

[VIEW FROM THE TOP](#)

Tran Trong Kien ditched the medical profession for travel & tourism and listens so well to its heartbeat that his Thien Minh Group, which owns Buffalo Tours and Victoria Hotels & Resorts, is going regional



BUILDING AN INCLUSIVE WORLD

Greater attention to accessibility for senior and disabled travellers will enable Asia to tap a crucial niche tourism market, experts advocate



RIDING THE DIGITAL WAVE

How can travel players surf the sea of technological changes and compete in the new-generation marketplace?



ASEAN CRUISING FINDS SEA LEGS

More cruise ships are calling at South-east Asian ports but are the region's travellers reciprocating their affections?



PLAYGROUND FOR RUSSIA'S RICH

A troubled rouble aside, deep-pocketed Russian travellers have found a new vacation destination in Singapore



OILING THE WHEELS OF CONNECTIVITY

Taipei is leveraging the BMW campaign to encourage foreign visitors to explore the city by public transport

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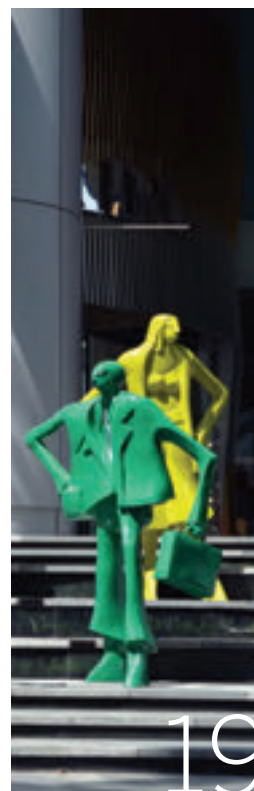
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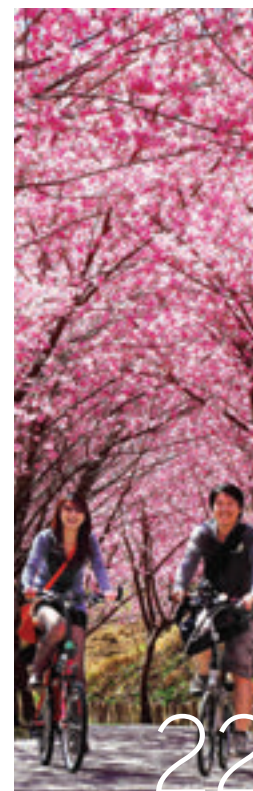
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Destination: Taiwan



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There is no lack of positive initiatives in this part of the world; what we need is the support of trade members to share these meaningful tourism products with a greater audience.

BE A POSITIVE AGENT OF CHANGE

It is with anticipation that I read that the Asia-Pacific Network on Accessible Tourism is setting up country chapters to champion barrier-free travel for people with disabilities in the region (see page 7) – a movement that South-east Asia strongly needs.

Bangkok, where I now call home, may be a fascinating city that beckons repeat visitors year after year, but its non-integrated public transport systems and cracked pavements often leave me wondering how a family with young children and strollers in tow or a physically challenged traveller could properly navigate the capital. Such experiences are repeated across many Asian cities, unfortunately, and if travellers leave with a bad taste in the mouth, will they even want to visit the destination again?

But far from suffering from a broken tourism scene, South-east Asia is also fast becoming a fertile ground for novel and meaningful travel ideas. I can't help but be inspired by a growing class of influencers and entrepreneurs shaping the region's travel landscape.

Driven by a desire for a world with equal socio-economic opportunities, engineer turned social entrepreneur Somsak Boonkam founded LocalAlike (see page 9) to promote community-based tourism in Thailand. What impressed me was Somsak's rural background, which was not a deterrent but an impetus for him to empathise with disadvantaged groups and set up a platform for community-based tour operators to connect with world travellers and improve their livelihoods.

Somsak's vision is laudable, and I sincerely hope that this start-up will retain its sustainable principles and make good progress in the days ahead to inspire more like-minded Asians to come forth and set up meaningful tourism enterprises too.

I strongly believe that tourism need not be a detrimental force, and everyone, whether a travel consumer or seller, can play a part to make travel more inclusive and make the world into a better place, one trip at a time. For travel sellers, obtainable ways would be engaging the services of responsible ground operators, may it be recommending restaurants that have implemented no shark's fins policies or hotels that have pledged their stand as an ethical operator to oppose sexual exploitation of children in tourism. Lately, there has been a noticeable shift away from elephant rides in the industry, with Bangkok-based Asian Oasis being the latest tour operator to drop elephant rides from its tours to end animal cruelty in tourism.

There is no lack of positive initiatives in this part of the world; what we need is the support of trade members to share these meaningful tourism products with a greater audience.

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COMING UP

NEXT ISSUE:
MARCH 13,
2015

HONG KONG A fast-growing private dining scene is offering visitors a new way to experience the dynamic city

BEACH RESORTS Two luxury properties prove that the allure of the Maldives as a paradisiacal resort destination is here to stay

BUSINESS TRAVEL The sharing economy is making its way into corporate travel market, but are travellers biting?

WE'RE SORRY

In last issue's *Shopaholics Wanted* destination report, we wrongly stated that Japan last July began waiving visa requirements for Indonesians for stays of up to 15 days. The visa waiver actually started in December 2014.

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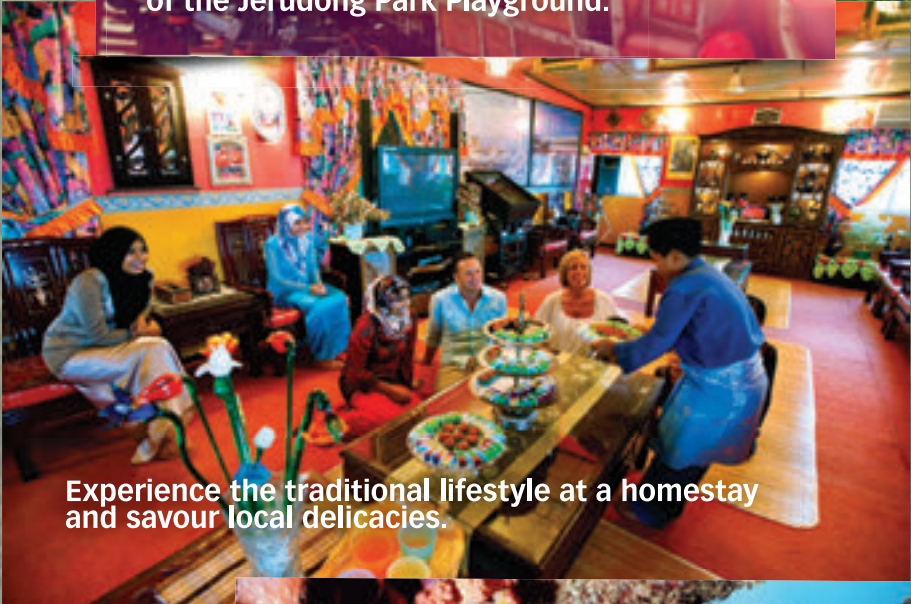
Yang Teramat Mulia Paduka Seri Duli Pengiran Muda Mahkota Muhiyiddin
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Analysis

Technology has disrupted the global travel landscape like a tsunami force, but how can industry players retool their organisations to compete in the next-generation marketplace? By **Hannah Koh**

RIDING THE WAVE OF TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE

TECHNOLOGY, once the exclusive domain of geeks and occupying just a small section of newspapers, is now so deeply embedded in the modern world that it has left no industry untouched in its relentless march forward.

