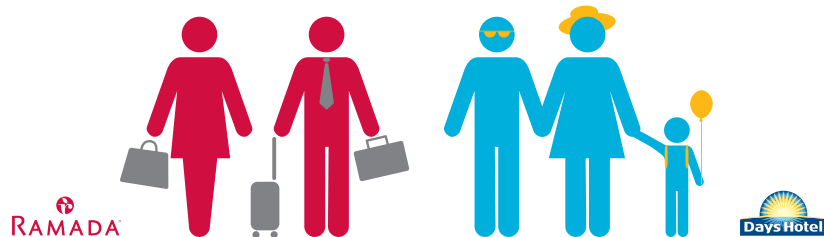


Business or Pleasure?



TTG

A S I A

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Business Travel

Asia's economic stars

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Ports of call

Harboursing cruise hopes

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China

Rising MICE ambitions

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After three decades of climbing the industry rungs, Arthur Kiong, CEO, Far East Hospitality, has reached the top spot as CEO of a hotel management group. Watch him build a 'Singapore-inspired hospitality brand'. By **Raini Hamdi** – see page 6

Made in S'pore



Vying for Muslims

More Japanese service providers are donning the halal badge

By **S Puvanewary**

KUALA LUMPUR Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO) is ramping up its focus on Muslim tourists from South-east Asia to boost tourism arrivals and assist the country's recovery from the March 2011 earthquake.

According to JNTO Singapore office manager, Susan Maria Ong, efforts to attract more Muslim travellers from Malaysia and Indonesia this year include conducting product briefings for travel consultants and organising media and trade fam trips to showcase Japan's readiness.

Last month, JNTO published the *Japan Travel Guide for Muslim Visitors*, highlighting Muslim-friendly restaurants, mosques, attractions and Muslim organisations in the country.

The Kanagawa Prefecture has also embarked on a similar ini-

tiative with the launch of a travel guidebook for Muslim travellers.

Kasmah Hidzir, secretary of the Kanagawa Prefecture representative office in Singapore, expects the booklet to help raise



Sato: a Muslim prayer room

Muslim tourists' comfort levels during their travels. He explained: "Muslim travellers are not comfortable with *onsen* baths as they think they need to be nude. So we point them to the famed Yunessun Spa Resort in Kanagawa, which only allows those wearing swimsuits to enter."

Following a fam trip for 20 Indonesian consultants in April 2012, the prefecture will organise another one for the Malaysian travel trade this year.

Japan Travel Bureau (Malaysia) senior manager, outbound division, Shen Nordin, observed that the company's new Muslim holiday packages to Osaka and

Tokyo were met with "surprising" response. He said: "We will maintain our Muslim packages for conservative Muslims. Liberal Muslims were attracted to regular packages, and we want to improvise our regular packages to cater to all races and make it more Muslim friendly."

A growing number of Japanese restaurants are seeking halal certification, observed Malaysia Halal Corporation (MHC) managing director, Akmal Abu Hassan. He said: "Last December, after we issued a halal certificate to Kamori Rusutsu Resort in Hokkaido, it received 260 Muslim tourists from Malaysia that month."

Since its establishment in 2010, MHC has issued halal certificates to nine restaurants in Japan so far; just last year alone, five Japanese restaurants were awarded the certification.

Several Japanese suppliers

Continued on page 3

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(as of April 2, 2013)

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- 3 Indonesian travellers still booking offline
- 4 Visitors to Singapore spent most on transport related expenditure
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- 6 Destination Asia's B2B booking engine goes live
- 7 Third KidZania in South-east Asia brings edutainment to Bangkok
- 8 Worldhotels partners Tauzia for branded hotels in Indonesia
- 9 Malaysian travellers go beyond traditional holiday hotspots
- 10 Centara unveils second Maldives resort

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Rising baht spurs outbound travel for Thais

By **Xinyi Liang-Pholsena**

BANGKOK Bolstered by a strengthening Thai currency as the local economy surges ahead, 2013 is set to be a growth year for outbound travel.

The Thai baht has appreciated more than four per cent against the US dollar from early this year, reaching its highest level in more than five years in mid-March, while also rising strongly against regional currencies.

Several tour operators that *TTG Asia* spoke to have already observed an upswing in demand, with Asian destinations like Japan and China leading the pack.

Said A-Sky Tour managing director, Anon Suvichagorn:

"Since late February when the school holidays started, we noted a 20 per cent increase in advance bookings for overseas tours."

At Micko Travel, which recorded a 10-20 per cent hike in bookings in the first quarter, general manager, Sumalee Chomsri, added: "The strengthening baht gives Thais more purchasing power during their overseas trips as the yen and yuan have dipped quite a bit since Songkran last year, hence Japan and China have become popular outbound destinations. Interest in South-east Asia is also holding up."

Similar trends are also observed at AA Travel Service. Said president, Sanguan Phornprathipdeva: "Japan has become more affordable for Thais...It also

helps that the Japanese tourism authorities are rolling out a lot of promotions."

Outbound demand from Thailand to Europe, particularly Italy and France, is likely to gather pace as summer approaches, predicted Sanguan.

Thailand Tourism Council president, Piyaman Tejapaibul, is expecting outbound travel to grow even more this year, partly due to pent-up consumer demand in the wake of the 2011 flood. "This year, we're expecting a 10 per cent growth in outbound travel from Thailand, as well as a 10 per cent increase in overseas spending from 140 billion baht (US\$4.8 billion) last year," she said.

According to Piyaman, the

number of Thai outbound tourists grew five per cent to 7.6 million last year from 7.2 million in 2011.

However, Thai Travel Agents Association (TTAA), president, Suthipong Pheunphiphop, has not observed a significant impact of the strong baht on outbound travel demand yet, if judging by the response during TTAA's recent Thai International Travel Fair in mid-February.

He said: "The Thai baht only started appreciating early this year but packages were sold several months ahead of the peak travel period from March to May."

"But if the Thai baht continues to go up, I expect the impact to be more pronounced after May when tour operators are likely to offer cheaper packages to attract more Thais to travel abroad after the peak season."

Not attractive enough

Investors urge clearer policies, better infrastructure in Indonesia’s secondary cities

By Mimi Hudoyo

JAKARTA While Indonesia is expecting robust hotel development in the next few years, it still needs to create a more conducive climate for foreign investors to invest in destinations beyond Jakarta and Bali.

Speaking during his keynote address at the recent Hospitality Investment World Indonesia conference in Jakarta, Indonesia’s vice minister of tourism and creative economy, Sapta Nirwandar, urged hotel investors and operators to “develop star-rated hotels in other parts of the country”.

Areas opening for tourism investment include Sabang (Aceh), Lake Toba (North Sumatra), Bintan (Riau), Belitung (Bangka-Belitung), Tanjung Lesung (Banten), Bugam Raya (Central Kalimantan), Mandalika (West Nusa Tenggara) and Wakatobi (South-east Sulawesi), Sapta added.

According to figures from STR Global, Indonesia has the third most active pipeline in Asia-Pacific with 251 hotels (27,883 rooms), representing a 22.5 per cent supply growth in the next four years.

However, data from the Indonesia Investment Coordinating Board (BKPM) showed that the majority of direct foreign investment last year was in Jakarta (US\$370 million) and Bali (US\$276 million), followed by West Nusa Tenggara,



Steinmeyer: facilities is key

ever-elusive human resource issue. Skilled workers and managers will become scarcer as more hotels are built.”

Financing is another issue. Although banks in Indonesia are opening up to financing hotel projects, they are still extremely cautious, Rio opined.

Foreign investors are also reluctant to enter secondary and tertiary cities as the average daily rates and yields are still low.

Tauzia Hotel Management, president director, Marc Steinmeyer, said: “Developing a new destination takes time. Foreign investment usually will come when a destination matures...Even Bali’s Nusa Dua area took many years to mature.

“Instead of focusing on many new destinations at the same time, the government should focus on developing infrastructure and facilities in the main destinations like

West Java and Banten.

Horwath HTL director, Rio Kondo, said: “Foreign investors are still uncertain about (varying) government regulations, especially at the regency levels.

“Infrastructure challenges are quite obvious, as well as the

Jakarta and Bali to attract more foreign investment and arrivals. Once arrivals increase to 12 or 15 million, people will travel to other destinations.”

Another way to catalyse regional development, Steinmeyer suggested, was to adopt an open skies policy, allowing airlines to enter different parts of Indonesia, paving the way for new destinations and investment.

Said BKPM director for sectors investment promotion, Ikmal Lukman: “The government has placed investment as an important pillar of economic growth. We are not relying on consumption and are trying to push investment instead.”

As a result of the investment-friendly policies developed by BKPM, such as simplifying business start-up and licensing procedures as well as providing tax allowances, direct foreign investment in the tourism industry in 2012 grew almost threefold since 2011, from Rp3.8 trillion (US\$394.7 million) to Rp10.3 trillion, which represents 87 per cent of total tourism investment last year, according to Ikmal.

Based on Horwath HTL data, foreign investment in hotels and restaurants in Indonesia rose from US\$250 million in 2011 to almost US\$800 million last year.

TTG Travel Pursuits

Compiled by The Fox

QUIZ

1. What is the name of the Malaysia/Indonesia-owned airline which has just started flying?
 2. Which hotel claims to have the highest hotel bar in the world?
 3. Which Asian destination uses the word ‘Incredible’ as part of its marketing slogan?
 4. History: Japan Airlines established a separate airline to fly Japan-Taiwan. What was its name?
1. Malindo Air. Owned 51% by Malaysia's National Aerospace and Defence Industries and 49% by Indonesia's Lion Air.
2. The appropriately named Ozone in the Ritz-Carlton, Hong Kong on the 118th floor.
3. Incredible India, started in 2002.
4. Japan Asia Airways. Started in 1975; merged into its parent company in 2008.

Humour

LetterLite

A light-hearted section where we take a word, alter it by adding, subtracting or changing just one letter – and giving it a new definition:

- Jemstar. Sparkling new low-fare airline.
- EThad. Airline planning outer-space flights.
- Dali. Island destination in Indonesia favoured by famous painters.

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Nature attractions soften Singapore's city vibe

Travel trade welcomes River Safari opening, but still don't see nature-focused packages as viable

By Lee Pei Qi

SINGAPORE The arrival of several nature-based attractions will complement Singapore's existing portfolio of attractions, but is unlikely to be enough to sell the country as a nature destination, said travel consultants.

Situated at Mandai between the Singapore Zoo and Night Safari, the River Safari – which just soft opened on April 3 – is part of the Singapore government's plan to develop the Mandai area as a nature tourism hub.

The river-themed park is the latest in a string of nature-based attractions to open in highly urbanised Singapore. Others like the Marine Life Park in Resorts World



Lee: greater diversity

Sentosa and Gardens by the Bay also debuted last year.

Star Holiday Mart, managing director, Dennis Law, said: "These new nature-based spots will enhance Singapore's image as an eco-friendly place and not just a city

destination.

