritual, before concluding with a Lao dance and music performance. Valid until the end of December, the package also includes a two-night deluxe room stay, a Lao-style *sindad* barbeque, a sunset dinner cruise on the Nava Mekong and a 60-minute massage.

**Contact** Villa Maly, Laos; Website: [www.villa-maly.com](http://www.villa-maly.com)

## Under the emerald sea

**What's the idea?** Couples keen to tie the knot can literally take the plunge with an underwater wedding ceremony in Thailand. Each year scores of couples head to the southern Thai province of Trang for a unique scuba-centric mass wedding ceremony that will mark its 18<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2014. Activities including tree planting and blessings usually take place between February 13 and 15, with the wedding held on Valentine's Day. Couples will take their vows and marriage registration underwater, with packages available for divers and non-divers alike (no experience is necessary).

**Contact** Trang Chamber of Commerce, Thailand; Tel: (66-2) 863-3288; Email: [info@underwater-wedding.com](mailto:info@underwater-wedding.com)

## On the back of pachyderms

**What's the idea?** Surin province, famed for its annual Elephant Round-up, also hosts a unique

ceremony in which couples get hitched on the back of the magnificent beasts. Brides will don a crown made from palm leaf while grooms will put on a rope with three colours. During the *sut tae* ceremony – the traditional wedding of the local Kui tribe – couples exchange their vows while seated on a pachyderm at Ta Klang Elephant Village and will take part in an elephant parade, among other activities. The event typically runs from February 13 to 15 each year.

**Contact** Tourism Authority of Thailand Surin office; Tel: (66-44) 514-447

## The white chapel by the sea

**What's the idea?** Auberge Discovery Bay Hong Kong debuted the city's first and only seaside resort-based wedding chapel early this year on Discovery Bay, Lantau Island. Clad with floor-to-ceiling glass windows, the 16m White Chapel provides a sleek yet idyllic backdrop for weddings with its waterfront location framed by panoramic views of beaches and mountains. Other novel experiences such as a ride on a horse-drawn, open-air carriage or a cruise aboard *The Bounty* can also be arranged.

**Contact** Auberge Discovery Bay Hong Kong; Website: [www.aubergediscoverybay.com](http://www.aubergediscoverybay.com)

## A Hong Kong of yore

**What's the idea?** Ocean Park's recently launched Old Hong Kong zone will double as an unusual venue for couples seeking thematic wedding styles when the destination's wedding package launches this month. Designed to recreate the authentic streets and scenes in the 50s-70s, this zone relives the early days of the territory. Couples even step aboard the heritage tram and savour the sounds and sights of yesteryears.

**Contact** Ocean Park Hong Kong; Website: [www.oceanpark.com.hk](http://www.oceanpark.com.hk)

# Taking hen and stag parties abroad

By Rohit Kaul

While foreign hen and stag parties are gaining popularity in the West, the trend has been rather slow to take off in Asia although India shows the biggest potential in this niche segment.

"The bachelor party segment is still a niche market but growing one. Most of these parties are heading towards countries nearby like Thailand and Singapore even though some prefer to organise parties in Europe too," shared Sanjay Bhasin, CEO of Culture Holidays.

Lower cost, less hassle and attractive venues abroad are strong pull factors, said Indian travel consultants.

Vikas Khanduri, CEO of Viva Voyages, said: "In India the venue cost itself will be, say, equal to taking 100 people abroad. Moreover, there are some great venue options available overseas for such parties."

Iqbal Mulla, president, Travel Agents Association of India, remarked: "Here in any hotel if you want to host a party you need a number of (permits) that create hassles for revellers."

Bhasin added: "The trend of having bachelor parties is catching among the youth of New Delhi, Mumbai and Bengaluru. People from non-metro cities only head overseas for their honeymoons."

However, this trend is less pronounced in other Asian destinations. For Hong Kong, Sunflower Travel Service's business development manager, Jane Young,

said: "We've organised overseas stag/hen parties before but they are all special requests...Such parties are usually organised by our clients themselves."

Meanwhile, Onyx Hospitality Group's spokesperson said: "We see a number of weddings in Amari Palm Reef Samui from the UK and Australia, and these markets are usually keen to celebrate the hen and stag traditions before the wedding event."

Patricia Javier, spokesperson for Shangri-La's Boracay Resort & Spa, said: "Most destination weddings are organised as a week-long affair, filled with daily festivities, including but not limited to a bachelor's party, a SPArty for the bride-to-be with her sisters or girlfriends, a rehearsal dinner, a send-off party, etc."