Needless to say the travel sector has not been spared the all-pervasive influences – both beneficial and detrimental – of the technology cudgel. First came OTAs, then metasearch, and now, the tide of peer-to-peer consumption is drawing the attention of a younger generation of travellers that are seeing a lesser need for travel agencies.

With the maturation of mobile, social media, big data and cloud, it is also clear that technological changes will take place faster and more profoundly than before.

For instance, Apple's Bluetooth low-energy wireless technology iBeacon, which received an upgrade alongside the release of the iPhone 6, paves the way for time-sensitive information prompts such as flight status changes at airports or location-based deals.

Or the Internet of Things which can be more accurately described as Things Linked to the Internet, which left tech pundits to predict that 2015 could be the year for it to take off. The ability to send and receive data from everyday devices and objects will have the most immediate impact on hotels – think rooms you can heat or cool before you return, baths you could fill, etc.

In an email interview, Gerry Samuels, CEO of MTT, which has worked with Jetstar Asia and Abacus Singapore and is currently collaborating with Singapore Airlines on smartphone apps, said travel companies already know they need to be on mobile and expects the roll-out of more payment options such as Apple Pay to further mobile bookings growth in future.

"The industry will also see a rise in 'data snacking' as a key mobile trend whereby quick, actionable and personalised mobile notifications are presented to travellers in a timely and relevant manner."

"There is also a greater focus on intelligence, where mobile systems are aggregating data from a multitude of sources to create true end-to-end smartphone apps to cover the entire travel experience," he said.

"Many airlines primarily focus on the in-airport experience, but the majority of travellers now want apps that help them navigate throughout their entire journey from when they depart their home to get to the airport, in the airport itself, to the hotel and beyond."

GfK's *Destination Digital* report stated: "The traditional travel (consultants) cannot ignore digital. In order to survive they have to mirror their offline strengths – such as friendly and personalised customer service, reliability, attention to detail and the ability to negotiate great deals



– in the digital environment. They need to grow and monetise their loyal user bases, finding innovative ways online to inform, serve, entertain, reward and retain customers."

Over 50 per cent of travel consumers do research online, making digital presence as important as word of mouth when reaching customers. Thus, it is important that travel companies ensure they are visible from the start of the travel cycle and that their online presence must be "mobile-friendly, user-friendly and adapted to every new platform and every screen size", given that more than 65 per cent of travel consumers now use three devices when researching and booking flights.

It makes good sense then that travel agencies are keen to find out what the next wave of technological disruption will

bring to remain relevant today.

This was the main theme at the 3rd PAT-Academy-HCD, held in Bangkok last December, where a lineup of speakers from the travel and technology sectors spoke on possible technologies that could come into play in the travel industry in the next few years, from wearables to artificial intelligence.

When enquired if keyless entry and mobile concierges were something Amritanjali Sakya, executive director of KGH Hotels, would like to implement at her properties in Nepal, she said: "Even if we did, people wouldn't know how to use them or what it's about. People (in Nepal) aren't ready yet."

Nguyen Truong Quan, CEO of Orient Horizon, a travel agency in Ho Chi Minh City, is considering whether he should

change the company's digital approach.

"We have a website to show we are alive, but now we have to think about where we have to go," he said. "As a B2B company, do we lose our partners by going B2C? Or how can we engage our existing partners?"

Venkat Chandramoleshwar, head of product marketing, APAC travel, Google, Singapore, a speaker at PATAcademy-HCD, advised: "There's a lot of cooler things that are happening, the cutting-edge stuff. (But) it makes a lot of sense for smaller businesses to get those that work for you, and for the rest you wait for the dust to settle, because you can't invest in everything. But there are a lot of things on Google, Facebook, TripAdvisor that you can do for digital relevance 101."

Words that now are almost prophetic in light of news that Google has stopped selling Google Glass in its current form, which had, following its launch, excited the travel industry with new possibilities for customer service such that Virgin Atlantic launched Google Glass trials at London's Heathrow airport.

Chandramoleshwar emphasised that there were still immediate steps to be taken: "Do you have your Google business listing? Is your phone number there, is it updated? Do you have those basics taken care of? Many don't, but the core thing to focus on are the basics. Respond to your reviews."

Fellow speaker Bronwyn White, co-founder of MyTravelResearch.com, stressed the nitty gritty: "You need to have a clear brand position – it's useless to be all things to all people anymore, like marketing to honeymooners one day and families the next."

"Do your research, get your marketing in place and have a clear brand position. Link all your social media to one URL. You may have your Facebook account, Google Plus, Instagram, make sure it's the same URL across all of them. URL is going to be telling the search engine whether your social media is active. Make sure your posts are geo-coded so people going around can see it. It's important to get your basics right."

In attendance at the seminar were a pool of hotel, airline, NTO and travel agency professionals, largely from Asia, united by their desire to know what they can do to ride the tech wave and emerge safely the other side. However, when asked if the participants had ever used Airbnb, only six out of the 30 travel professionals replied in the affirmative. Interestingly, they were all female.

But is such a straw poll a measure of how ready travel industry players in Asia-Pacific are in embracing disruption and travel technology? And what technology to adopt? Will keyless entry and augmented reality make that much of a difference?

However, one thing is clear – the technological tide waits for no one.

Said PATA CEO Mario Hardy pointedly: "Disrupt, or be disrupted."

Analysis

Poor infrastructure, services and attitudes towards travellers with special access needs is preventing the Asian tourism sector from seizing an important niche market, writes S Puvaneswary



While the concept of accessible tourism for senior and disabled tourists has emerged in various parts of the world, the needs of this niche market remain unaddressed and under-served in Asia despite its strong potential to contribute to tourist arrivals and revenue.

The World Health Organisation Report 2011 estimates that 15 per cent of the world's population has a disability and more than one billion people with special needs worldwide, of which an estimated 80 per cent live in developing countries.

According to HelpAge International, by 2050, nearly one in five people in developing countries will be over 60. United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific projects that Japan, South Korea, Singapore, China and Thailand will become the five leading countries in Asia with an ageing population of 60 years and above in 2050.

The Asia-Pacific Network on Accessible Tourism (APNAT), which is headquartered in Malaysia and currently in the process of being registered as an association, will soon see the establishment of country chapters to champion barrier-free travel for people with disabilities in the region.

Sia Siew Chin, pro tem committee chairman of APNAT, said: "Through APNAT, we would like to be able to reach out to governments, people in the tourism industry and service providers to provide for the access needs of everyone in society, in particular people with disabilities."

Advocating that the creation of barrier-free travel can improve a country's tourism competitiveness, Joseph Kwan, global chair, International Commission on Technology & Accessibility, Rehabilitation International and advisor to APNAT, said: "Making changes need not be too costly. When transportation such as old buses and cars need replacement, transport providers can look at buying vehicles that are user-friendly and accessible to the elderly and people with disabilities, thus increasing ridership and in turn, revenue."

"Costs in making appropriate changes to building structures and facilities that are accessible to all can be reduced by getting advice from specialist access architects and from organisations dealing with people with disability."

Several enterprising travel organisations in the region have already identified the market as ripe for picking.