"But it will not be feasible to use (nature) to solely attract tourists. These new places can only complement all our current attractions, (offering) a win-win situation for existing and new ones."

Eco Adventures Worldwide Singapore, managing director, Timothy Tan, added: "Such new nature-based spots will add diversity to our small place and can appeal to the nature fanatics."

However, it is unlikely that fully nature-based packages will take off because travellers still "want a bit of everything" in Singapore, he explained.

"New attractions always arouse the curiosity of travellers," said Jane Teo, general manager of Green Holidays, who noted that the bulk of her travellers often request

for family-friendly packages, which now comprise the Marine Life Park and Gardens by the Bay.

As for the creation of a purely nature-based package, she said: "It may be a good-to-have but it is not really a focus for us because our customers mostly still

want the best of all attractions."

Luxury Tours & Travel Singapore's director, Michael Lee, agreed that such attractions will not translate into new packages, but will allow for more diversity in tour offerings.

In addition, he also warned of the

growing competition between attractions. Lee said: "We see traffic from older existing attractions moving over to the new hotspots."

"It is important for the attractions, especially the older ones, to stay competitive if they want to retain their guests."

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Continued from page 1

Muslim-friendly stops

that *TTG Asia* spoke to during the recent MATTA Fair in Kuala Lumpur in mid-March also expressed their interest in rolling out Muslim-friendly products.

Don Quijote, which operates the 24-hour discount stores of the same name across Japan, now provides labels on non-halal food and is in the process of selecting food items for a soon-to-debut Muslim-friendly section in its stores, revealed Kazuhiko Tahara, business headquarters sub manager, inbound business team.

He explained: "We want to do our bit to grow the Muslim travel segment into Japan, which we see as having growth potential and is already on the rise."

Meanwhile, Universal Studios Japan is considering the installation of a Muslim prayer room within its property due to the rising number of Muslims from the Middle East and South-east Asia, said sales executive – international sales, Tommy Sato.

In 2012, Japan welcomed about 8.4 million international tourists, an increase of 34.6 per cent from the year before. Despite the surge in numbers, international tourist arrivals have yet to fully recover to the 2010 level of 8.6 million.



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Haven't been to our website?

Here's what you've missed

Tourism Data

Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines dominate the top 10 island destinations in Asia, with Thailand's Koh Tao being the sole Asian representative in international rankings; the Philippines secured a record number of arrivals for the first two months of the year, posting 854,187 visitors in January and February 2013

Hot Moves

Marcus Bauder has stepped up as hotel manager of Mandarin Oriental, Bangkok; Hugo Gerritsen is now area general manager of Dorsett Grand Subang and Dorsett Grand Labuan, and Alfred Paulsen is general manager of Dorsett Grand Labuan; Myanmar Tourism Federation has named Peter Tay tourism ambassador of Myanmar for Singapore



From left: Hugo Gerritsen, Alfred Paulsen, Peter Tay

Hot Deals

Accredited tour and media professionals can take advantage of discounts from over 400 travel operators under Tourism New Zealand's Explore New Zealand programme; Mediterra, a tour operator and wholesaler specialising in Mediterranean itineraries, is offering travel consultants a six-day fam trip to Turkey



Compete on experience

Our team had a recent teambuilding activity at Food Playground, a six-month-old cooking studio in Singapore that serves up cultural cooking classes to leisure travellers and caters for corporate events.

While such studios are not all that uncommon in Singapore, I was impressed by managing director Daniel Tan's emphasis on local recipes – a deliberate attempt to showcase Singapore's rich food heritage to foreign visitors whether through *satay* or *onde onde*. Even Food Playground's location – in a restored shophouse near one of the city's colourful cultural precincts – was smartly chosen.

If you ask me, it is experiences like these that travel consultants should incorporate into their offerings. Whether travelling as part of a group series or free and easy, tourists these days crave unique memories they can pack home with them, especially for a mature destination like Singapore where many boast of having been more than once.

Singapore has been lucky in the last few years, with attractions rolling in one after the other since the rise of the integrated resorts. The opening of the mega projects in phases means that the country has been receiving a steady flow of new products, from an ArtScience museum to a Marine Life Park. The once urban-centric destination can also now brandish several nature options like Gardens by the Bay and newest kid on the block, River Safari.

But yet it is never really about the number of attractions that one has but how creatively they are packaged. Which is why I am surprised that none of the travel experts interviewed (see page 3) expressed interest in creating a customised itinerary for nature lovers based on Singapore's recent openings. The irony is that as I write this, today's front page story in the local broadsheet is of how the country may soon be getting its first UNESCO World Heritage Site thanks to the 154-year-old Botanic Gardens.

Sure, the bulk of travellers may continue to demand packages that



TTG Asia Media's editorial and sales teams whipped up curry chicken and *roti jala*

allow them to see "a bit of everything", but given that the goal these days is to work towards attracting discerning guests who seek differentiated experiences, sticking with the status quo is antiquated.

In fact, hoteliers seem to have taken this challenge more seriously. How many brands or properties have launched their own insider/live like a local experiences, targeting guests who want to be fully immersed in the destination? Hotels recognise that it is no longer about the hardware, and it is a scary thought that they might do such a great job at providing experience-oriented stays that day trips by local tour operators may no longer be needed.

The travel trade should really take a cue from tourism boards and look beyond the mass market. As part of its push for high yield, the Singapore Tourism Board has announced a new Kickstart Fund with an initial funding of S\$5 million (US\$4 million) to support lifestyle concepts with strong tourism potential and scalability.

And it is not just Singapore that's going for spend. Malaysia, too, is increasingly gunning for upmarket business, joined also by Indonesia and Thailand, whose buzzwords now are "niche" or "special interest". Culinary, golf, nature and ecotourism, and health and wellness are just some examples.

Oh, and by the way, the last I checked, Food Playground was ranked fourth out of Singapore's 279 attractions listed on TripAdvisor, which just goes to prove how much interest there is in such a product.



Gracia Chiang
Deputy Group Editor and
TTG Asia Editor

Most commented on www.ttgasia.com

High-speed railway in Thailand gets green light

On Thailand's plans for a trans-national high-speed rail, Charles William Morgan, Jr in South Korea said: "This is an excellent plan! However, Thailand is a committed member of the Trans-Asian Railway programme. The line from Bangkok through Cambodia to Ho Chi Minh City is an integral part of the network! Why is this segment totally ignored?"

Tips on how to make profit (while keeping staff happy too)

In response to Giovanni Angelini's column, Dorian Harris from the UK said: "I'm amazed to hear anyone still recommending rate parity. It is under investigation by the competition authorities in the UK, Switzerland and Germany and there are 31 class actions in the US against hotels insisting on rate parity. Has this news not reached Asia?"

Malindo Air bumps up capacity to East M'sia

Sandy from Sarawak left a comment on our article, giving the thumbs up to Malindo Air's new flights to Kota Kinabalu and Sarawak. "This is good news for us East Malaysians, and this will definitely improve East Malaysia's, especially Sarawak's, tourism business. Hoteliers in Sibul have been lamenting for many months now the lack of direct flights to Sibul. Hopefully, these direct flights will improve their hotel occupancies."

China pushes for paid leave system to facilitate holiday travel

MB Khadka from Kathmandu said: "It is good to hear that China is planning to (enforce) a paid leave system, increase funding to expand tourism infrastructure, improve service standards and add tourism product supply."

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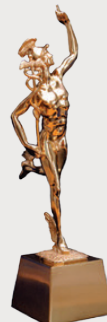
Travel Hall of Fame

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

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

- 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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Arthur Kiong, CEO
Far East Hospitality (FEH)
Singapore

After three decades of climbing the industry rungs, Kiong has reached the top spot as CEO of a hotel management group. Watch him build a 'Singapore-inspired hospitality brand'. By Raini Hamdi

Made in S'pore

Now that you are CEO, you can do things the way you feel they should be done, achieve dreams you've always longed for.

Those were exactly the thoughts that went through my mind when I considered this opportunity. At the top end, how many people in their careers have an opportunity to create a proprietary hospitality brand? And should one be given the chance, what would this brand be, how

do you articulate it, how do you rally others to say, 'yes, that resonates with me'?

And what proprietary hotel brand have you always dreamed of?

I've always dreamed of building a homegrown, world-class brand of hospitality which is Singapore-inspired, which I think will differentiate us.

Everyone says 'we are Asian hospitality'. But in reality there is no 'one Asia'; Koreans are different from Chinese or Thais. As a Singapore homegrown company, Singapore-inspired hospitality is what I want to deliver.

What is Singapore-inspired hospitality?

I thought of three words: kind, assertive and perceptive, i.e. observe and adapt what's relevant.

I draw parallels of the Singapore story with us as an upstart. When Singapore first started, one man (Lee Kuan Yew) said this was all we've got and we have to make a success of it. We have a disparate group of people

– Chinese, Malays, Indians, and Eurasians – and we must be inclusive. Pragmatism and striving for excellence are important.

How are you planning to translate this into a hotel brand promise?

I've come up with 10 core values under the acronym ACTOR'S CODE because this is how we are going to act: according to a set of principles that defines and differentiates us.

A is for attitude. If you think about it, Singapore is an attitude. It's small with no natural resources but it not only wants to survive but compete with the best. We're the same.

C is for customers. We strive to provide something that international hotel chains say, 'hey, maybe they do this better'.

T is for team. Just like Singapore integrates its four races, we have to break down the silos, so it's not departments versus departments, hotels versus hotels, but one cohesive team.

O is for others, i.e. we focus on the strengths of others and make their weaknesses irrelevant.

R is for responsiveness, S for savviness.

As for CODE, C is for change, which is constant, so people cannot hang on to old mindsets. O is for observation – we learn by observing. D is about delegation; when we delegate, we must ensure the person has the skills, autonomy and purpose to do the task. And lastly E is to engender trust.

Singapore's hotel industry is 50 years old and Singapore's success is admired globally. But few, if any, local chains have trumped the connection. Why is that so?

Their starting point is different. Many local chains benchmark against Western chains and seek to emulate them. But if we've come of age, shouldn't we be asking, 'who is our customer, who am I'?

Westerners eat with six cutlery and six wine glasses, and that becomes the definitive standard which we aspire to. Why not evolve from the banana leaf and redefine the meal? The lens then changes from a Western perspective to a local perspective.

You were with Far East Organi-

zation (FEO) heading its then new Hotel Division from 2005-2008. You returned last year to drive FEH, which is part of FEO's recently launched REIT. How different is the game now?

When I first joined, the brief was different; it was to consolidate five disparate hotels, and eventually the service residences, into a division. It was an organisation challenge.

Is it a new game? Yes and no. No, because I understand the organisation, people and circum-

"Many local chains benchmark against Western chains. But if we've come of age, shouldn't we (question that)?"

stances. Yes, because the REIT offers resources and opportunities.

Because of the REIT are you under pressure to grow quickly?