Added Cristina Macabasco, spokesperson for Fridays Boracay Resort Hotel: "(Hen and stag parties) are not a primary market but provide additional income for F&B and spa."

Gender-oriented packages are one way that resorts could cater to brides-and grooms-to-be. Said YTL Hotels' spokesperson Tracy Khee: "We had done a three-day girls get-together package at Gaya Island Resort in Sabah, which included pampering sessions with a spa experience, a henna artist, manicurist and a bead artist...plus a snorkeling excursion at Malohom Bay." – **additional reporting from Rosa Ocampo, Greg Lowe, S Puvaneswary and Prudence Lui**

services. For those who prefer more privacy, weddings can also be conducted at The Beach House, a three-bedroom villa with its own 16m infinity edge pool – an accommodation type that today has gained popularity for intimate wedding celebrations, cocktail parties, birthdays or anniversaries. The Beach House has also been upgraded with a new 20m terrace with sunbeds, accessible from the master bedroom, which itself has been rearranged for better ocean views.

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Beijing Capital International Airport was ranked the world's second busiest airport in 2012

# More tourists wanted

Beijing's room supply and air links are growing, but foreign arrivals have lagged behind. By **Prudence Lui**

**Arrivals** In 1Q2013, Beijing received 905,000 foreign arrivals and a tourism revenue of US\$930 million – a fall of 11.7 per cent for both indexes. For the first half of the year, Beijing received a total of more than 2.1 million international arrivals, a 14.3 per cent year-on-year drop.

According to Beijing Municipal Commission of Tourism Development (BMCTD), arrivals from Beijing's top five international source markets – the US (368,554), South Korea (179,155), Japan (115,369), Germany (114,853) and the UK (84,178) – have all declined, with Japan recording the sharpest plunge at 54.5 per cent amid the political rows.

**NTO** To arrest the downward trends in tourist arrivals, BMCTD has allocated a RMB1 billion (US\$163 million) budget for tourism development in 2013, with a majority of the funds going towards strengthening Beijing's tourism image through advertisements on TV and media, high-end tourism promotion, as well as training and mega events.

Meanwhile, the Beijing gov-

ernment has implemented a 72-hour visa-free stay policy for tourists from 45 countries transiting through Beijing Capital International Airport (BCIA) since January 1 this year. Visitors are not permitted to leave Beijing for other Chinese cities during their stay and have to depart from Beijing.

**Airlines** Passenger traffic through BCIA hit a record high of 81.9 million in 2012, making it the second busiest airport in the world.

Dragonair CEO, Patrick Yeung, said: "(A busier Beijing Capital International Airport) is a challenge for all airlines operating to and from Beijing as well as other airports which are also experiencing fast growth in air movements."

Air China has stepped up its international network expansion this year, launching four weekly Houston-Beijing flights on B777-300ER aircraft from July 11 and four weekly Beijing-Geneva flights on A330-200 aircraft on May 7.

Several Chinese carriers have registered their interest with the Civil Aviation Administration



"(A busier Beijing Capital International Airport) is a challenge for all airlines operating to and from Beijing as well as other airports which are also experiencing fast growth in air movements."

**Patrick Yeung**  
CEO  
Dragonair

of China to operate new routes. For example, Hainan Airlines has sought approval to start daily Beijing-Boston flights in April 2014 and thrice-weekly Beijing-Bali services during the 2013 winter schedule; Air China has also applied to start daily flights from Beijing to Siem Reap and Phnom Penh from November 2013 and February 2014 respectively.

**Hotels** Jones Lang LaSalle (JLL) recorded Beijing's total internationally branded high-end hotel supply at 32,823 rooms at the end of 2012, with just 682 rooms added during the year. Some 2,605 rooms are expected to enter the market by 2013, but the pace will slow down to 1,706 and 1,193 in 2014 and 2015 respectively.

JLL's senior associate, Tina Jin, added: "From 2012 to 2015, Beijing's hotel room inventory is expected to grow by approximately 21.3 per cent to 38,327 rooms by December 2015."

Following the launch of the 289-room Conrad Beijing in March this year, the 284-room Rosewood Beijing is due to roll out in Q3 and the 309-room New World Beijing Hotel in

October. Meanwhile, new hotels in the 2014 pipeline include Mandarin Oriental, Kempinski Hotel Yanqi and Waldorf Astoria Beijing, while Kempinski is set to introduce two Nuo hotels in the Chinese capital in 2015.