For Antony Leopold, managing director of Kuala Lumpur-based Ace Altair Travels – which caters to the special needs of disabled travellers from the point of arrival to the point of departure – his interest in providing such travel services is a

personal one, as he suffers from polio.

Leopold said: "We ventured into this segment in 2013 when we fitted our new van with a hydraulic wheelchair lift. That year, we had three physically challenged clients. In 2014, we had 26 clients, ranging from families with a member needing a wheelchair, to couples and friends with special needs travelling together."

"(This) year, we will fit another van with two hydraulic wheelchair lifts as we get many requests from people travelling in pairs," he added.

Ace Altair Travels' services include providing trained personnel; recommending disabled-friendly hotels, restaurants and attractions; and offering special equipment such as wheelchairs, ramps, shower chairs and portable commode.

"There are different levels of disability," stressed Leopold. "Once we get a request from a client, we will first have to find out what is the level of their disability, what they are able to do and not do. If the person requires a wheelchair, we will find out the size and whether they want a motorised one or not."

Leopold also drew attention to the state of disrepair of sidewalks and high curbs in Malaysia, where wheelchair users frequently find their path of travel obstructed by poorly designed narrow sidewalks, parked cars, motorcycles, fences, stairs and trees, reflecting an accessibility issue that is repeated across other South-east Asian cities from Bangkok to Jakarta.

"In many areas of the city, it is virtually impossible to travel without an assistant," he added. "We hope our effort will make accessible tourism a reality in Malaysia, which presents a great challenge for travellers with mobility impairments."

In Singapore, want2travel (www.want2travel.com.sg) was started by Patrick Ang, a paraplegic, in July 2012 to encourage families to involve disabled or elderly members with mobility issues in their travel plans instead of leaving them behind.

He said: "There is a lot of additional work when it comes to providing travel services for the disabled. For example, we will find out the extent of the disability and then try and match accommodation and services to suit the client's needs."

"Many hotels claim they are disabled friendly because they may have ramps leading to the entrance, but the disabled room may not have a toilet that is disabled friendly (with) handrails or enough space to manoeuvre a wheelchair, thus we do a thorough check first before recommending a hotel or providing advice to a client."

Non-profit organisations are also keen to make tourist sites more accessible.

With an aim to make the state's Sungai Liam Waterfall in Ulu Yam accessible to all, the Waterfall Lovers Association of Selangor is raising funds through corporate sponsorship to build parking areas for the disabled, ramps linking the parking area to the waterfalls, disabled-friendly toilets and special wheelchairs for use in water.

This ambitious project, scheduled to be completed in 1H2015, will be replicated at other waterfalls too, said Mohd Ridzuan Gunasegaran Abdullah, secretary general of the association.

Elsewhere in the country, National Council for the Blind Malaysia will join hands with George Town World Heritage

to develop a three-hour audio descriptive guided walk around the UNESCO World Heritage site of George Town in Penang, catering to the visually impaired. The trail is targeted to be launched in July.

Meanwhile, the Taiwan Access For All Association had recently developed a mobile app for inclusion and assistance for disabled and senior travellers. The app provides a listing and photographs of accessible restaurants, tourist sites and hotels, and users can also share their experiences on accessibility. There are plans in future to develop this site in English, according to the association's secretary-general, Jacky Hsu.

Best Western's shopper's paradise in Bangkok

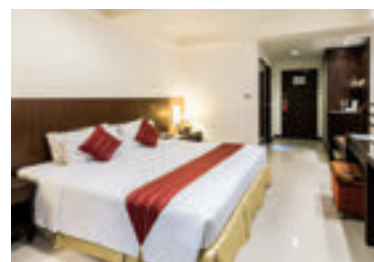
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Top five airlines in Asia-Pacific

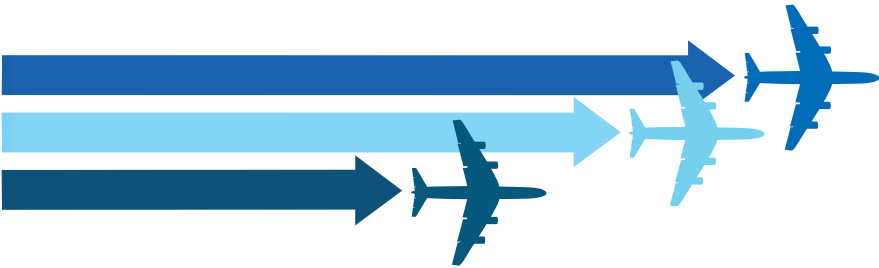
Asia-Pacific's top five airlines in 2014 remained unchanged from 2013, with China's top three also Asia-Pacific's top three. In order of seat sales, they are China Southern Airlines (CS), China Eastern Airlines (CE), Air China (AC), followed by Qantas and Cathay Pacific Airways.

These are group totals and include domestic traffic – one reason that neither Japan Airlines (small domestic traffic of around 17 million, compared with, say, nearly 75 million for AC) nor Singapore Airlines (no domestic traffic) are listed.

Cathay Pacific sneaks into the top five both because it includes its Dragonair subsidiary in its totals, and their China routes are essentially domestic routes.

Main trends:

- CS not only topped 100 million but was still growing faster than China's other major airlines at almost 10%. CE's total was just ahead of AC, but on current growth patterns, even AC's faster growth will not be enough to overtake CE this year.
- On international routes, CE remained largest with 9.6 million seats sold, but it grew only 6%. AC grew 18% to reach just over 9.2 million, and CS grew even faster at 21%, taking it to just under 9.2 million.
- Qantas is a multi-airline group with domestic operations in Australasia and regional operations – mainly under Jetstar name – in Asia. But our estimates indicate weak growth in 2014 at just 1%, down from +2% in 2013 and +6% in 2012.
- Cathay Pacific's +6% is close to AC and CE's growth but below the +10% of its nearest southern China neighbour CS.



Seat sales of Asia-Pacific's top five airline groups, million

	2014	Growth, %	AAGR, %	2013	Growth, %
China Southern Airlines	100.9	9.9	7.2	91.8	6.1
China Eastern Airlines	83.9	5.9	6.9	79.2	8.5-E
Air China	83.0	6.9	19.5	77.7	7.3
Qantas*	49.2	1.1	3.2	48.7	2.0
Cathay Pacific Airways+	31.6	5.5	4.2	29.9	3.3

Notes: AAGR = annual average growth rate 2010-14 (except CE and AC 2011-14), E = TBA estimate. *Group; with Jetstar; based on Jan-Nov growth for 2014. +With Dragonair. Source: companies, TBA.



HOTEL BAROMETER

Weaker performance from Asia last October

In Asia-Pacific overall, hotel occupancy was down fractionally in October to 78%, average room rate (ARR) down US\$6 to US\$147, pushing revPAR down US\$6 to US\$114.

In addition, the overall hotel TBA-100 Index for October stood at 98 – representing a 2% fall growth in comparison with the same months in 2013.

Hotel results in the resort island of Bali look weak, with occupancy falling 5%; ARR and revPAR falls were partly related to exchange rate changes – a stronger US dollar. Although the patterns are not necessarily linked, Bali's occupancy fall is significantly different from direct air foreign-visitor arrivals that month, which grew 27%.