Yes, of course, the REIT was incredibly successful and with the price being decent, there's a lot of enthusiasm. We also have a lot of suitors knocking on our doors for our hospitality management business. But it's for us to manage this and not be fools rushing in. We must be clear about who we are, and who we are is this: we are business people in a people business. Our development strategy is first through the EBIT yield of the site – is it sustainable? A hotelier's way might be through product, facilities, level of service, then finding the customer for it. That's not us.

Who, apart from Straits Trading, are the suitors?

Rendezvous, Toga in Australia – for every two we're talking to, many are calling for a date. The danger is to be flattered and tempted into dating everyone, and before you know it, lose focus. No, we want to stay on track with our geographic and market focus and add value.

What's your geographic and market focus?

We will grow in a disciplined manner, with Singapore as our primary focus, followed by South-east Asia, then balance the high growth and high risk of South-east Asia with Australia, which is transparent, predictable but has a different cycle. And after that, cast our eyes on Asia.

Our market is the upper mid-tier and, again, we must be disciplined. The upper mid-tier is itself a broad market, so we must be able to niche the sub-segments and define our brands clearly. Others may want to provide more and more; we want to provide what is relevant in the most elegant manner, comfort without excess that people don't want to pay for.

Many people say your brands are a mishmash and confusing.

The priority is to consolidate everything under a master brand, FEH, which is the largest operator of hotels and service residences in Singapore. It's the orchid if you like and from one stem, there can be different flowers – Oasia, Quincy, Village, etc. As I said, the upper mid-tier is itself a broad market. Oasia is for efficient, sharp, business people; Quincy is for the fashionistas; Village for those seeking local flavours. None of them want to overpay. All want comfort and don't want to pay for the excesses.

So phase one, which we will embark on this year, is creating a strong master brand, FEH.

Are you only into management contracts?

FEH manages, Far East Orchard can invest or take an equity stake, and FEO (of which Kiong is executive director) has the resources/expertise to build and design.

What was your biggest challenge in the past six months?

Getting buy-in to the Singapore-inspired vision. To articulate it so everyone understands it is itself a challenge, then communicating it, getting them to believe in it and seeing it have a life of its own. I don't write the screenplay. I come up with the outline and we write it together. And in the end, we must be able to measure it through financial results and improved customer reviews. If not, we're just believing our own hubris, we're just on an ego trip.



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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

[ACTIVITIES]



1 Star experiences at Disneyland
This year, Hong Kong Disneyland’s popular Star Guest programme will feature interactive experiences revolving around princesses and monsters. With activities like the Royal Princess Dinner, Feel-Like-A-Princess Spa Vacation and Princess Makeover Party,

guests of all ages can indulge in the ultimate royal experience. Fans of the *Monsters, Inc.* movie can also take part in the very first MonSTAR Tour and Junior MonSTAR Chef Training. The programme runs until May 19.

2 Soak in the wild at River Safari
Singapore’s river-themed wildlife park has soft opened, with the giant panda







forest as one of the park’s main attractions. Spanning 12 hectares, there are over 150 plant species and 300 animal species in eight river habitats including the Mississippi, Nile and Amazon rivers. Its Amazon Flooded Forest has also been described as the world’s largest freshwater aquarium. Riverboat rides and other exhibits will open at a later date.

3 Edutainment for kids at KidZania
The largest KidZania in Asia has opened its doors at Siam Paragon in Bangkok, the third in South-east Asia after Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur. The KidZania concept blends entertainment and education in realistic, interactive cities where children can role play any of 80



careers in 65 establishments such as a bank or restaurant. They can climb into a real Boeing 737 fuselage and cockpit for a test flight, for example. Unique to KidZania Bangkok, guests can explore the Green Tea Factory or Drinking Water Research Center.

[HOTELS]

Dorsett Singapore	Hansar Samui	Sofitel Philippine Plaza	Centara Ras Fushi Resort & Spa Maldives
 <p>Dorsett International has soft opened a midscale hotel in Singapore. Located above Outram Park MRT and close to the Chinatown area, the 285-room Dorsett Singapore features guestrooms and loft rooms equipped with free high-speed Internet access, cable TV access, a posturepedic mattress and an iPhone/iPad docking system.</p>	 <p>Expectant parents can treat themselves to Hansar Samui’s new Babymoon Package, which includes a three-night stay in a Sea View XL or Beachfront room, daily breakfast, a romantic private dinner for two, spa treatments and a baby gift set, comprising Luxsa shampoo and body wash, calming oil, baby soap bar and soft toys.</p>	 <p>Sofitel Philippine Plaza has opened its own in-house aesthetic centre. Vietura is a 20-room facility offering a range of customisable programmes including face contouring, body sculpting, weight management, and remedies for complexion problems and digestive disorders. On staff are nurses, a dietician and a lifestyle coach.</p>	 <p>The Thai hotel group has opened its second resort in the Maldives, offering 140 suites and villas. Guests can choose from beach or water villas, both of which have the option of an outdoor Jacuzzi. There are four dining outlets, serving cuisine ranging from Arabian to Italian, while on site are also a spa, and watersports and PADI dive centre.</p>

[TRANSPORT]

Garuda pumps up Australian capacity
Indonesia’s national airline will offer increased access between Bali and Australia through its new route to Brisbane and greater frequencies for services to Melbourne.
On April 1, Garuda Indonesia upped the number of flights linking Denpasar and Melbourne by two a week, running daily services between the two destinations. Beginning August 1, Garuda will also operate daily flights between Brisbane and Denpasar on a Boeing

737-800 Next Generation with 162 seats. Travellers can also transfer to connecting flights to reach Jakarta from Bali.
THAI Smile adds five routes
Thai Airways International’s sub-brand, THAI Smile, kicked off three new routes to India, and one each to Malaysia and Myanmar from March 31. The carrier began five weekly flights between Bangkok and Mandalay and twice-weekly flights between Bangkok and Ahmedabad on March 31. It also commenced twice-weekly Phuket-New

Delhi flights on April 1, four weekly Phuket-Kuala Lumpur flights on April 2 and twice-weekly Phuket-Mumbai flights on April 3.
Malindo Air launches East M’sia flights
New Kuala Lumpur-based carrier Malindo Air commenced thrice-daily services to Kota Kinabalu on March 22 and four-times-daily services to Kuching the next day on a 180-seater Boeing 737-900ER aircraft. A joint venture between Malaysia’s National Aerospace & Defence Industries and Indonesia’s Lion Air, the self-proclaimed hybrid airline offers low fares coupled with services usually associated with full-service airlines such as refreshments, 45-inch seats in business class and 32-inch seats in economy. Other international destinations such as Trichy, New Delhi, Hong Kong, Guangzhou and Shenzhen are also on the cards.

[TECHNOLOGY]
Travelport has rolled out the Travelport Smartpoint App, a software upgrade for the Worldspan Go! Desktop.
The application infuses the cryptic environment with a mix of native and point-and-click navigation, plus graphical user interfaces to speed up the reservation process, reduce call handling time and improve user experience. The result is that training needs are cut down, while productivity and customer service are boosted.
Time-saving features include an interactive calendar that allows travel consultants to search and shop flights, hotels and car rentals directly from the calendar; alerts when queues are updated; a smart panel where flight details are pre-populated, and graphical maps and images help to identify the best hotel and car rental options; as well as multiple tabs that enable several searches to be conducted at the same time, while retaining all information.



Asia's economic stars

Here are our picks of cities across the region that are emerging as bright spots for corporate travellers

[PHILIPPINES]

By Marianne Carandang

DAVAO

WHY IT'S BOOMING A thriving agribusiness centre and exporter, Davao is home to multinational food companies like Dole, and is an up-and-coming ICT hub, particularly for business process outsourcing (BPO) and software solutions. Business travellers hail from Singapore, the US and, increasingly, from South Korea.

ACCESS/ACCOMMODATION

Davao is linked by flights to Manila, Cebu and Clark international airports, but remains hobbled by a lack of crucial regional connections to Singapore and Malaysia.

According to the Philippine Department of Tourism (DoT) Region XI director, Art Boncato, Davao City has about 7,000 rooms and 10,000 rooms in the Davao Region. The 186-room Seda Abreeza and the 204-room Park Inn by Radisson Davao are recent additions to the city. Average room rates in the city's top-tier hotels hover around PHP3,000 (US\$73); on Samal Island, a resort and medium-sized meetings destination, the average room rate at Pearl Farm Beach Resort is PHP6,500.

Major hotels such as the Waterfront, Royal Mandaya, Apo View and Marco Polo can handle about 200-250 pax in their MICE facilities. At Samal Island, Pearl Farm can accommodate 80-250 pax at its meetings and events venues.

Davao's appeal as a MICE destination is set to rise, especially with the opening of the 7,835m² SMX Convention Center Davao in SM Lanang Premier in December 2012. Located just 2.5km

from Francisco Bangoy International Airport, SMX Davao hosted about 500 participants during the Philippine MICE Convention 2013 in March.

LIFESTYLE ASPECTS Davao city is a shopping and food paradise with a myriad of fresh and grilled seafood. Ayala Land's Abreeza Mall opened in May 2011, followed by SM Lanang Premier in September 2011. A 30-minute ferry ride away are the Samal and Talicud islands, home to many beach resorts and top dive spots like Dapia Reef, Ligid Caves and Malipano. Outdoor enthusiasts can go hiking at Mount Apo Natural Park or whitewater rafting down Davao River.

ILOILO

WHY IT'S BOOMING Many of the country's richest families built their wealth in Iloilo, where the economy is driven by agribusiness, seafood, handicraft and furniture. Iloilo's heritage, eco- and agritourism are also creating business opportunities in tourism.

Since 2003, the BPO sector has been steadily rising in Iloilo, with 13 IT-BPO firms employing over 6,000 people as of mid-2012. According to Iloilo mayor Jed Mabilog, a major French IT firm setting up in the city will bring in 8,000 jobs.

The 54 hectare Iloilo Business Park will become the largest IT park in Iloilo when completed in 2015, with BPO facilities offering 24,000 seats, adding to the four parks currently in operation.

ACCESS/ACCOMMODATION

Cebu Pacific made Iloilo its sixth hub in

2012, and began offering flights to Hong Kong and Singapore from last November. "We see a lot of business travel on our Iloilo routes, primarily because our direct flights eliminate the need for connecting flights or overnight stays," said Cebu Pacific's vice president for marketing and distribution, Candice Iyog.

The route also connects businessmen from Iloilo with regional business cities like Shenzhen, said Erlinda Tan, operations manager at JLT Travel and Tours, adding that the recently renovated Iloilo International Airport is also driving business.

According to DoT's Region VI OIC, Helen Catalbas, there are 2,962 rooms in the city as of July 2012, of which 1,100 rooms are spread across 14 DoT-accredited first- and standard-class hotels.

Save for the festive season (Dinagyang in January and Paraw Regatta in February), rooms are priced from PHP800 to PHP 2,500. "There is a lack of range in accommodation, which Iloilo is now trying to address," said Aileen Clemente, president of Rajah Travel.