**MICE** In early 2012, Beijing Convention & Visitors Bureau (BCVB) was established by Beijing Tourism Development Committee.

Commenting on the launch of BCVB, Off-site Connections Event Solutions general manager for China, David Ong, said: "MICE is a fast-growing industry. We don't lack infrastructure, money or international brand but we can't produce quality conferences to impress clients from the US and Europe. I hope BCVB would learn from other countries by doing exchange programmes as well as research."

The MICE segment was supposed to fare better this year but business has not picked up as fast as expected, according to Ong.

He added: "We have less traffic this year as China experienced a major slowdown in economic growth and the new political administration has clamped down on government spending."

# Chinese attire, French accent

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*Lobby of Sofitel Wanda Beijing.*

**S**ofitel Wanda Beijing bears all the characteristics of the esteemed Sofitel brand — extraordinary luxury, prime location, full service and exceptional gastronomy. And in this historical Chinese capital, guests will enjoy a cross-cultural experience in modern, refined hospitality that blends the best of France and China.

A perfect fit for discerning international business and leisure travellers, the hotel offers a total of 417 guestrooms, of which 43 are suites that fulfil China's national platinum five-star standard. There are 311 Luxury Rooms and 63 Club Sofitel Luxury Rooms.

The Luxury Rooms feature Sofitel's famous MyBed, free Wi-Fi and high speed internet, luxurious amenities and a comfortable space of 38-46 sqm.

Club Sofitel Luxury Rooms, for those seeking enhanced exclusivity, can be found on the top four floors (levels 23-27). Guests here can make use of the personalised services of Club Sofitel on level 26. These rooms feature a glass wall between the bath room and bedroom that changes from frosted to clear with the flip of a switch.

There are four categories of Suites:

Junior, Prestige, Opera and Imperial. There is only one Imperial Suite. The most prestigious, it is located at the top level (27th floor) and comes with a living room, library, dining room, terrace, a master and second master bedroom, and steam room.

The 27-floor five-star Sofitel Wanda Beijing is located in Beijing's Central Business District, with easy access to the China International Exhibition Centre and popular tourist attractions such as the Forbidden City and Tiananmen Square. It is also 30 minutes' drive to Beijing Capital International Airport via the Airport Expressway and 15 minutes' drive to Beijing Railway Station. The subway station is only five minutes' walk away.

This convenient location means the hotel is suitable for meetings too. Event organisers can choose from 11 function rooms, all on the same floor with natural light. The largest is the pillarless Grand Ballroom. At 1,368 sqm, it accommodates up to 850 people banquet-style and can be partitioned for smaller meetings.

As befits its pedigree, the hotel is also an outstanding destination for fine French dining. Héritage – its French Gastronomic

Restaurant, serves gourmet cuisine by a French chef and an impressive selection of fine wines. For something more casual, the Voyages of International Cuisines, or VIC in short, offers an open-kitchen concept with cuisines inspired by Tokyo, Bombay, Rome and New York, all served by an unmistakable French "savoir faire". Fine Chinese cuisine can be found at Yipin Chinese Restaurant and Old Shanghai and Japanese cuisine at Hyoki.

With such complete services, comfort and convenience, visitors to Beijing couldn't have picked a better hotel to experience the peak of East-West hospitality during their stay in this vibrant, historical city. ■



*Luxury Room Club Sofitel.*



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*The Grand Ballroom.*

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# Feeling the heat from growing competition

Beijing's room rates have hiked in recent years, while second-tier Chinese cities are gaining popularity. By Prudence Lui

**1 Is Beijing seeing stronger competition from other cities and provinces in China?** HRG China assistant deputy general manager, Sara Liu, has observed that clients were increasingly opting for second-tier cities in the past three years, with a significant surge in such requests last year. She said: "A good example is the peak period for annual corporate dinners from November to January – most of our clients are now exploring options in Dongguan, Guangzhou and Chengdu."

"The rising popularity of second-tier cities is also reflected in the demand for flights from first-tier cities, such as the Shanghai-Sanya route. Wuhan, Xiamen and Chengdu are fast emerging as business travel destinations in China," she added.