Bangkok occupancy continued to fall 8%, although arrivals through the capital's airports that month showed the first increase (+4%) in the year, after nine months of falls – as much as -35%. However, Bangkok's ARR fall was less, only -2%, which may predicate growth in the last two months of the year.

For Hong Kong hoteliers, October is usually their busiest month. The political street protests in Hong Kong took place over this period (running from end-September to early-December 2014), but hotel results seemed surprisingly unaffected. All three measures were essentially unchanged from October 2013.

Singapore's 2% fall in occupancy looks small, but it is greater than the fall in visitor arrivals that month, which fell just -0.2%.

Notes/Caveats: Although rates are quoted in US dollars, the data is supplied by hotels to TBA in local currencies, and thus changes in exchange rates can affect figures. Different categorisation of hotels across countries may also distort the rate comparison. For this reason, percentage changes of ARR within a city may be a surer comparison of market progress.



Hotel operating results in selected centres, October 2014

Location	Occupancy, %	Growth, %	ARR, US\$*	Growth, %	RevPAR, US\$	Growth, %
Bali	69.9	-5.1	154	-15.3	108	-19.6
Bangkok	67.2	-8.2	112	-2.3	75	-10.3
Beijing	76.9	7.0	101	-5.6	78	1.0
Hong Kong	83.9	-0.3	263	0.8	221	0.4
Melbourne	93.7	4.7	184	-6.1	173	-1.7
Singapore	85.2	-2.3	181	-5.0	154	-7.2

Notes: Compared with same month, year earlier. ARR = average room rates, RevPAR = revenue per available room. *Calculated at exchange rate for specific month to US dollars. Source: hotels to TBA.

Asia-Pacific's travel stock prices in 2014

Overall, the leading international travel stocks in Asia-Pacific grew 21% over 2014. However, that is not as good as it seems because the relevant stockmarkets increased 17% – meaning that the real increase can be read as being closer to 4%.

Our data is shown in percentages (because there is rarely any value in comparing actual stock prices). This method can produce big changes even if the dollar change is less impressive. For instance, the biggest growths – Qantas' 119% and China Travel's 65% – represented a growth of only A\$1.31 (US\$1.02) and HK\$1.06 (US\$0.14) per share.

Unlike in many years, airlines performed better than hotels in 2014, mainly thanks to the late-2014 boost as the price of fuel fell. Most of the savings from lower fuel prices will go straight into company profits, with some of that to dividend payments.

There is rarely a clear connection between operational results and stock prices. For instance, among China's big three airlines (see report above), the slowest growth in seat sales was China Eastern Airlines. But in stock prices, China Eastern and China Southern grew fast, and Air China managed only 8%.

Growth in travel company stock prices, 2014

Company*	Stock	Growth, %	Market	TBA-100 Index**
Airlines				
AirAsia	23.6	-5.7	MY	102
Air China	8.3	23.2	HK	90
Air New Zealand	50.6	17.5	NZ	125
All Nippon Airways	42.5	7.1	JP	118
Cathay Pacific Airways	3.0	23.2	HK	85
China Airlines	32.4	8.1	TW	110
China Eastern Airlines	27.4	23.2	HK	105
China Southern Airlines	22.2	23.2	HK	101
Japan Airlines	38.7	7.1	JP	115
Jet Airways	43.7	30.1	IN	119
Malaysian Airline+	-14.5	-5.7	MY	71
Qantas	119.2	1.1	AU	181
Singapore Airlines	11.4	6.2	SG	92
Thai Airways International	5.8	15.3	TH	88
Hotels				
Banyan Tree	-11.0	6.2	SG	74
Jinjiang	-6.1	23.2	HK	78
Mandarin Oriental	0.3	6.2	SG	83
Shangri-La	-29.2	23.2	HK	59
Others				
China Travel	65.0	23.2	HK	137
Genting	-17.5	23.2	HK	68

Notes: *May not be full formal name in stockmarket listing. +Dec 13-Nov 14. **Against all companies listed here. Source: TBA.

Agency

Take heed of tech-savvy agencies that have transformed their businesses and pick up new ideas on how to do better

INNOVATORS

EMPOWERING RURAL COMMUNITIES

By Xinyi Liang-Pholsena

WHO Growing up in upcountry Thailand, the exposure to the ingenuity of rural cultures from young drives Somsak Boonkam, founder and CEO of Local Alike, to address socio-economic inequalities among less advantaged communities.

Following an MBA on sustainable management in the US, the trained engineer gave up a stable career to work in the non-profit sector, which subsequently led to his founding of Local Alike in September 2012.

WHAT Local Alike is a social enterprise that provides a platform for authentic experiences in community-based tourism (CBT) while helping to preserve local culture and generate income to local villages. Its portfolio of immersive experiences range from joining southern Thai fisherman in Koh Yao

Noi for their early morning catch to meeting with hill-tribe tea planters in Mae Salong, Chiang Rai and learning about tribal culture.

On the Local Alike website (www.localalike.com), each listed trip clearly states the itineraries available, costs and a breakdown of how fees contributed will be channelled into the village income and development fund respectively. Each trip also details the village background, location, suggested activities and amenities, alongside photos.

Since its official launch in March 2014, Local Alike has received 660 bookings from within Thailand and abroad, including travel agencies and corporate companies.

WHY "There are some 200 established CBT (providers) in Thailand but they lack reliable channels to

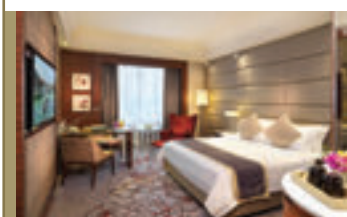
connect them directly to prospective customers," shared Somsak. "My goal is to share the wisdom of indigenous people to the mass market, (and) develop sustainable products and services with a positive impact on society.

He added: "Local Alike can change city dwellers' perspectives of looking at local villagers."

TARGET Somsak envisions Local Alike to become a "showcase" for sustainable tourism in the region, while growing into a reliable long-term partner for CBT suppliers.

"We plan to expand to at least 100 communities (from the current 15) in Thailand and neighbouring countries," he said, citing Laos and Myanmar as the next targets in the enterprise's growth plans. "Our ultimate goal is to help our communities achieve self sustainability."

Local Alike, the brainchild of Somsak Boonkam (right), offers travellers a chance to meet with rural villagers and contribute to community development



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HOTELS



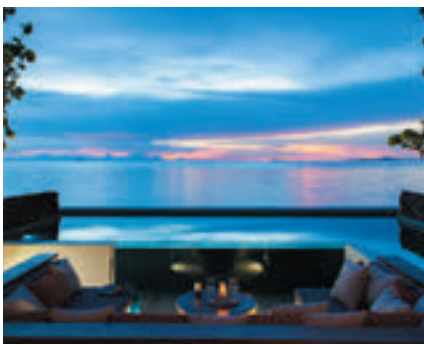
ANDAZ SINGAPORE

Expected to open in 2017 as part of the new DUO development in Singapore's Ophir-Rochor district, the first Andaz hotel in South-east Asia will have more than 340 guest rooms. Featuring a boutique lifestyle hotel concept, Andaz Singapore offers a lounge area, restaurants and bars, a rooftop outdoor venue, event spaces, spa services, a fitness centre, a swimming pool and a gift shop, with direct connection to Bugis MRT Station.