The 187-room Sarabia Manor Hotel has a 1,200-pax convention centre. The Iloilo Convention Center, located in the upcoming Iloilo Business Park, will have a total floor area of 6,400m², a 3,700-pax main hall and eight 500-seat function rooms. The

Philippine government is looking at hosting

some of the APEC Summit 2015 events here.

A 90-room Richmonde hotel will also open in 2013 at the Iloilo Business Park, followed by two more hotels – Le Grand Richmonde and Marriott Courtyard – at the same venue.

LIFESTYLE ASPECTS Iloilo is a picturesque city with Spanish and American mansions and heritage churches, the most famous of which is the Miag-ao Church, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Iloilo is also a popular jumping-off point to neighbouring beach destinations. Guimaras is a mere 30-minute ferry ride away and Bacolod is 45 minutes away by fast craft. Capiz, a two-hour drive away, is the Philippine seafood capital and a culinary destination in its own right.

[INDONESIA]

By Mimi Hudoyo

SURABAYA

WHY IT'S BOOMING Home to one of the country's busiest seaports, Surabaya is a major commercial centre in the eastern region of Indonesia. It is also the capital city of East Java province whose major economic sectors include marine and shipbuilding, industrial automation, vehi-

cle manufacturing, energy production, plastic and packaging.

ACCESS/ACCOMMODATION

Surabaya is well-connected by road and rail with the rest of Java island, and by air and sea with other parts of Indonesia. Air links to Singapore, Malaysia, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Brunei are served by carriers like Cathay Pacific, China Airlines, AirAsia, EVA Air, Valuair and Saudia.

Budget and upscale properties are available, with established brands such as Sheraton, JW Marriott, Shangri-La, Swiss-Belhotel and Santika. The city's total star-rated inventory stands at 5,500 rooms, with rates ranging from Rp250,000 (US\$26) to Rp2.3 million.

Supermall Surabaya Convention Centre has a 453m² exhibition hall that can accommodate 5,000 pax in theatre style and a 3,000-pax ballroom, while Gramedia Expo has a 2,750m² exhibition hall and a 1,200m² convention hall. Existing hotels also offer ballrooms and meeting facilities of various capacities.

"The growth of business travel to East Java last year was more than seven per cent, higher than the national average of 6.4 per cent," said Surabaya Plaza Hotel, general manager, Yusak Anshori.

"The development of infra-

A Jain Temple in Chennai



structure such as the opening of Blimbingsari Airport in Banyuwangi regency (near Surabaya), has made the city more interesting for business and leisure travellers. Some airlines (like Garuda Indonesia and AirAsia) have also made Juanda International Airport their hub to eastern Indonesia. Improved access has stimulated businesses too.”

LIFESTYLE ASPECTS Plaza Tunjungan, Ciputra World Surabaya and Supermall Surabaya are some of the major shopping and entertainment centres in the city. Diverse culinary experiences are readily available, from local establishments offering East Java specialties like *rawon* (black beef soup), deep-fried duck and *rujak cingur* (vegetable, fruit and buffalo lip salad) to international cuisines at upmarket venues such as Platinum Grill, Casa Fontana and House of Sampurna.

MEDAN

WHY IT'S BOOMING The capital of North Sumatra province, Medan is the biggest city on Sumatra and the fourth largest in Indonesia. The city is an economic and commercial hub of the region, driven by trade, hotel and restaurant businesses as well as manufacturing industries.

ACCESS/ACCOMMODATION

Medan is connected with the rest of Sumatra island by road, and with other parts of Indonesia by air. As a hub of western Indonesia, the city is connected with major cities like Jakarta, Surabaya and Denpasar as well as secondary cities in Sumatra such as Padang, Banda Aceh and Pekanbaru. Domestic airlines and regional carriers like SilkAir, Valuair and AirAsia connect the city to Singapore and Malaysia. More international airlines are expected to fly into Medan when the Kuala Namu International Airport opens later this year.

Santika Premiere Dyandra Hotel & Convention Medan general manager, Cita Dewantoro, said: “The opening of Kuala

Namu International Airport will change the destination in a huge way. We can expect more airlines to come in, bringing both business and leisure markets to the destination.”

The city has 48 hotels, varying from major brands such as JW Marriott, Grand Aston, Grand Swiss-Belhotel, Santika Premiere and Aryaduta to individual properties like Grand Antares, Danau Toba International and Garuda Plaza. Room rates range from Rp250,000 to Rp750,000.

Part of the Santika Premiere Dyandra Hotel & Convention, Medan International Convention Center is the city's largest convention facility with conference capacity for more than 3,000 pax and nine breakout rooms seating 40-90 pax.

LIFESTYLE ASPECTS Grand Palladium, Sun Plaza and Medan Mall are the major shopping complexes. The city is a great culinary destination with local delicacies such as Medan *kway teow* (noodles), *soto ayam* (chicken soup) and durian dishes. Merdeka Walk, a popular local hangout in the heart of town, is great for sampling Medanese cuisine.

[MYANMAR]

By Rahul Khanna

YANGON

WHY IT'S BOOMING Myanmar's main economic, tourism and transport hub, Yangon has seen a surge in arrivals since many foreign governments lifted travel sanctions on Myanmar.

According to the Ministry of Hotels & Tourism, Yangon received 554,531 foreign visitors in 2012, up 54.3 per cent from 2011, with FITs making up the single largest group with 232,715 visitors, followed by package tourists (126,036) and business travellers (114,456). The bulk of business travellers come from Asian countries like Japan, South Korea, China, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam, and also Scandinavian countries like Denmark, Norway and Sweden.

ACCESS/ACCOMMODATION

Yangon saw a tremendous boost to its air access last year, and it is now linked by 22 international airlines such as AirAsia, Dragonair and Singapore Airlines. According to the Centre for Aviation, Myanmar's international aviation market currently has 81,000 weekly seats, from just 49,000 as recently as April 2012.

Myanmar's Department of Civil Aviation will redevelop Yangon International Airport to double its annual handling capacity from 2.7 million to 5.5 million passengers and will soon resume construction of the Hanthawaddy International Airport in June 2013 – due to complete by December 2016 – to accommodate 10 million passengers a year.

Yangon Central Railway Station, the largest in Myanmar, offers access to the 5,000km rail network across the country. Japan is currently financing the extension of the railway projects, which are expected to be up by 2015. Visitors mainly use the Yangon-Mandalay route, on which Myanmar Railways offers daily and nightly reserved carriages on express trains.

Yangon has a 4,456km road network, most of which is in good condition. Taxis are the easiest way for visitors to get around Yangon but it is customary to negotiate fares prior to starting the trip.

To ease the city's shortage of rooms, the Myanmar Investment Commission has put historic state-owned buildings in central Yangon up for tender for conversion into hotels.

The 240-key Shangri-La Residence is expected to launch in mid-2013, the 366-room Novotel Yangon Max will debut by this year-end and the 300-room Hilton Yangon will open in 2014. Meanwhile, Best Western International is looking at franchising and ownership options in Yangon, Mandalay and other key destinations in Myanmar.

Vietnam's Hoang Anh Gia Lai Group is investing in a US\$300

million mixed-use development comprising a 27-storey commercial centre and a 414-room hotel.

Established properties like Traders Hotel, Parkroyal and Chatrium Hotel are equipped with MICE facilities.

LIFESTYLE ASPECTS

Yangon is thriving with new bars, restaurants and shopping malls, as well as an emerging art scene. Shwedagon Pagoda, Sule Pagoda and the British colonial buildings are the city's landmarks; many tourists also enjoy the local experiences aboard the circular railway, which links downtown with the outlying suburbs.

MANDALAY

WHY IT'S BOOMING The second largest city and the last royal capital of Myanmar, Mandalay is located 700km north of Yangon with plenty of historic and religious sites. Despite Nay Pyi Taw's recent rise, Mandalay remains the main economic, educational and health centre in Upper Myanmar, with Chinese businessmen forming a significant portion of the visitors to Mandalay.

ACCESS/ACCOMMODATION

Mandalay had only one international route to Kunming by China Eastern Airlines previously, but AirAsia and THAI Smile have joined the fray with flights from Bangkok, while Bangkok Airways will start flying in September.

Myanmar Airways International (MAI) commenced flights to India's Gaya in November 2012 and Bangkok from March 31. Using Mandalay International Airport as its base, MAI has plans to expand its route network to Singapore, Malaysia and Hong Kong.

Mandalay International Airport, with an annual handling capacity of three million passengers, is expected to undergo an upgrade soon to become a logistics centre.

Mandalay's strategic location in Central Myanmar also makes it a vital hub for transporting people and goods, and it is connected to the rest of the country, China

and India by road and rail networks.

Mandalay Central Railway Station is the terminus of Myanmar Railways' main line from Yangon and the starting point of branch lines to Pyin Oo Lwin, Lashio, Monywa, Pakoku, Kaly, Gangkaw as well as the northern cities.

In terms of hotels, the 280-room Novotel Mandalay Mingalar is opening this year-end. Mandalay Hill Resort can accommodate up to 200 pax in its meeting rooms and up to 600 pax for themed events, while Sedona Hotel has MICE facilities for up to 260 pax.

LIFESTYLE ASPECTS

Mandalay is home to many holy temples such as Maha Myat Muni Paya and Kuthodaw Paya. In the heart of the city, the walled Royal Palace offers a glimpse of the city's former splendour during the last Burmese monarchy.

[CHINA]

By Hong Xu

CHENGDU

WHY IT'S BOOMING Chengdu, the capital city of Sichuan province, is also the logistics and commercial centre of western China. As of end-2011, 207 of the world's top 500 enterprises have established branches in Chengdu, mainly in the advanced manufacturing and high-end services like electronics, automobile, new energy and finance.

Though a rising star among China's emerging cities, certain aspects of Chengdu still need to be improved, said Ding Jianmin, assistant general manager, Shanghai CITS International Travel Service. “A business city needs to be fast-paced and efficient, but Chengdu is not like that. It's also not attractive enough for talent yet.”

ACCESS/ACCOMMODATION

Shuangliu International Airport is the largest aviation hub in central and western China, connected to more than 70 domestic cities and over 20 cities worldwide such as London, Sydney, New Delhi, Los Angeles and Jakarta. Chengdu has extensive rail links, with scheduled trains from Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Xi'an, Lhasa and Urumqi.

Chengdu boasts international hotel brands such as Crowne Plaza, Sofitel, Shangri-La and In-

From left: a water town in Suzhou; a local festival in Surabaya; Yangon's Shwedagon Pagoda



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Papua New Guinea

Harbour Grand Hong Kong
Hong Kong



The Surya, New Delhi
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terContinental, with recent debuts like the 208-room Chengdu Tianyi Grand Garden Hotel and the 185-room Fantasia of Lumberg Chengdu Hotel.

According to figures from China National Tourism Administration (CNTA), Chengdu had 127 hotels in 1H2012, with an ARR of about RMB425 (US\$68) and an average occupancy rate of 67.6 per cent.