Said Wessel Krauss, general manager of Hotel Éclat Beijing, which just opened its doors in March this year: "Many of our guests visit Beijing for individual business meetings or (leisure). In comparison with cities such as Chengdu, Beijing is not as aggressive in marketing itself."

**2 How are Beijing's room rates and demand faring?** Jones Lang LaSalle senior associate, Tina Jin, said: "Due to the stable growth of occupancy rates and ADRs in Beijing's five-

**"Many of our guests visit Beijing for individual business meetings or (leisure). In comparison with cities such as Chengdu, Beijing is not as aggressive in marketing itself."**

Wessel Krauss, general manager, Hotel Éclat Beijing

star hotels, RevPAR has continuously increased in recent years, climbing to RMB735 (US\$120) in 2012, showing a year-on-year improvement of 8.6 per cent.

Diaoyutai MGM Hospitality' regional director of sales and marketing, May Chow, shared: "(Rates) are even more expensive during the high seasons...but Beijing is not as expensive as in London, Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan, Seoul and Taipei because the city's mass population provides reasonable labour cost, and room supply is more than de-

mand. (Comparatively), Beijing is affordable."

However, Pacific World Beijing's director of operations for MICE, Y Y Yan, contended: "(Beijing) has become an ex-

pensive destination. A deluxe five-star hotel may cost US\$400 now, doubled what was charged seven or eight years ago. Our source markets are Europe and North America and given their economic situation, their budget hardly covers the whole package.

"It was a very bad year in 2012 for us (and other DMCS), and the situation will be even worse in 2013. But I am not pessimistic and hope things will improve in mid-2014," he added.

Demand growth is expected to be stagnant or even negative

this year as the Chinese government has tightened spending on functions, meetings and overseas travel in the public sector.

According to Horwath HTL, Beijing's market-wide ADR in 1Q2013 declined 1.9 per cent year-on-year. Unsurprisingly, hotels in west Beijing, which rely more heavily on government demand, recorded a bigger ADR drop of 3.5 per cent compared with east Beijing.

**3 What are hotels doing to reach out to the trade better?** For Diaoyutai Hotel Beijing, Lama Temple – opening in 3Q2014 – Chow said that the group would target the domestic market through sales visits, tailor-made programmes and competitive rates. "For the international market, we'll attend trade shows, appoint GSAs and set up remote offices across Asia."

Hotel Éclat Beijing has signed up as a member of Small Luxury Hotels (SLH) to promote itself to relevant operators through the alliance. Tradeshow also play a vital role to reach out to the international trade, Krauss pointed

out. He added: "SLH attended ILTM in Shanghai in June 2013. In addition, we have partners in key markets such as Hong Kong, Russia and Australia. On a domestic level, we also work with travel (consultants) in Shanghai."

**4 What new trends can be observed among Beijing hotels?** Luxury and boutique hotels are a rising trend. China World Hotel, Beijing director of sales and marketing, T S Cheah, said: "More boutique hotels have opened up in Beijing, facilitating the transformation of the capital city into a trendier destination."

Commenting on the addition of Hotel Éclat Beijing to the Chinese capital's boutique scene, Krauss said: "Average room rates in Beijing have not increased significantly since 2012 but we see people are willing to pay for a different hotel experience."

"For the past five years, with the exception of the Olympics, Beijing has not held many major international events which would (otherwise) drive demand for hotel rooms," he added.

## 2013 中国国际旅游交易会 CHINA INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL MART

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- 云南省人民政府

时间: 2013 年 10 月 24 日 (四) 至 10 月 27 日 (日)

地点: 云南省昆明市国际会展中心

规模: 展览面积 50 000 平方米, 预设标准展位 2 000 个

**Hosts:**

- China National Tourism Administration
- Civil Aviation Administration of China
- Yunnan Provincial People's Government

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## Products

## Cultural quarters

## Renaissance Beijing Capital Hotel

The 521-room hotel has launched the R Navigators programme, in which selected employees act as personal guides to guests by offering insiders' tips on places to dine, shop or visit in Beijing. Examples of off-the-radar experiences include a Houhai Hutong tricycle tour led by a guide sharing ghost stories of the historic houses, a cooking class at Black Sesame Kitchen followed by a lunch and Sanlitun bar tour, and the *Amazing Race*-style Navigator Game highlighting local areas such as Today Art Museum, Panjiayuan Antique Market and Pearl Market.