JW MARRIOTT SHENZHEN BAO'AN, CHINA

Opening in 1Q2015, the 356-room hotel is the first international luxury hotel in Shenzhen's Bao'an district, overlooking Qianhai Bay and the Pearl River Delta. Hotel facilities include two specialty restaurants and one lounge, a spa & wellness centre, a fitness centre, indoor heated and outdoor swimming pools, and over 2,600m² of meeting spaces including the 1,758m² Grand Ballroom.



U PATTAYA, THAILAND

U Hotels & Resorts has expanded its footprint into Pattaya this month with a 44-key boutique hotel comprising villas and guest rooms with sizes ranging from 32-90m². Located between Jomtien and Bang Saray, a two-hour drive away from Bangkok, U Pattaya's facilities include a French restaurant, a rooftop bar, a swimming pool, a fitness centre and the U Spa. Opening rates start from 2,599++ baht (US\$80++) per room per night.



HUALUXE NANCHANG HIGH TECH ZONE & HUALUXE YANGJIANG CITY CENTRE, CHINA

InterContinental Hotels Group has announced its first two Hualuxe Hotels and Resorts properties in Greater China. The 281-room Hualuxe Nanchang High Tech Zone will occupy the 39th to 56th floors of a skyscraper in Nanchang, Jiangxi province while the 282-room Hualuxe Yangjiang City Centre is located in Yangjiang, Guangdong province.

TECHNOLOGY

AMADEUS LINKS ARMS WITH CTRIP FOR FLIGHT INVENTORY

Amadeus has entered into a multi-year agreement with China's Ctrip.com International to provide all air content for points of sale outside of China. The agreement will initially include Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea and the US, with future plans to move into Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and Thailand, among others. Ctrip will implement Amadeus Master Pricer TravelBoard, Amadeus Mini Rules and Amadeus Ticket Changer, with the aim to adopt more of Amadeus' online search solutions in the near future.



NEW PREPAID CITIZEN CARD FOR MYANMAR'S TRAVELLERS

Singapore-based payment services provider 2C2P and Myanmar Citizens Bank (MCB) have launched a reloadable prepaid card that is accepted by MasterCard merchants worldwide for Myanmar travellers. The Citizen Card comes with an optional iOS or Android smartphone app that allows the user to manage transactions in real life and get online support. The card will benefit users who go overseas, as cardholders are entitled to special benefits and privileges at destinations such as Thailand and Singapore.

OAG BOLSTERS STAKE IN REAL-TIME FLIGHT STATUS INFORMATION MARKET WITH FLIGHTVIEW ACQUISITION

OAG has upped its game in the in-flight status market with the acquisition of Boston-based Real-time flight information solutions provider FlightView. FlightView aims to aid aviation and travel professionals offer better customer service and operational efficiencies, and has a portfolio of over 600 B2B customers. OAG currently holds a schedules database of over 900 airlines, including 113 LCCs and 4,000 airports, and processes more than 21 million flight status updates every month.

ACTIVITIES

TRAFALGAR ROLLS OUT MANDARIN GUIDED HOLIDAYS FOR ASIANS

Trafalgar is offering Mandarin guided holiday programmes to cater to the needs of the Chinese-speaking population in the Asia-Pacific region for travel to Europe and the US. The programme will be available in Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Australia, as well as China where the programme had its trial. Building on the strengths of the English programmes, Trafalgar Mandarin programmes will enable travellers to interact with local characters and enjoy exclusive access and queue-skipping at major attractions. Another specialty will be highlight meals, which allows travellers to enjoy local cuisine combined with Asian fare at each destination.

TRANSPORTATION



NEWLY RENOVATED EMERAUDE TO ADD LUON GROTTO TO ITINERARY

Hanoi-based investment firm Openasia has acquired the 37-cabin *Emeraude* cruise ship and initiated the final phase of a three-year refurbishment to add new beds, sinks, wall coverings and shower heads and repositioned toilets, along with an aesthetic makeover, to its interior. The renovation will be completed this April. The ship's management remains the same. At the same time, the *Emeraude* has also added passage through Luon Grotto by bamboo boat to its cruise itinerary, moved the vessel's dock to a new pier in Hon Gai and opened an *Emeraude* café at Halong Bay.

HK EXPRESS LAUNCHES SIEM REAP ROUTE

Budget airline HK Express will launch a thrice-weekly route between Hong Kong and Siem Reap from October 1, 2015, with reservations for the new service already open. The flight from Hong Kong will depart at 07.15 while the return trip from Siem Reap will depart at 09.35, both operating on the same days of Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays.



View from the top

He ditched the medical profession for travel & tourism and listens so well to its heartbeat that his Thien Minh Group, which owns Buffalo Tours and Victoria Hotels & Resorts, is going regional. Tran Trong Kien talks to [Raini Hamdi](#)

A PULSE ON TOURISM

You ran local tours to fund your medical studies. How did you end up as a tourism entrepreneur rather than a doctor?

It was summer work and I found guiding French tourists enjoyable. I set up a small tour guides' office to create jobs for friends, who were six or seven other medical students.

We were all born in 1973, Year of the Buffalo, hence, Buffalo Tours. None of us had any guiding experience. What we had was pride in our country and the desire to show visitors its authenticity – the street food, villages, etc.

How did tourists find you?

At the time (1994), Vietnam was opening itself to the world. There was no infrastructure. There were only state-owned tourism companies like Saigontourist. Our tour guiding was far superior – we were young, educated, eager – and as a result, travel companies started approaching us. A lot was also through word of mouth.

Soon, we started booking transport and became rather like a DMC. This wasn't the plan at all.

What made you stick to the industry?

1995 was a special year; it's quite like Cuba today: after years of isolation, the US embargo was lifted. Private sector was allowed to enter and business suddenly grew.

I also began to enjoy running a business. Later, as we grew, I went for an MBA, as running a business requires you to know how to read a balance sheet, how to do marketing, etc, which medical studies do not teach you.

Are the others still with you?

Yes. It's because of trust and it made me realise what a treasure it is to have the trust and the belief of your team.

Your parents must have flipped when their son became a DMC chief rather than a doctor.

They were proud when I went to medical school. My parents always give me the total freedom to do what I want to do, including going to medical school, then going into this business. It was a shock for my friends, however.

We compete by bringing the company spirit and our beliefs and values to the market. We don't mind investing and we're looking at six to eight new, authentic experiences in Singapore unique to Buffalo.

10 NEED TO KNOWS ABOUT TRAN TRONG KIEN

■ **Who's in your family?** We have three children. Our daughter and son are studying in London and the little daughter is living with us in Hanoi.

■ **What do you do for fun?** I run, and I collect pens.

■ **Your ideal vacation?** Trekking in the Himalaya or skiing in the Alps.

■ **How do you book your own leisure trips?** I often research my own itinerary and book some of the hotels online. We often book activities in destinations.

■ **What are you reading right now?** *Straw Dogs* by John Gray

■ **How do you stay healthy?** I run a couple of times a week, swim in the ocean whenever I have a chance (visiting some of

our beach resorts) and play football with our Thien Minh Group FC team. I do not drink and consider myself to be a social sipper.

■ **Favourite food?** Pho, Hainan chicken rice, English breakfast and *canh ruou cua* (Vietnamese freshwater crab soup).

■ **A bad habit you cannot kick?** I like working long hours and can't stop thinking about work when I am at home.