Among the newer MICE venues in the city are the 55,000m² Chengdu International Convention and Exhibition Centre and the 150,000m² New International Convention & Exposition Centre Chengdu Century City.

LIFESTYLE ASPECTS Chengdu's long-spanning history has yielded such cultural sites as the Thatched Cottage of Du Fu, Wuhou Memorial Temple and Wenshu Monastery. Natural beauty abounds in surrounding areas such as the Jiuzhaigou Scenic Area and Huanglong Valley. It is also home to the giant pandas.

SUZHOU

WHY IT'S BOOMING Suzhou is a major city located in Jiangsu Province in eastern China, with Shanghai to the east and Zhejiang Province to the south. It is home to the Suzhou Industrial Park, the largest cooperative project between the Chinese and Singaporean governments.

ACCESS/ACCOMMODATION From Suzhou Railway Station, it takes only 25 minutes to Shanghai on the high-speed G trains and less than two hours to Nanjing.

Air traffic to Suzhou still comes primarily through Shanghai's Hongqiao and Pudong international airports – both are linked to Suzhou via the G trains – connecting the city to major

cities worldwide.

Suzhou boasts star-rated brands like Shangri-La, Pan Pacific, Kempinski, Garden Hotel and Regalia Resort and Spa. According to CNTA, there were 131 hotels in Suzhou in 1Q2012, with an average room rate of RMB368 and average occupancy rate of 52.6 per cent.

Suzhou International Expo Center and Suzhou International Convention and Exhibition Centre are some of the city's prominent MICE venues.

Said Ella Zhou, manager, department of exhibitions, Shanghai Spring International Travel Service: "Suzhou is already well-known among businessmen, and as a result, people are probably more interested in other emerging cities. Meanwhile, commodity and business costs are relatively high in Suzhou."

LIFESTYLE ASPECTS Suzhou's 2,500-year history can be seen in its unique architecture and streets. It is also famous for its classical gardens, with several such as the Humble Administrator's Garden and the Lingering Garden added to the UNESCO World Heritage list.

[INDIA]

By Shekhar Niyogi

CHENNAI

WHY IT'S BOOMING The fourth largest city in India, Chennai has grown exponentially in the last few years with new investments in the automobile, healthcare, banking, IT, electronics and petrochemicals sectors. This port city is also a major hub for exports and imports, and its entertainment industry is the second largest in India after Mumbai. The recent creation of the Chennai-Bangalore Industrial Corridor will further add to

its business potential.

ACCESS/ACCOMMODATION

All Indian carriers fly to the newly refurbished Chennai airport, which is also connected by international carriers like British Airways, Singapore Airlines, Malaysia Airlines, Thai Airways International (THAI), Emirates and Qatar Airways. AirAsia India, the new joint-venture airline by Malaysia's AirAsia and Tata Group, will commence opera-

"Chennai is sought after for business due to its infrastructure and pool of skilled manpower."

C Nagendra Prasad

Chairman

Travelxpress

tion in 4Q2013 from its Chennai hub. The upcoming metro rail will also be commissioned in 2014.

Based on HVS' 2012 *Trends and Opportunities* report, Chennai is expected to grow 154 per cent from 4,904 branded rooms in 2011 to 7,547 rooms in 2016. In 2012, hotel occupancy in the city was 66.7 per cent and ARR was Rs5,551. More than 1,000 five-star rooms entered the market last year with the opening of the 600-key ITC Grand Chola, 326-key Leela Palace and 201-key Park Hyatt.

ITC Grand Chola features the 2,465m² Rajendra ballroom, 12 meeting rooms and an upcoming auditorium, while Leela Palace offers the 1,080m² Grand Ballroom and 570m² Royal Ballroom, two meeting rooms and seven boardrooms.

Padmini Narayanan, managing director, Akshaya India Tours, said: "We are witnessing a quantum leap in inbound business travel and MICE demand to the city. The new airport terminal and meeting facilities are generating even more demand."

Vijay Shrikent, general manager, Vivanta by Taj, Conne-mara, said: "In 2013, we expect occupancy levels to rise despite the addition of more than 1,000 keys. Inbound travel demand is very strong and growing."

LIFESTYLE ASPECTS Each December, the month-long Margazhi festival showcases Chennai's classical dance and music, alongside performances from international and domestic artists.

AHMEDABAD

WHY IT'S BOOMING With a population of over 5.5 million, Ahmedabad in Gujarat is a rapidly growing city with economic growth that has surpassed other Indian cities in the last five years. The apex of a three-city industrial cluster – the other two being Surat and Vadodara – Ahmedabad's major sectors are textile, automotive, pharmaceutical, diamond processing and chemical industries. Business travellers from Japan, South Korea, France, Germany, Italy, Israel, China and Russia are arriving by the droves in Ahmedabad.

"The region is expected to embark on a growth trajectory with landmark projects such as the Delhi Mumbai Industrial Corridor and Gujarat International Financial Tec-City," said Himadri Mayank, senior manager, Jones Lang LaSalle India.

ACCESS/ACCOMMODATION

Indian carriers link Ahmedabad to major cities in the country, while international carriers such as Emirates, Etihad Airways, Fly-

dubai, Qatar Airways, Saudia, Singapore Airlines and THAI have direct flights to the city. THAI Smile has just launched twice-weekly services from Bangkok since March 31. The city is also connected by an extensive rail and road network.

The 176-room Aloft Ahmedabad, SG Road is opening on April 15, while the 116-room Radisson Blu Hotel, Ahmedabad and the 173-room Holiday Inn Express have launched in January 2013. The 178-room Hyatt Ahmedabad was just rebranded from Ista in March.

According to a HVS hospitality study, Ahmedabad's total room inventory stood at 1,975 rooms in 2012, having seen a compounded growth of 31 per cent from 519 rooms in 2006-2007. Another 2,550 rooms will be added to the city by 2017, of which half will be in four- and five-star categories.

In 2012, Ahmedabad's average occupancy rose 10.1 per cent year-on-year to 59.8 per cent. The ARR was Rs4,057 (US\$75), down 5.3 per cent from Rs4,285 in 2011, while RevPAR grew 4.3 per cent year-on-year to Rs2,426.

The 13.8 hectare Mahatma Mandir Convention & Exhibition Centre has a 5,000-pax main hall, several breakout rooms and a large exhibition space, with the capacity to accommodate 15,000 pax at any time. MICE spaces are also available in hotels like Le Méridien, Courtyard by Marriott, Taj Gateway, Pride and Hyatt.

LIFESTYLE ASPECTS Nestled in Ahmedabad's outer fringes, Ame Gujarati offers a unique venue for corporate meetings or dinners for up to 300 pax. Each of the eight air-conditioned all-glass huts with tented roofs can seat 24 guests. The cuisine served is vegetarian Gujarati, with a 20-course buffet spread.

Harbouring cruise h

Malaysia

By S Puvaneswary

VOLUME Cruise passengers to Malaysia have been steadily rising in the last three years, with this year's figure estimated to exceed half a million. In 2012, Penang handled the largest number (211,554), followed by Klang (141,266) and Malacca (54,166). This corresponds with the number of international cruise ship calls recorded by the country last year. Penang received the most calls (139), followed by Klang (98) and Malacca (37).

This year, however, Langkawi is expected to claim the third spot, beating Malacca with 59,600 passengers and 52 calls.

Port Klang Cruise Centre head of corporate communications, Ahmad Kamal Abdollah, said: "We see increasing berth bookings for the next two years by larger ships on itineraries previously undertaken by smaller counterparts."

"In East Malaysia, the opportunity to develop exotic itineraries leveraging on the locations' pristine natural beauty and local cultural elements remains very attractive. Larger ships have also been exploring this location as part of their itineraries, previously considered mainly by smaller ships."

INDUSTRY DEVELOPMENTS To encourage foreign cruise vessels to offer services between Malaysian shores, all cruise vessels were exempted from the cabotage policy as of March 2012.

Tourism Malaysia's director of industry development, Saidi Bundan, explained that the policy previously only allowed vessels that had been registered in Malaysia to load and unload passengers at Malaysian ports. With this exemption, international cruise ships are now able to disembark and re-embark passengers at more than one Malaysian port.

Another encouraging development is the formation of the Malaysian Cruise Council in June 2012, whose main task is to chart the direction of the country's cruise industry and coordinate marketing efforts to attract cruise liners.

Port authorities have also been looking into the infrastructure required at the six primary ports of Penang, Klang, Kota Kinabalu, Langkawi, Malacca and Kuching, according to Mirza Mohammad Taiyab, director-general of Tourism Malaysia.

"Efforts will be focused on identifying the improvements needed at these ports to make them more attractive as cruise destinations," he said.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE TACKLED

• Marketing

Lim Chee Tong, managing director, Jebson Travel & Tours Services

"More awareness needs to be created to inform cruise lines about what the country has to offer to entice them to home-port here. For example, in Penang, cruise passengers can easily move around on their own as the port is close to the city, while its local food is great. Langkawi's attraction is that it has free port status."

• Shore excursions

Ahmad Kamal Abdollah, head of corporate communications, Port Klang Cruise Centre
"We would like to see tour operators



Above: Singapore Cruise Centre; right: Port Klang Cruise Centre

freshening up their product offerings with innovative shore excursions, as we anticipate increased numbers of repeat cruisers who will want to experience new things at ports they have been to before."

Singapore

By Lee Pei Qi

VOLUME Larger ships were previously unable to call at Singapore because of height restrictions faced at the Singapore Cruise Centre (SCC). However, the birth of the Marina Bay Cruise Centre Singapore (MBCCS) has since allowed Singapore to cater to bigger cruise ships.

Ong Huey Hong, director, cruise, Singapore Tourism Board (STB), said: "In 2012, Singapore saw more than a threefold increase in the number of maiden voyages to Singapore compared to 2011. These maiden calls include the largest ships to ever homeport in Asia."

"From 2002 to 2011, cruise passenger throughput has grown at a compounded annual growth rate of 3.6 per cent. A preliminary estimate for cruise passenger throughput in 2012 is 907,000, with 332 ship calls."

The arrival of *Voyager of the Seas* last year paved the way for the newer generation of larger cruise liners to dock in Singapore, including Oasis-class ships, observed Melvin Vu, CEO of SATS-Creuers Cruise Services, operator of MBCCS.

World Express managing director, Darren Tan, agreed. "We're seeing great diversity in the types of ships calling, with even six-star luxury cruises and mega-size cruise ships," he said.

INDUSTRY DEVELOPMENTS Considered the cruise hub of Asia, Singapore currently has two extensive cruise centres that boast superior facilities: SCC and MBCCS, which opened last October.

Located in the heart of the city, MBCCS, which has two berths and can handle 6,800 passengers at any one time, effectively doubled Singapore's berth capacity.

Refusing to be left behind, SCC rejuvenated its terminal at HarbourFront in southern Singapore last November, creating a 26 per cent increase in passenger operations space and enabling it to handle 4,000 passengers at any one time.