Big Bowl Small Plate provides seats in giant bowl-like booths

**Contact**

Tel: (86-10) 5863-8888  
Website: www.marriott.com

## Big Bowl Small Plate

A design-driven restaurant in Beijing's Sanlitun Village, Big Bowl Small Plate or BBSP is an ideal spot to share meals with family and friends, with booth seats shaped to resemble giant bowls. The simple menu impresses with an array of noodle and rice dishes, which are "neither big nor small" to tantalise taste buds to crave for larger portions. Signature dishes include beef brisket noodle and fried pork fillet drizzled with chef's special sauce. Light desserts such as jasmine

and pomelo cake are also served, with beverage choices ranging from home-made cane juice to fresh soya milk.

**Contact**

Address: NLG-45, Sanlitun Village North, 11 Sanlitun Road, Chaoyang District  
Tel: (86-10) 6416-0880

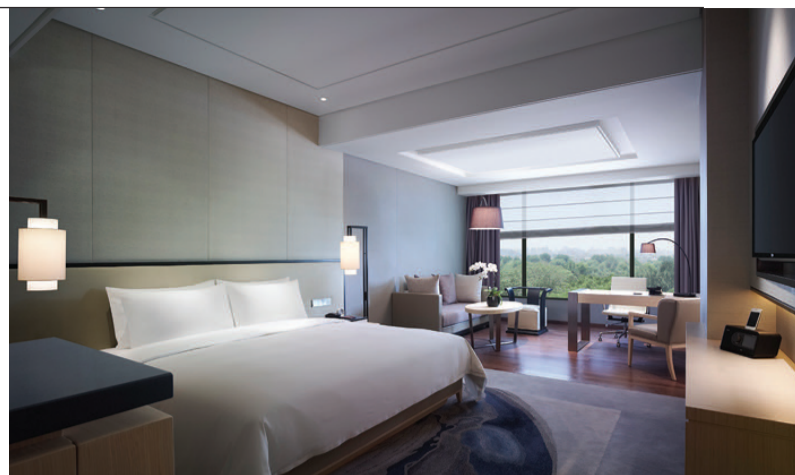
## Transit Restaurant and Lounge

From its beginning at the Gongti hutongs to its relocation to Sanlitun Village North in 2011, Transit Restaurant and Lounge remains one of Beijing's best spots for authentic Sichuan cuisine.

The 70-seat outlet offers must-try cold starters like spicy cold chicken and vinaigrette bamboo tips, braised eggplants in litsea oil, honey ginger baked pork knuckle and stir-fried spicy chicken with pomelo vinaigrette – usually only available in the mountains of Sichuan. There is also a six-metre bar, which doubles as a spot for executive lunches and pre- or post-dinner cocktails.

**Contact**

Address: N4-36, Sanlitun Village North, Sanlitun Road, Chaoyang District



The 309-room New World Beijing Hotel will open its doors in October

Tel: (86-10) 6417-9090

## New World Beijing Hotel

Scheduled to open in October this year, the five-star hotel will feature 309 rooms and suites, with room sizes ranging between 47m<sup>2</sup> for superior rooms to 400m<sup>2</sup> for the exclusive presidential suite. It is home to four dining outlets, including an open-air rooftop bar, an all-day café, a lobby lounge and a 200-seat Chinese restaurant. Other facilities include a health club and spa equipped with a gym, an indoor pool, a sauna and steam rooms, as well as 1,542m<sup>2</sup> of meeting and banquet spaces.

**Contact**

Website: www.beijing.newworldhotels.com

## Kempinski Hotel Beijing Lufthansa Center

The luxury hotel in the Chinese capital has rolled out local discovery experiences for Global Hotel Alliance (GHA) members. Available till the end of this year, the *Backstage at the Peking Opera* programme takes guests to the Li Garden Theatre, offering backstage access for guests to observe the making of the traditional opera, from the makeup process to the end of the show. The three-hour package includes transfers by a BMW limousine and VIP seats during the performance. Non-GHA members have to pay a price to join the tour.

**Contact**

Tel: (86-10) 6465-3388  
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# India's million dollar baby

West Bengal is investing US\$627 million on tourism infrastructure developments, reports **Shekhar Niyogi**

**NTO** West Bengal's tourism authorities is intensifying marketing efforts for several tourism destinations within its borders.

According to chief minister Mamata Banerjee, Darjeeling, Terai and Dooars will be promoted as a tourism circuit, while new attractions will be developed at Rohini, Jorebunglow, Tukdah and Deolo in Darjeeling. A film city at Siliguri in Terai and an entertainment park at Banarhat in Dooars are also coming up.