■ **Your pet peeve, something that never fails to annoy you?** Untidiness and any form of cruelty.

■ **Most people don't know that you...** I'm introverted and happy to be left alone! :-)

What about the business did you particularly enjoy?

We were young, had the best education in the city and were eager to learn. We had a blank slate to create something and, by 1997-98, we created a name as the first company in Vietnam to offer the concept of experiential travel – nothing fabricated, helping people to enjoy the culture and even, having a commitment to the community.

As medical students, we were trained to do no harm – try to find the root cause first and the different solutions to a problem. Through tour guiding, we also met amazing people. One of them, Mike, was a founder of the ecotourism society in Washington DC. It's people like him, through a week of kayaking with us, who opened my eyes as to why tourism should be a business that supports community conservation.

Everyone now professes to be engaged in sustainability. So how do you stay different when the USP is now the norm?

Yes, it's a standard today, but that's good for the environment. As for staying different, there is never a boundary that stays still or fixed. It moves everytime. We just have to be nimble and flexible, and adopt changes quickly as a result of changes from the demand side, be it geographical or the tastes of clients.

You went on to buy Victoria Hotels & Resorts, seaplanes, cruises, etc. Why?

As DMC, we're a middleman. If we're to grow, especially in a developing country in the 90s, we need to be able to control the entire supply chain.

So we started buying smaller hotels and now we own 12 hotels. We also looked at innovative transportation means, so that our guests could travel from point A to B with our train, then cruise on our boat and stay in our hotel – imagine the total experience and how we could control this whole experience.

And now Buffalo is going regional with

the JV with Flight Centre (TTG Asia e-Daily, December 19, 2014). Why Flight?

They share our fundamental belief that the passenger is a human being and wants interaction. And this is why tour operators and retail agencies will continue to thrive.

In a small country like Singapore where you've just opened office, how do you compete with the other established DMCs?

We compete by bringing the company spirit and our beliefs and values to the market. We don't mind investing and we're looking at six to eight new, authentic experiences in Singapore unique to Buffalo. It could be, for example, a seaplane experience, an overnight cruise, a cycling programme across the island – each will be an engaging experience.

We also have local experts, the right people on the ground who have the ability to connect with clients and who can create a total experience. Our general manager in Singapore, Carol Tan, for example, is extremely experienced. Combined with our technology and distribution, we will do well.

Why do you prefer to set up afresh than buy an existing regional DMC?

It's easier to create a new one and train the people on the culture and spirit of Buffalo, compared with buying company X, where we have to scrap their values, then retrain.

What's your advice to young entrepreneurs in emerging markets such as Indonesia?

We don't need to follow the models or brands set up in the West. We can create our own. I have often wondered why it is rare for an Asian homegrown model to grow regionally, then globally. I believe if you have the guts and the intelligence, you can create something that comes from your own backyard. Hopefully, this message will be an inspiration to young entrepreneurs in places like Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar.



Report Cruises

Cruise operators are embracing South-east Asia as a market as well as a destination but are travellers from around the region reciprocating their affections? By Mimi Hudoyo, S Puvaneswary, Paige Lee Pei Qi, Greg Lowe and Rosa Ocampo

ASEAN CRUISING FINDS SEA LEGS

Sea-based explorations of South-east Asia are experiencing a surge in demand from within and outside the region, and cruise lines have been quick to expand their reach here with new homeportings and itineraries in recent years.

Intra-ASEAN cruising remains the dominant choice, report cruise lines and travel consultants.

A growing middle class lure more ships

ASEAN travellers are taking up regional itineraries over international itineraries 70:30, according to Royal Caribbean Cruises' managing director, Singapore and South-east Asia, Jennifer Yap, who attributed this to closer proximity and better flight availability.

"The number of guests from ASEAN taking up regional cruises has also grown 50 per cent year-on-year, especially with... the arrival of the new *Quantum of the Seas* (in Singapore this) June," said Yap.

Royal Caribbean International's *Mariner of the Seas* is plying 29 sailings for the current Singapore season until March 2015. Itineraries range from three to five nights, cruising to Malaysia and/or Thailand.



Demand for cruising in South-east Asia is growing because travellers want to try the facilities on board, the duration is short and the price is affordable.

Rudiana
Director of sales, WITA Tour Indonesia

Carnival Asia has also doubled its regional market share in the past two years as well. Farriek Tawfik, director of South-east Asia of Carnival's Princess Cruises, credited this to the region's booming consumer market and rising purchasing power of the middle class. "We expect double-digit growth in passenger traffic and 30 per cent growth in sales for regional cruise packages in (2015)."

First-time cruisers and large family groups from the region tend to take three-to five-day cruises, opt for larger ships and also prefer more affordable itineraries within South-east Asia since it is nearer to home.

Farriek commented that Princess Cruises is seeing an "increase in first-time cruisers and young Asians". Based on Carnival Asia's research, a larger proportion of 18- to 30-year-olds in Singapore aspire to go on a cruise holiday than the over-65 age group.

Given such a forecast, it is unsurprising that Princess Cruises entered a strategic partnership with Changi Airport Group and Singapore Tourism Board to promote fly-cruises out of Singapore last year.

Markets ripe for plucking for the Singapore-centred fly-cruise segment are the Philippines and Indonesia.

Jenica Ferrer, sales and operations officer at Travel People Philippines, Costa Cruises' preferred sales agent and ground-handler in the Philippines, said about half of Costa's Filipino clients sail around ASEAN.

Ferrer attributes "strong bookings" to the lower cost of cruising compared with other means of travel, especially competitive fly-cruises in the region due to the proliferation of LCCs.

Filipinos like flying into Singapore and sailing to Thailand and Malaysia, though some also venture farther to Shanghai, Japan and South Korea.

Elsewhere in the region, travel consultants are also reporting a continued preference for ASEAN cruises. Anthony Chan, group managing director and CEO, Chan Brothers Travel Singapore, said: "We have seen a 30 per cent year-on-year increase in demand for regional cruises from Singapore."

Passengers range from busy professionals to multi-generation families and groups of friends with a budget, he said.

"Since international cruise liners began deploying ships in South-east Asia, they have been promoting heavily in In-



From above: *Voyager of the Seas* in Port Klang; dining on board *Crystal Symphony*

donesia, collaborating with travel companies and offering promotional fares," said WITA Tour Indonesia's director of sales, Rudiana, who said demand for ASEAN cruising has been increasing.

Meanwhile Buhdy Bok, senior vice president Pacific Asia and China, Costa Cruises, noted China's growing appetite for intra-ASEAN cruises, such that the *Costa Serena* will be deployed year-round in Shanghai starting April 2015.

On the other hand, local markets have also been a mainstay for Star Cruises. "Star

Cruises' three key ASEAN markets are Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia," said Michael Goh, vice president sales. "Both our two- and three-night destination-centric cruises (in Asia) are very popular with ASEAN travellers."

"We've seen year-on-year growth in the family segment for *SuperStar Libra* mainly due to its affordable pricing. The fact that it is homeported in Penang, which has good access out of our main customer base Kuala Lumpur, also helps," Goh said.



Game changing for Costa in Asia

Costa Cruises opens a new chapter in Asia's cruise industry this year with the arrival of its third ship *Costa Serena* and the launch of Asia's first 'Around-the-World' cruise on *Costa Atlantica*.