Said SCC CEO, Christina Siaw: "As a well-known and reputed marine port, Singapore is a preferred spot for home-



porting because everything provided is very sophisticated."

Recognising this, Costa Cruises opened an office in Singapore last year and, for the first time, made Singapore its homeport last November.

STB's Ong said: "This shows that cruise lines are recognising the potential in Singapore's cruise industry and are placing greater emphasis on Asia."

She added that STB is also building a bigger source market, working with the Asia Cruise Association and cruise lines to raise awareness of cruise tourism.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE TACKLED

• Port facilities

Kevin Leong, general manager, Asia Cruise Association

"There can be more CIQ and terminal operator support in Singapore – especially during the weekends when ships with more international guests do their turnarounds – more taxis for disembarking guests and more flexibility in dockage charges, especially at MBCCS."

• Complete visitor experience

Darren Tan, managing director, World Express

"There are multiple factors that affect the guest experience when passengers arrive or depart via cruise ships. You need all parties to share the same objective to deliver a great visitor experience in terms of what they see as a tourist as well as efficiency in entering and exiting the country."

Thailand

By Xinyi Liang-Pholsena

VOLUME Phuket received the highest number of international cruise passengers in 2012 out of all ports of entry. It had 188,771 arrivals, although this was a

dip of 22.8 per cent from 244,569 in 2011. Bangkok saw a slight hike of 3.9 per cent to 5,970 passengers in 2012 from 5,745 in 2011, while Laem Chabang recorded robust growth of 34.5 per cent from 43,324 passengers in 2011 to 58,253 in 2012.

Cruises entering Thai shores are bulk-ing up in size and quality, noted Regale International Travel general manager, Sukanya Rattanavadee. "*Voyager of the Seas* and *Costa Atlantica* are also sailing to Thailand since the ships started home-porting in Singapore (in 2012 and 2013 respectively), as well as *Queen Mary 2*."

New luxury vessels include the 112-pax *SeaDream II*, which will sail to Phuket during her inaugural Asian season in late 2013, while the 1,060-pax *Ocean Dream* launched her maiden Pattaya-Koh Samui-Sihanoukville cruise in the Gulf of Thailand from Laem Chabang last August.

Said Massy Mittakarin, general manager of Tour East Thailand: "With more cruise liners including Thailand in their itineraries, I expect inbound cruise demand to continue growing."

INDUSTRY DEVELOPMENTS Rising demand, however, has not been met by dedicated cruise port development, say industry stakeholders.

Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), governor, Suraphon Svetasreni, said: "We recognise cruise travellers as a high-end market group with high spending power that can generate more income for the country. However, in terms of infrastructure, this requires a large amount of investment and cooperation from different government agencies; thus, this has resulted in the slowness of the (development) of required infrastructure."

The Thai government should invest in a dedicated cruise terminal if it doesn't want the country to lag behind, urged Regale

Harbouring cruise h

Malaysia

By S Puvaneswary

VOLUME Cruise passengers to Malaysia have been steadily rising in the last three years, with this year's figure estimated to exceed half a million. In 2012, Penang handled the largest number (211,554), followed by Klang (141,266) and Malacca (54,166). This corresponds with the number of international cruise ship calls recorded by the country last year. Penang received the most calls (139), followed by Klang (98) and Malacca (37).

This year, however, Langkawi is expected to claim the third spot, beating Malacca with 59,600 passengers and 52 calls.

Port Klang Cruise Centre head of corporate communications, Ahmad Kamal Abdollah, said: "We see increasing berth bookings for the next two years by larger ships on itineraries previously undertaken by smaller counterparts."

"In East Malaysia, the opportunity to develop exotic itineraries leveraging on the locations' pristine natural beauty and local cultural elements remains very attractive. Larger ships have also been exploring this location as part of their itineraries, previously considered mainly by smaller ships."

INDUSTRY DEVELOPMENTS To encourage foreign cruise vessels to offer services between Malaysian shores, all cruise vessels were exempted from the cabotage policy as of March 2012.

Tourism Malaysia's director of industry development, Saidi Bundan, explained that the policy previously only allowed vessels that had been registered in Malaysia to load and unload passengers at Malaysian ports. With this exemption, international cruise ships are now able to disembark and re-embark passengers at more than one Malaysian port.

Another encouraging development is the formation of the Malaysian Cruise Council in June 2012, whose main task is to chart the direction of the country's cruise industry and coordinate marketing efforts to attract cruise liners.

Port authorities have also been looking into the infrastructure required at the six primary ports of Penang, Klang, Kota Kinabalu, Langkawi, Malacca and Kuching, according to Mirza Mohammad Taiyab, director-general of Tourism Malaysia.

"Efforts will be focused on identifying the improvements needed at these ports to make them more attractive as cruise destinations," he said.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE TACKLED

• Marketing

Lim Chee Tong, managing director, Jebson Travel & Tours Services

"More awareness needs to be created to inform cruise lines about what the country has to offer to entice them to home-port here. For example, in Penang, cruise passengers can easily move around on their own as the port is close to the city, while its local food is great. Langkawi's attraction is that it has free port status."

• Shore excursions

Ahmad Kamal Abdollah, head of corporate communications, Port Klang Cruise Centre
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Above: Singapore Cruise Centre; right: Port Klang Cruise Centre

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opes

Asia is the new must-stop for international cruises, but not all destinations have the necessary hardware and software. Who are the front runners and who are those that need to shape up or ship out?

International Travel's Sukanya. "Singapore already has a new cruise centre while Hong Kong is adding the Kai Tak Cruise Terminal soon. Right now, the Laem Chabang deep-sea port is intensively used for cargo, while most cruise ships docking at Phuket port still need tenders," she said.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE TACKLED

Port facilities

Suraphon Svetasreni, governor, Tourism Authority of Thailand

"We need to offer a good quality product including attractions, facilities and services that meet international standards. Facilitation of immigration procedures and transportation is also needed.

Tobias Fischer, business development director, Go Vacation Thailand

"Authorities should attend more cruise trade shows and invest in port infrastructure for commercial development. Laem Chabang also does not have enough tourist facilities even though it is large enough to handle big ships and is used as the main gateway to Bangkok."

Indonesia

By Mimi Hudoyo

VOLUME The modernisation of ports across Asia has had a spillover effect on Indonesia, as the country is expecting a 54 per cent jump in cruise calls this year.

Some 308 calls with 147,134 passengers are scheduled, up from 199 calls and 118,834 passengers in 2012 and 176 calls with 112,882 passengers in 2011. This looks set to further increase in 2014, with 320 calls and 200,000 passengers planned.

Some of the new ships calling at Indonesia this year are *Aegean Odyssey* (378 passengers) and *Pacific Venus* (846 passengers), both arriving in Bali. *Artania*, on the other hand, visited Semarang with 1,200 passengers.

"Cruise lines do not only see Asia, including Indonesia, as a destination but also a market," said Indonesia's Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy director of MICE and special interest marketing, Rizki Handayani.

She added that the port developments in Asia, such as in Singapore, China and South Korea, have allowed more cruise lines to deploy ships and develop itineraries in the region, opening up opportunities for Indonesia.

A greater number of expedition ships are also coming, noted Destination Asia Indonesia managing director, Sediya Yasa. They include *Orion* and *Clipper Odyssey*.

"Being small ships, they can cruise to places like West Papua, East and West Nusa Tenggara and Kalimantan areas, (which have exotic nature and culture)."

INDUSTRY DEVELOPMENTS Cruising is one of the special interest segments the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy is currently focusing on. It is working with the Ministry of Transportation and port authorities to improve facilities and services, while undertaking cruise promotions on the international stage.

Most of the cruise interest still centres on Bali, although Benoa Harbour is hampered by the fact that it is still unable to accommodate large ships carrying more

than 2,000 passengers. One of the priorities is for Bali to be able to cater to turnarounds within the next few years.

Benoa's channel is now 10m deep, but

it needs to be at least 14m deep and 150m wide. According to Rizki, Indonesia's transport ministry has committed to setting aside money to deepen the channel to

12m this year and 14m by 2014.

Meanwhile, port developments are also under way in other parts of Indonesia such as Semarang and Lombok, enabling



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MARINER OF THE SEAS

Singapore Departures: 2013 Jun 4, Dec 16, 2014 Jan 7, 16, 29

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

4-NIGHT ISLES OF SOUTHEAST ASIA CRUISE

MARINER OF THE SEAS

Singapore Departures: 2013 Nov 18, 25, Dec 2, 9

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

4-NIGHT JEJU & BUSAN CRUISE

VOYAGER OF THE SEAS

Shanghai (Baoshan) Departures: 2013 Jun 3, 16, 20

Ports-of-call: Jeju, Busan

5-NIGHT SPICE OF SOUTHEAST ASIA CRUISE

MARINER OF THE SEAS

Singapore Departures: 2013 Nov 10, Dec 23, 2014 Jan 2, Feb 7

Ports-of-call: Kuala Lumpur (Port Klang), Phuket, Penang

5/6-NIGHT PHUKET & MALAYSIA CRUISE

MARINER OF THE SEAS

Singapore Departures: 2013 Dec 28, 2014 Jan 11, 23, Feb 2, 22

Ports-of-call: Kuala Lumpur (Port Klang), Phuket (overnight)

*Similar 6N cruise with additional port calls at Langkawi.

8-NIGHT EXOTIC ASIA CRUISE

MARINER OF THE SEAS

Hong Kong Departure: 2013 Nov 2

Ports-of-call: Ho Chi Minh City (Phu My) (overnight), Bangkok (Laem Chabang) (overnight)

12-NIGHT ALL JAPAN EXPLORER

VOYAGER OF THE SEAS

Beijing (Tianjin) Departure: 2013 Sep 7

Ports-of-call: Toyama, Sapporo (Muran) (overnight), Tokyo, Nagasaki, Busan

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www.gbta.org/china
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GBTA is the world's premier business travel and meetings organization. With China forecasted to overtake the United States as the largest Business Travel Spender as early as 2014, this China conference aims to offer a true insight into the business travel management challenges and opportunities in this important country and how to deal with Chinese business travellers domestically and internationally. The GBTA China conference is timed to dovetail with IT&CM China.



China (Shanghai) International Meetings & Conferences Forum

www.cimcf.org
16 to 17 April 2013 | Shanghai Marriott Hotel City Centre

Learn how to organise and manage meetings and events successfully and professionally in China. Get expert advice through keynote speeches, panel discussions, educational presentations and case studies at this one-and-a-half day forum.



Association Professionals Competencies Briefing

17 April 2013 | Shanghai World Expo Exhibition & Convention Center

Specially tailored for personnel working in societies and

associations. Association Professionals Competencies Briefing is a higher education programme based on the internationally acclaimed Certified Association Executive (CAE®) designation. It is co-offered by the Australasian Society of Association Executives and the Canadian Society of Association Executives. Hundreds of professionals have benefited from the CAE® programme. Learn more about its benefits and highlights during this briefing.