Some Rs37 billion (US\$627 million) will be spent on infrastructure developments such as the Gajoldoba Tourism Hub, Kolkata Giant Wheel, Sylee Tea Tourism Hub, Kunjanagar Nature and Adventure Park, and to promote ecotourism in Jhadkhal, Sundarbans.

The Rs15 billion Gajoldoba tourism project, 42km from Bagdogra Airport, is said to be attracting interest from international investors. It will have premium and budget hotels, a health and Ayurvedic spa, F&B training school and golf course spread over 20 hectares.

Gajoldoba already houses a safari park in the Baikunthapur forest, and attracts a variety of migratory birds.

The state tourism body is planning multi-city roadshows to showcase its latest *Let's Visit Bengal* campaign.

**Arrivals** West Bengal received 1.4 million international visitors in 2012, or eight per cent of India's total arrivals, making it the sixth top state in terms of arrivals. It had 25 million domestic visitors in 2012, or three per cent of the country's total. Sources estimate international arrivals grew seven per cent in 1H2013. Business travel is also up with increased activity in IT-enabled joint ventures. Average international tourist spend per person per day is said to be US\$300.

**Access** Expansion of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose International Airport was completed in March 2013, doubling its size to 180,000m<sup>2</sup>. The airport can now handle 20 million passengers a year.

Last year it handled 10.6 million passengers, up 12.09 per cent over 2011. There were 272,554 in 1Q2013.

International airlines that fly to Kolkata include Emirates, Qatar Airways, Singapore Airlines, Thai Airways International, Chi-



"West Bengal has all that a tourist would want, but none of the tourist destinations are on par with international standards. Kolkata, its capital and the only international gateway to eastern India, can attract stays of three to four nights if packaged properly."

**Bhagwan Ramnani**  
Director  
Vensimal Leisure Holidays

na Eastern Airlines, Druk Air, AirAsia, Bangladesh Biman, Air India, Jet Airways, SpiceJet, Indigo and GoAir. Dragonair launched flights from Hong Kong on November 3 last year, while Air India turned its twice-weekly service to Yangon to thrice a week from July 18 this year.

**Hotels** There are 1,410 five-star rooms and 1,288 four-star rooms.

The 92-room Park Plaza Kolkata Ballygunge opened in 1Q2013, while the 41-room Tulip Inn opened late last year. Room inventory will be boosted with the opening of the 244-room Lalit Great Eastern in November, the 200-room Taj Gateway next February, 400-room ITC One, 260-room Westin and 165-room JW Marriott in 2Q2014, 250-room Novotel in 3Q2014, and 200-room Courtyard Marriott in the last quarter.

Yet to set their opening dates are the 150-room Best Western Rajarhat, 90-room Eastin Easy Kolkata and 250-room Radisson Blu with a conference centre.

Meanwhile, private investors are converting four heritage buildings in Jhargram, Mahishadal, Panchkat and Wazil Manzil into hotels, and new pro-

jects are slated in Datura, Baluka Bheel, Digha and Salt Lake.

**Rates** The Average Room Rate (ARR) in the first quarter was US\$136 in the five-star segment and the average occupancy rate (AOR) was 76 per cent. ARR fell in 2Q2013 to US\$128 and AOR to 71 per cent.

**Festivals** Durga Puja, celebrated by the predominant Bengali population of Kolkata over four days every autumn in October, is not to be missed. It offers overseas visitors an opportunity to see how the locals celebrate the goddess Durga through community feasts at various sites across the city. The city is normally shut down for a week as crowds stream onto the city streets in joyful abandon.

Travellers should also mark their calendars for Holi, the spring festival of colour. Merry locals smear each other with coloured dust or drench fellow revelers with coloured water.

Come January, Kolkata's landmark Book Fair is held, drawing throngs of avid readers who visit the fairground to browse and buy books, attend panel discussions and book launches, and socialise.

## Products

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## Best Western grows in greater Jakarta

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

Best Western International (BWI) has continued its rapid expansion in Indonesia with the signing of a hotel in the bustling business hub of Tangerang, West Java. Set to open in the fourth quarter of 2013, the new BEST WESTERN Serpong adds 196 rooms and suites to our collection in the West Java area. And this is just the start of our expansion plans; BWI currently operates one hotel in the Indonesian capital, the BEST WESTERN Mangga Dua Hotel & Residence, but we are planning to launch at least seven more properties in the area between now and 2015. Overall, BWI's Indonesian portfolio is expected to increase from five to almost 25 hotels in the coming years.