A focus on Asia and China

Costa Cruises will set a new milestone as the first international cruise line with three ships based in Asia when *Costa Serena* joins *Costa Victoria* and *Costa Atlantica* in April. The new arrival will increase Costa Cruises' capacity in Asia by 74% to better meet growing demand.

Costa Atlantica will soon achieve another honour by being Asia's first "Around-the-World" cruise to sail from Shanghai. It will offer an experience customised to the needs of Greater China guests, featuring Chinese-speaking crew members and Asian cuisines.



Atrium, Costa Serena

These moves will significantly strengthen Costa Cruises' presence in China, which is set to become the world's second largest cruise market by 2017. Costa was the first cruise company to sail from China back in 2006.



Theatre, Costa Serena

Italy at Sea

Costa Serena with other two Asia fleet which have been operating successfully for years – *Costa Victoria* and *Costa Atlantica* – will offer Costa Cruises' unique brand of "Italy at Sea" experiences in terms of hospitality, cuisine, design, entertainment and shopping.

Costa Cruises, a pioneer of Asia's cruise industry, is the first international cruise line to



Mr Buhdy Bok

"Costa Cruises provides a unique 'Italy at Sea' concept that gives our guests a rich and immersive experience in Italian culture – from hospitality, to cuisine, and to art. Our ships, decked out in distinct Italian elements, and our services combine to give the comfortable, right-at-home feeling on board."

Mr Buhdy Bok

President Costa Asia
Costa Cruises Asia Pacific & China



4D cinema, Costa Serena

operate homeport cruises out of Shanghai. In 2015, Costa will offer more than 200 cruises in Asia, departing from Shanghai, Tianjin, Hong Kong, Singapore, Fukuoka, Yokohama, Incheon and Pusan.

COSTA ASIA FLEET

① Costa Serena

THEME

Greek and Roman mythology. The ship is christened "Ship of God" and is positioned as "Ancient Rome at Sea". The decor is inspired by Olympian Gods and the ship is a proud showcase of Italian art, culture, cuisine and wines. Special entertainment include 4D cinema and Grand Prix Simulator.

CAPACITY

3,780 passengers



② Costa Atlantica

THEME

Italian cinema and art – "Venice at Sea". Each deck is named after films by Italian film maestro Federico Fellini, while more than 400 artworks made it a floating art museum.

CAPACITY

2,680 passengers



③ Costa Victoria

THEME

Italian fashion and elegance, with an indoor spa pool inspired by the splendour of Pompeii, Bar Capriccio glamorously decorated with mosaics of Emilio Tadini and top European designer boutiques with duty-free prices.

CAPACITY

2,394 passengers

About Costa Cruises

Costa Crociere S.p.A. is the leading cruise company in Europe and Costa Cruises (www.costacruisesasia.com) is the first international cruise company to operate homeport cruises in the China market since 2006. For the past 9 years, Costa Cruises holds the principle of customer-oriented and focuses on innovation and excelsior to bring Chinese passengers the most creative and high-quality cruise products with the flavor of "Italy at Sea". According to CCYIA, Costa Cruises continues its leading position in China with 35.98% market share of homeport cruise journey in 2014.

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Report Cruises



Enter the Muslim, incentive markets

The lucrative Muslim market is also taking to cruising, in the meantime.

Rakyat Travel Kuala Lumpur's CEO, Adam Kamal, told *TTG Asia*: "We've seen a 20 per cent increase in year-on-year bookings for family travel on *SuperStar Libra*, mainly due to the availability of halal food on board. This is very important to entice the Muslim market, which is our main customer base."

Sunflower Holidays Kuala Lumpur's managing director, Mint Leong, said the company is promoting the idea of cruising as an incentive, which is still a novel idea in Malaysia. "In 2014 we started to market *SuperStar Libra*'s 4D3N cruise from Penang to local corporates looking for new incentive ideas."

Negotiations with two multi-level marketing companies for incentive cruises are also underway at the moment, she revealed.

"We have seen demand growing in the last two years from both FITs and corporate incentives for South-east Asian cruises. They take 4D3N or 5D4N packages, boarding in Singapore and cruising to Malaysia and Thailand," said Edhi Sutadharma, general manager of Golden Rama Tours and Travel Indonesia.

Far-flung destinations keep appeal

On the other hand, cruise travellers with

deeper pockets in South-east Asia tend to gravitate towards far-flung destinations.

Paul Garcia, director of public relations at Crystal Cruises, said that while demand for cruises from Asia-based clients remains strong, especially from Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan, most travellers are opting to go beyond South-east Asia. Mediterranean and Baltic itineraries remain firm favourites.

He explained: "The ultra-luxury cruise guest is much more adventurous than the regular cruiser and therefore is seeking destinations much farther afield, though they sometimes book a regional sailing at the very last minute if they opt for a last-minute holiday."

Likewise, cruise specialists in Thailand say demand for intra-regional trips remains weak. Supanee Bencharit, managing director of SEA Tours Thailand, said Crystal Cruises and Oceania Cruises remain the leading choices for local clients, who range from 40 to 80 years old and comprise both FIT and group travel.

Star Cruises' Goh added: "Our affluent guests are eager to experience longhaul cruises to worldwide destinations especially with our ships, *Norwegian Breakaway* and *Norwegian Getaway*." Popular destinations include Alaska, the Mediterranean and Caribbean, or Hawaii, he shared.



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Deutsche Messe



THE PURSUIT OF WIDER SKIES

There is never a dull moment in ASEAN’s dynamic LCC landscape. Today, LCCs are based in seven ASEAN countries – only Brunei, Cambodia and Laos do not have any home-based LCC.

LCCs have proven in the last decade to be nimble and exceptionally adaptable to changing market conditions. Ahead of the ASEAN Open Skies, Indonesia and Singapore have, in fact, proceeded to sign a more liberal air services agreement. With some member countries less willing than others to add signatures to the ASEAN Open Skies though, the arrangement is more likely to be a gradual process of liberalisation than à la Europe.

Hazem Hussein, Amadeus Asia-Pacific’s executive vice president of commercial airlines, said: “The introduction of the Open Skies policy in 2015 will see competition among airlines in ASEAN increasing. LCCs in particular will see the need to evolve to drive competitive advantages and compete with full-service carriers.”

In June 2014, Tigerair Mandala ceased operations – clearly a casualty of the strong competition posed by Lion Air

and Indonesia AirAsia. But even with the failure of its Indonesian and Filipino outfits, Tigerair continues to grow its brand outside of the region, albeit with only a token 10 per cent stake in Tigerair Taiwan. With its less than sterling performance, Tigerair had to park several aircraft in Alice Springs, Australia and leased a dozen A320s to India’s IndiGo. In an effort to rein in Tigerair and perhaps exercise greater control over the airline, Singapore Airlines has increased its stake in Tigerair to 56 per cent with the potential to up this to 70 per cent later.

Valuair, which only continues to exist for the purpose of operating Jetstar Asia’s flights to Indonesia, has begun to disappear after Indonesia agreed to let Jetstar Asia operate its own flights.

Amid the roller-coaster ride, LCCs’ market share in ASEAN has grown to nearly 50 per cent in Malaysia and Indonesia, and only a shade lesser in Singapore.

New entrants

In an already crowded arena, new entrants – all of which are offshoots of existing LCCs – have entered the fray. Thailand and Indonesia are the most sought-after

“The introduction of the Open Skies policy in 2015 will see competition among airlines in ASEAN increasing. LCCs in particular will see the need to evolve to drive competitive advantages and compete with full-service carriers.”