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IT&CM China 2013

www.itcmchina.com
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Since 2007, IT&CM China has established itself as China's leading international Meetings, Incentives, Conventions and Exhibitions (MICE) business, education and networking event, dedicated to "Promoting China to the World and the World to China". Featuring 3 days of exhibition, business appointments, seminars and networking events, IT&CM China is the platform for international and leading Chinese players in the MICE industry to explore business opportunities on all fronts – inbound, outbound and domestic. IT&CM China 2013 is co-organised by TTG Events, a business group of TTG Asia Media, CITS International M.I.C.E. and MP International.



ICCA Association Database Workshop

18 to 19 April 2013 | Shanghai World Expo Exhibition & Convention Center

During this 3-hour workshop, ICCA members will learn a variety of database skills

including the use of the ICCA database, how to locate business leads and the use of other ICCA business tools. The training will be conducted in English and is suitable for all levels of database users.



IMEX-MPI-MCI Future Leaders Forum

18 April 2013 | Shanghai World Expo Exhibition & Convention Center

Aimed at nurturing the future leaders of the MICE industry, this full-day programme is catered to students pursuing degrees in

meetings and events management, tourism or related business or administration studies. It offers the best and brightest students a chance to experience real-life industry challenges and an insightful glimpse into a dynamic MICE career. This event is held in conjunction with IT&CM China 2013.



TTG China Travel Awards 2013

www.ttgchina.com/ttg-awards
19 April 2013 | The Longemont Hotel Shanghai

The TTG China Travel Awards has been recognising the best of Greater China's travel industry since 2008. This prestigious

annual event honours stellar Travel Suppliers across Airlines, Hotels & Resorts, Serviced Residences and Travel Services segments in the region. Respected as one of the travel industry's most prestigious travel awards, The 6th Annual TTG China Travel Awards 2013 will applaud 60 exemplary industry partners for their success in maintaining quality standards to ensure a stellar experience for all. This TTG Travel Trade Publishing event is proudly organised by TTG China, with the support of TTG-BTmice China, TTG Asia, TTG India and TTGmice.

big ships to berth, while a second port in Bali is being planned in Tanah Ampo.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE TACKLED

• Cruise agents

Rizki Handayani, director of MICE and special interest marketing, Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy

“We need to have more cruise agents in Indonesia in order to develop a wider variety of shore excursions. There are only about six active ones. It may take a lot of investment and effort to handle and win the trust of cruise lines initially, but it is good business.”

• Land attractions

Sediya Yasa, managing director, Destination Asia Indonesia

“Developing new destinations is not only about building ports, but also attractions. Semarang Port, for example, has the Borobudur Temple, and Probolinggo in East Java, Mount Bromo. What else do we have? We need to find new highlights.”

Hong Kong

By Prudence Lui

VOLUME Hong Kong has not seen tremendous growth in its number of ship calls and passenger throughput over the last three years, with calls totalling 2,166 in 2012, 2,125 in 2011 and 2,111 in 2010. This figure, however, includes cruises without destination.

Cruises with Hong Kong as a destination, including using it as a transit or homeport, accounted for 98 calls in 2012, 104 in 2011 and 120 in 2010.

Correspondingly, passenger numbers also did not shift much, with 1.4 million passengers arriving in Hong Kong last year, compared to 1.6 million in 2011 and 1.5 million in 2010.

Sightseers (HK) managing director, Linda Yuen, said: “In the last few years, there weren’t many big changes, except more travel consultants venturing into selling cruises. Cruise lines like Costa Cruises are also now deploying bigger vessels to serve the market.”

INDUSTRY DEVELOPMENTS

Hong Kong’s capacity limitations will be alleviated in June. Said a Tourism Commission spokesperson: “The commissioning of the Kai Tak Cruise Terminal, which will be able to accommodate the largest cruise

ships up to gross tonnage of 220,000 tonnes, will solve this problem. Bigger ships will no longer be required to make alternative berthing arrangements.”

She added that Hong Kong Tourism Board had organised the inaugural Seatrade Hong Kong Cruise Forum in January to encourage itinerary development and regional cooperation.

“Together with the well-established Ocean Terminal in Tsim Sha Tsui, the cruise berthing capacity of Hong Kong will be greatly enhanced, welcoming all types of cruise ships from the world,” said the spokesperson.

Thrice the size of the existing Ocean Terminal, Kai Tak’s second berth will be ready in mid-2014. At least 16 ships are scheduled to arrive up until April 23, 2014, such as *Diamond Princess* and *Celebrity Millennium*.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE TACKLED

• Recognition as a source market

Lanny Leung, CEO, Wing On Travel Service

“It would be a big help if cruise operators could make Hong Kong their homeport or put it in their itineraries so travellers could board here instead of flying overseas. Given the rising demand for cruises, especially from China and Hong Kong, the segment demonstrates positive growth.”

• Visa facilitation

Jeff Bent, director – cruise, rail and business development, Worldwide Flight Services

“We hope that NTOs can help to persuade their governments to either waive visa restrictions for cruise visitors or make visas on arrival free and quick. They should also assist cruise lines to develop regional itineraries in tandem with other NTOs.”

Philippines

By Rosa Ocampo

VOLUME While numbers are still small, data from the Department of Tourism shows that there are more international cruise ships calling on the Philippines.

Last year, ports received 17 cruise ships with 13,466 passengers, a leap from 11 ships with 9,770 passengers in 2011. In the first quarter of this year, 13 ships with 7,897 passengers called on Manila’s South Harbor alone.



Above: Kai Tak Cruise Terminal; left: a Balinese marionette

Despite its substandard facilities, Manila’s South Harbour is the top port in the country based on number of calls. Cebu takes second place as the principal port of entry into the Visayas.

From only three ports of call in 2011 (Manila, Cebu and Puerto Princesa), this saw an increase to six (adding Cagayan, Romblon and Subic) in 2012.

Marilyn Tungia, inbound tour supervisor at Sharp Travel Services, said the trends include bigger ships coming in such as *Queen Victoria* with 1,800 passengers last month, ships calling with more frequency, and the inclusion of new destinations such as the Hundred Islands in Pangasinan, La Union.

INDUSTRY DEVELOPMENTS Ironically, for a country that has thousands of islands, the Philippines lags in developing its cruise facilities.

Even the country’s main international port in Manila has no dedicated cruise facilities as it was designed for handling cargo. There have been plans to gradually shift cargo operations to Batangas and Subic, but there has not been progress.

International cruise ships call at Pier 15 at the Manila South Harbour, which is also shared by cargo ships, visiting warships and inter-island vessels. Pier 15 can accommodate five regular ships at one time and has a passenger terminal for up to 2,000 passengers.

As it is known to be dirty, dusty and unsightly, it has become an embarrassment for the travel trade who are clamouring

for its overhaul.

By infrastructure, the Subic Bay Freeport Zone is the best in the country and the only one that meets the standards of many cruise lines. However, Subic’s tourist attractions need more packaging and promotion.

Subic Bay Metropolitan Authority chairman and administrator, Roberto Garcia, said an integrated world-class family resort was on the cards for Subic, which would include a cruise ship passenger terminal in the area of the unused international airport. He added that the project would commence as soon as the feasibility study has been approved by the Philippine president.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE TACKLED

• Port facilities

Carla Mariano, Blue Horizons Travel & Tours manager – groups, MICE and special projects

“We would like the ports to be kept clean, with well-maintained restrooms. There should also be a welcome ceremony for ships in the form of musical entertainment and activities showcasing what the local destination is all about.”

• Shore excursions

Maria Corazon Jorda-Apo, group head, North America and Asia-Pacific, Department of Tourism (DoT)

“The DoT is encouraging inbound tour operators to offer shore excursions that are interactive, educational, experiential and enjoyable.”

Test drive

Legend of the Seas



The party never stops on board, with only poor service at one café giving reason for pause, says **Hannah Koh**

WHY Royal Caribbean International’s *Legend of the Seas* pushed off in February after a month-long, US\$50 million facelift. This added refreshed staterooms with flatscreen TVs, Wi-Fi access and lounges for loyalty members and guests staying in premium rooms. Three specialty restaurants and a fare-inclusive café were also among the new offerings, while the ship’s expanded entertainment options include outdoor movie screenings.

WHAT My three-night Best of Malaysia cruise saw me ensconced in a 14m² Deluxe Balcony Stateroom, where the balco-

ny provided a welcome spot to read, enjoy the breeze or breakfast with the sunrise. The room and shower-only bathroom were clean and kept that way throughout.

Onboard programmes were never-ending as was the party atmosphere, which saw reticent Singaporeans take to the floor at the line dance party. Other programmes included morning stretches, quizzes, health seminars and scrapbooking sessions. I also enjoyed the four-hour heritage shore excursion in Penang.

Service was fantastic most of the time – waiters who had served me at dinner the first night came over to say hello on the second, I found a rabbit folded from towels on the bed, while the cruise director and the staff overall were sunnier than the ship’s deck at noon.

But where service was poor – and it was



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at Park Café – the staff were as surly as cafeteria ladies, with one charmer wandering off mid-service to answer the phone. Maybe it was due to the endless stream of customers, but a shame nonetheless.

HOW Royal Caribbean’s cruises will appeal to travellers looking for an intensely social and fun experience, especially for multi-generational Asian families for whom the range of activities will cater to everyone – from stage shows and rock climbing to shopping and gambling. Parents looking to foist their young ones on someone else can also make use of the Royal Babies & Tots Nursery.

Legend of the Seas is finishing its four-year Asian deployment this month, but even larger sister *Mariner of the Seas* will sail into Singapore to offer voyages to South-east Asia and China in June, late 2013 and early 2014.

VERDICT A value-for-money proposition for families.

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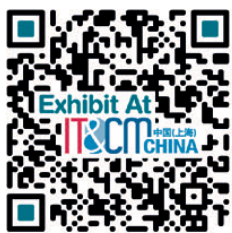


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Guangzhou is seeing a branded hotel boom, boosting event space

Rising MICE ambitions

Influx of international upscale hotels sharpens city's competitive edge. By **Prudence Lui**

Arrivals

The city welcomed 7.1 million overnight tourists from January to November 2012, 2.5 million of whom were foreign visitors, according to statistics from the Tourism Administration of Guangdong Province. This represents growth of 1.6 per cent (total inbound visitors) and 5.9 per cent (foreign visitors) in arrivals over the same period of the previous year.

Zhu Li, director, Tourism Administration of Guangzhou Municipality, said: "Traffic from the US increased, and we hope to draw more tourists from different parts of the world."

Following the implementation of a 72-hour visa-free transit policy for foreign visitors with third-country visas at Beijing Capital International Airport, Shanghai Pudong International Airport and Shanghai Hongqiao International Airport early this year, the city is keen to adopt a similar policy at Guangzhou Baiyun International Airport in order to draw more traffic.

Access

India-based budget carrier SpiceJet started a four-times-weekly New Delhi-Guangzhou route in Febru-

ary, while Air China and China Southern began operating daily services from Guangzhou to Jiuzhaigou (Sichuan) on March 31.