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## The Salt Spa

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## Contact

Tel: (91-1-800) 108-300  
Email: support@groupon.co.in

## Nyon Yang

A rare addition to the culinary treasure trove of Kolkata, this 44-seat restaurant is housed on the first floor of new hotel Park Plaza Kolkata and serves a wide range of Asian delicacies. While its Cantonese chef stays true to tradition by whipping up authentic Cantonese dishes, the introduction of Peranakan cuisine for the first time in this city – perhaps also a first in the country – is a pleasant surprise. Peranakan favourites such as *Babi Pongteh* (braised pork), *Tum Bebek* (Malaysian minced duck in banana leaf) and *Kukus Tahu* (steamed tofu with ginger and



Sink your teeth into exquisite dim sum at The Flying Monk

leek) are runaway favourites with diners, even though the *Laksa Lemak* and *Satay Ayam* are just as mouth-watering.

## Contact

Tel: (91-33) 4040-9999  
Website:  
www.parkplaza.com/kolkatain

## Club Prana

This oasis for the visitor located at Hyatt Regency Kolkata is the city's first holistic spa and rejuvenation facility. It offers a selection of international and traditional treatments by a trained team of therapists. This 920m<sup>2</sup> wellness centre comprises seven Massage Suites, a 202.4m<sup>2</sup> fully equipped gymnasium featuring the latest cardiovascular equipment, separate spas for men and women, a jogging track, squash and tennis courts, a unisex salon, and a large landscaped swimming pool.

## Contact

Tel: (91-33) 2335-1234  
Email:  
india.reservations@hyatt.com

## Pan Asian

One of India's finest Asian restaurants, the 145-seat Pan Asian in ITC Sonar Kolkata offers a variety of dishes, ranging from

Japanese teppanyaki and yakitori to Korean barbecues and hotpots, and from Chinese- and Thai-style stir-fry to Mongolian brazier. Featuring interactive kitchens, the restaurant embodies the spirit of East and South-east Asia. The master chefs and sommeliers are on standby for discussion with guests on their preferences and to offer suggestions.

## Contact

Tel: (9133) 2345-4545  
Email: reservations.itcsonar@itchotels.in

## The Flying Monk

This new 72-seat restaurant offers dim sum as its specialty. Located in a busy shopping and commercial neighbourhood in Kolkata, its homely atmosphere is a pleasant change from the more formal restaurants in the city. The service staff is friendly, while the food is excellent. Executive chef Swatantra Verma personally attends to guests to understand their preferences and suggest dishes that will leave them craving for more. Norwegian salmon in burnt lotus leaf, teriyaki duck breast, and seaweed and potato croquettes with

panko crumbs are some of the best picks on the menu.

## Contact

Tel: (9133) 4001-1414  
Email: reach@theflyingmonk.in

## Kolkata helicopter tour

West Bengal Tourism has kicked off a helicopter tour of historic Kolkata from June 19 this year. Visitors can choose from two 10-minute rides at 16.00 and 17.00 daily and an additional flight at 11.00 on Sundays, taking off from Behala Flying Club in the southern fringe of the city. Price per person is Rs1,700 (US\$27.83). The facility will embark on an expansion soon, with the addition of more helicopters by 2Q 2014.

## Contact

Tel: (91-33) 4401-2659-62  
Email:  
visitwestbengal@yahoo.co.in

## Itachuna Rajbari

This heritage homestay property was a regal abode built in 1766. It has been refurbished to its original splendour recently. A two-hour drive from Kolkata, its 10 guestrooms and one suite offer an ideal weekend getaway that allows one to embrace nature in a rural landscape, yet avail of all the comforts of modern living. Local Bengali cuisine is served the traditional way, with dishes cooked according to recipes handed down by generations of an illustrious family, interspersed with European settlers' influence in the region. Tribal music, dance performances and open-air barbecues are available on request. Other options include kite-flying and a night walk through the village.

## Contact

Tel: (91) 98-3014-2389,  
98-3104-9816  
Email:  
info@itachunarajbari.com



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Michal Barszap, President/CEO of ITS Tours, Meetings & Incentives, USA

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Agnieszka Kaminska, Project Manager of Impuls Travel, Poland

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