Capacity from the Philippines is increasing, with Philippine Airlines commencing four-times-weekly Manila-Guangzhou flights from June 1. Last October, low-cost carrier Cebu Pacific also launched four-times-weekly flights from Manila.

Guangzhou Baiyun International Airport recorded 4.8 million arrivals in 2012, up 7.3 per cent from the previous year. The construction of the third runway began last summer and is set to complete in 2014. The new Terminal 2 is scheduled to start operations in 2016.

Guangzhou's transport system is also seeing improvements. Guangzhou Metro currently has eight routes in operation, covering a total of 236km. From now until 2016, the company will aggressively expand with another 284km, covering extensions of existing routes like Line 4 and Line 8 as well as brand new ones such as Line 7 and Line 9 connecting the city to the Pearl River Delta.

MICE

Guangzhou's increasing number of international



"Guangzhou has always been seen as a leisure tour destination for both domestic and international tourists. What it needs is a MICE bureau to really drive promotional efforts."

David Ong

Greater China general manager
Off-Site Connections Events Solutions

five-star hotels is opening up new possibilities for events.

Off-Site Connections Event Solutions, Greater China general manager, David Ong, said: "Guangzhou is abundant in event spaces, which is an advantage. Major five-star hotels, especially the newer ones, have decent-sized function rooms to accommodate different-sized events."

However, he felt that Guangzhou needed a MICE bureau to drive promotional efforts. "Guangzhou has always been seen as a leisure tour destination for both domestic and international tourists. The tourism ministry is not proactive enough in promoting Guangzhou to the MICE industry. Even with Guangzhou's ideal conditions, many corporations leave it out of their selection process, not knowing what the city has to offer as a MICE destination."

Mandarin Oriental Guangzhou general manager, Clemens Hoerth, pointed out that there was already MICE demand for Guangzhou, especially from incentive groups. "I was recently at IMEX, and noticed that many planners were looking for new experiences. People don't want to stay in only one place."

Non-hotel sites are also tapping into events. For instance, Canton Tower is expanding its team and upgrading its hardware, such as carpet and chandeliers, in function areas.

Canton Tower product manager, Lovina Zeng, said: "MICE used to be an independent department but it's now under sales because we're adopting a one-stop selling strategy, packaging MICE offers with a tower entertainment option. MICE groups may want to combine their business meetings with leisure elements under one roof."

Products

The 30,000m² Guangzhou Library officially soft-opened last December. Located adjacent to the Guangdong Museum, the 10-storey building offers 1.3 million books, backed by modern technology such as a self-service book return and borrowing system. It will be fully operational in June 2013.

Canton Tower will add a 3D and 4D movie theatre in the second quarter of 2013, in partnership with Jinyi International Cinemas. Designed with three sections (two 3D and one 4D), it will include a VIP club facility.

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Movement at the higher end

Guangzhou's growing inventory of premium rooms may tip the supply-demand balance. By **Prudence Lui**

1 What does Guangzhou's hotel supply and occupancy look like? The city is home to 11 international hotel management companies representing 20 brands, according to the Guangzhou Hotels Association. Out of the city's 226 star-graded hotels, 21 are five-star properties.

Last year's occupancy for five- and four-star properties was 65 per cent and 68 per cent respectively, noted William Lin, chairman, Guangzhou Hotels Association.

He said: "With the hotel boom in the last few years, the city has added more than 3,000 new rooms of international five-star quality. This year's newcomers are W Hotels, DoubleTree by Hilton and Langham, while hotels by Park Hyatt, JW Marriott, St. Regis and Jumeirah are in the pipeline. We're expecting another 2,000 to 3,000 rooms."

2 Will this influx impact hotel rates? Lin revealed that the current average rate for five-



DoubleTree by Hilton Hotel Guangzhou

star, local properties is RMB\$800 (US\$129) whereas the rate for international properties is in the range of RMB\$1,200-1,400. Luxury hotels like Grand Hyatt and Four Seasons might be charging even more.

Patrick Pahlke, manager, Grand Hyatt Guangzhou, said: "New international five-star hotels confident in their brand positioning might maintain their rates, which means continued strong average rates in at least the high-end segment."

"Or eventually, like in Shang-

hai, a rate war could start as hotels fear they are not getting enough market share. This is a given danger, as supply is already far exceeding demand in Guangzhou."

Hong Kong-based ABA Destination Management, director of marketing (MICE), Franki Lee, is already observing keen competition. He said: "The rate is not too high but there is definitely a price war brewing."

"Hopefully there will be more international events to draw overseas travellers."

3 Do new properties have the competitive edge? The surge of upscale hotels is reassuring for international business travellers. Newly opened Mandarin Oriental Guangzhou boasts the biggest standard room, averaging 60m² in size.

Its director of sales and marketing, Raymond Tang, said: "Apart from being conveniently located above the metro and part of the mixed-use development complex, we engaged a notable chef for Jiang restaurant. The partnership leverages on his reputation and ideas, and helps us penetrate the local dining scene."

Set to debut in the fourth quarter, Langham Place Guangzhou will boast the largest pillar-free ballroom with a 2,000 pax capacity. Its convenient location right next to Pazhou Exhibition Centre is also a strength.

Its general manager, Ronnie Cheng, said: "About 90-95 per cent of hotels here focus on corporate business. We are no exception."

4 Does Guangzhou need more hotels? W Guangzhou general manager, Brian Segrave, remains bullish. "As the largest city in Southern China, Guangzhou has always been an important trading port and cultural meeting point. Its location serves well as a place for new ideas and products to be introduced to one of the wealthiest provinces in China," he explained.

On the other hand, Grand Hyatt Guangzhou's Pahlke was cautious. "Having the largest convention centre in China, we can steadily accommodate more hotels. However, we do not anticipate any well-structured conventions in the coming three years. Thus, it is not necessary to have any new hotels at this stage."

"In addition, there are also plenty of five-star hotels in nearby cities, within an hour's drive. For example, there are already over 25 five star hotels in Dongguan. This has lately been diverting a lot of business away from Guangzhou."

Checking in



Name Mandarin Oriental Guangzhou
No. of rooms 233 rooms, 30 suites and 24 serviced apartments
Rate Best Available Rate for Mandarin Room is RMB2,600 (US\$413)
Contact details
 Tel: 86-20 3808-8888
 Email: mogzh-gro@mohg.com
 Website: www.mandarinoriental.com/guangzhou

Mandarin Oriental Guangzhou



Surprising details make for a pleasant experience, rounded off with good food, discovers **Prudence Lui**

LOCATION This is the hotel's winning aspect, being right above the Shipaiqiao Station and within TaiKoo Hui, a mixed-use development with shopping, offices, a hotel and entertainment under one roof in Tianhe CBD.

It took me less than five minutes to hop on the metro. It may be a challenge to get a taxi during the peak hour as the hotel has a different entrance from the shopping mall, but the friendly concierge can help with that.

ROOMS Upon stepping into the room, I was greeted by a long wooden corridor with artistic décor. The 80m² Mandarin Room consists of a living room, bathroom with a bath tub and rainforest spa shower, as well as a dressing area, all sections separated by sliding doors. As this room type is only located in the south-east and north-west corners of each floor, it means more privacy for guests.

What impressed me most was the abundant daylight that streamed in from the floor-to-ceiling window and brightened the interiors. I also had a 90-degree view of the city.

Thumbs up for the thoughtfully designed marble bench in the shower area, giving me the option of sitting while showering.

However, it would have been nice to have a clock inside the room to indicate the local time.

F&B It may be tough to stand out in this food capital of China but Mandarin Oriental's culinary legend did not disappoint.

Among the five outlets that caught my attention were the TaiKoo Lounge, with its reputable high tea, and the signature Mandarin Cake Shop on the ground level, whose freshly made macarons have a limited production every day.

Also, instead of relying on its own chefs, the hotel smartly partnered local expert Chef Fei for its Jiang restaurant, delivering impeccable Cantonese dishes.

VERDICT Excellent location with unsurpassed service.

Refreshing of an icon

After a major renovation of its executive floors in 2006, The Garden Hotel Guangzhou will soon embark on another revamp of its 300 standard rooms from the fifth to 10th floors. This is part of the hotel's attempt to live up to its Platinum Five-Star Hotel status, which it obtained from the China National Tourist Association a few years back.

The hotel will also be recarpeted before the Canton Trade Fair this autumn and new MICE facilities will be added.

William Lin, chairman and general manager, LN Hospitality Management, explained: "The bowling centre will be converted to a 600m² function room. After the structural assessment, we hope to begin works this year in time for operation in 2014."

Although last year was a good one for the hotel's revenue, Lin pointed out that the Central Government's policy to curb government spending late last year had impacted hotel operations in China.

He said: "Government activities like banquets diminished,

and officials swapped their lavish dinners for simple dim sum meals. We estimated a 10-20 per cent drop in our food and beverage business."

"This new policy will probably be enduring. In the past, the overspending was irrational and caused unnecessary wastage. It's a good thing that (government spending) is more disciplined now. But from a business viewpoint, we have to readjust our strategy and products to make up for the loss."

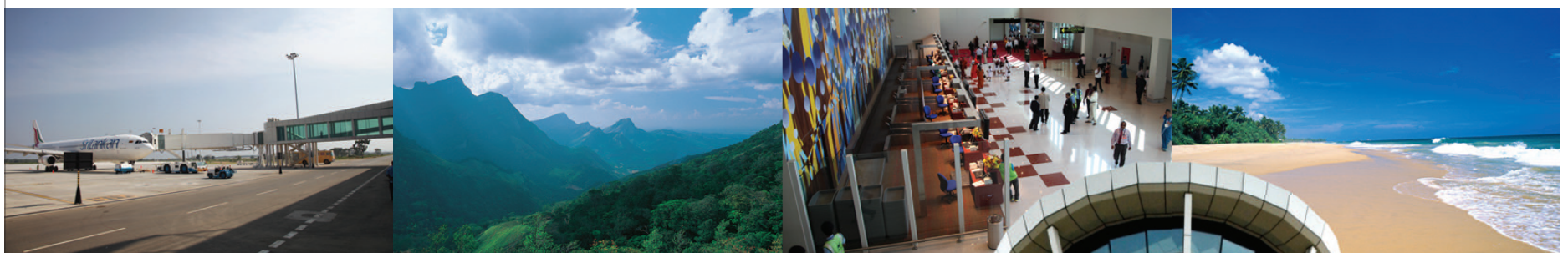
LN Hospitality Management, which operates The Garden Hotel, is busy building its brand presence through over 50 properties covering the Guangdong area, as well as domestic destinations like Changsha.

The LN Garden brand will be for super deluxe properties, while LN Dong Fang will represent five-star standards. A new upper, four-star brand will also be announced soon for city centre properties that are chic and modern. The first under the brand is the 330-room Guangzhou Hotel. – **Prudence Lui**



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