Hazem Hussein
Executive vice president of commercial airlines
Amadeus Asia-Pacific



Airline	Main operational base	Fleet
Indonesia		
Citilink Express	Jakarta – Soekarno-Hatta Airport Jakarta – Halim Perdanakusuma Airport	Current: 31 x A320, 5 x B737-300 On order: 10 x A320, 35 x A320neo
Indonesia AirAsia	Jakarta – Soekarno-Hatta Airport Denpasar – Ngurah Rai Airport	Current: 30 x A320
Indonesia AirAsia X	Denpasar – Ngurah Rai Airport	Current: 1 x A330-300
Lion Air	Jakarta – Soekarno-Hatta Airport Batam – Hang Nadim Airport	Current: 2 x B747-400 (leased out), 2 x B737-300, 4 x B737-400 (inactive), 30 x B737-800, 71 x B737-900ER On order: 15 x B737-800, 56 x B737-900ER, 201 x B737MAX-9, 46 x Airbus A320, 109 x Airbus A320neo, 65 x Airbus A321neo
Wings Abadi Air	Jakarta – Soekarno-Hatta Airport	Current: 20 x ATR72-500, 10 x ATR72-600, 5 x MD-80 (inactive) 3 x Dash 3 Series 300 (inactive) On order: 56 x ATR72-600
Malaysia		
AirAsia	Kuala Lumpur International Airport	Current: 68 x Airbus A320 On order: 78 x Airbus A320, 264 x Airbus A320neo
AirAsia X	Kuala Lumpur International Airport	Current: 18 x Airbus A330-300 On order: 41 x Airbus A330-300, 10 x Airbus A350-900, 50 x Airbus A330-900neo
Firefly	Kuala Lumpur – Subang Skypark	Current: 12 x ATR72-500, 4 x ATR72-600 On order: 19 x ATR72-600
Malindo Airways	Kuala Lumpur International Airport Kuala Lumpur – Subang Skypark	Current: 2 x B737-800, 6 x B737-900ER, 11 x ATR72-600 On order: 3 x ATR72-600
MASWings	Kuching International Airport Kota Kinabalu International Airport	Current: 10 x ATR72-500, 4 x ATR72-600 Planned: 12 x ATR72-600, B737-800
Myanmar		
Golden Myanmar Airlines	Yangon – Mingaladon Airport	Current: 1 x Airbus A320, 1 x A320 (damaged and inactive) 2 x ATR72-600
Vietnam		
Jetstar Pacific	Ho Chi Minh City – Tan Son Nhat Airport	Current: 8 x Airbus A320
VietJetAir	Hanoi – Noi Bai Airport	Current: 17 x Airbus A320 On order: 13 x Airbus A320 7 x A320 (to be leased), 42 Airbus A320neo 7 x Airbus A321



photo by master films / H.GOUSSE

LCCs have changed the game for the aviation sector in the last decade as they capture the region’s growing appetite for air travel, but their full-service counterparts are also gaining altitude in the battle for ASEAN’s skies, writes [Sim Kok Chwee](#)



An AirAsia aircraft taxiing on the runway

Airline	Main operational base	Fleet
Singapore		
Jetstar Asia	Singapore – Changi Airport	Current: 16 x Airbus A320
Scoot	Singapore – Changi Airport	Current: 6 x Boeing 777-200ER On order: 10 x B787-9 Dreamliner 10 x B787-8 Dreamliner
Tigerair	Singapore – Changi Airport	Current: 2 x A319 (inactive) 24 x Airbus A320, 3 x A320 (leased out) 6 x A320 (inactive) On order: 6 x Airbus A320, 37 x A320neo
Thailand		
Nok Air	Bangkok – Don Mueang Airport	Current: 18 x Boeing 737-800 2 x ATR72-500, 4 x Dash-400 On order: 2 x Dash 8-400, 7 x B737-800, 8 x B737-MAX8
NokScoot	Bangkok – Don Mueang Airport	Current: 1 x B777-200ER
Orient Thai	Bangkok – Suvarnabhumi Airport Bangkok – Don Mueang Airport	Current: 2 x Boeing 747-400 (leased out), 1 x B767-300ER (leased out), 1 x B737-300 (leased out) 3 x B767-300, 6 x B737-300, 2 x B737-400
Thai AirAsia	Bangkok – Don Mueang Airport	Current: 40 x Airbus A320 On order: 2 x Airbus A320
Thai Lion Air	Bangkok – Don Mueang Airport Hat Yai Airport	Current: 8 x B737-900ER, 1 x ATR72-600
Thai AirAsia X	Bangkok – Don Mueang Airport	Current: 2 x A330-300
Thai VietJetAir	Bangkok – Suvarnabhumi Airport	Current: 1 x Airbus A320
The Philippines		
Cebu Pacific Air	Manila – Ninoy Aquino International Airport	Current: 10 x Airbus A319, 25 x Airbus A320, 5 x A330-300, 8 x ATR72-500 On order: 9 x Airbus A320, 30 x Airbus A321neo, 2 x Airbus A330-300, 1 x ATR72-500
PAL Express	Manila – Ninoy Aquino International Airport	Current: 1 x A330-300, 14 x Airbus A320, 4 x Dash 8-300, 5 x Dash 8-400
AirAsia-Zest (Merger of AirAsia Philippines and Zest Air)	Manila – Ninoy Aquino International Airport Mactan-Cebu International Airport	Current: 4 x Airbus A320

markets, given the entrance of Thai AirAsia X, Thai Lion Air, Thai VietJet and Indonesia AirAsia X.

NokScoot, a joint venture between Scoot and Nok Air, has also been established in Thailand. Although it will only begin operations in North Asia sometime in 2015, it has supplemented Nok Air’s services in December 2014 and January 2015 on the popular Don Mueang-Chiang Mai route. VietJet is also mulling a subsidiary based in Myanmar.

Malaysia Airlines, which currently operates Subang-based Firefly as its LCC subsidiary, is rumoured to be transforming its Kuching- and Kota Kinabalu-based full-service subsidiary MASWings into an LCC that will also operate international flights of up to four hours’ flying time from both airports using B737-800s.

Infrastructure

Kuala Lumpur opened klia2 in May 2014, a mega LCC terminal now utilised by carriers such as AirAsia, AirAsia X, Lion Air, Malindo Air, Tigerair and Cebu Pacific. The 257,000m² klia2 has 68 departure gates with an additional eight remote stands. With the ability to handle up to 45 million passengers annually, it is the largest dedicated LCC terminal in the world.

In Singapore, the Budget Terminal will be replaced by a new Terminal 4 and LCCs previously calling at the Budget Terminal have moved into Changi Airport’s Terminal 2. Ironically, the first and hitherto only airline to confirm moving to Terminal 4 is Cathay Pacific Airways.

Connectivity

With LCCs establishing operations in various short- and medium-haul markets, the potential for connectivity has grown significantly. AirAsia X’s passengers originating in Australia could book travel beyond Malaysia to other destinations in South-east Asia, North Asia and India. Lion Air Group carriers similarly offer connecting flights across much of Asia. Jetstar Asia is able to extend its reach to more destinations in Japan via gateways in Bangkok, Manila and Taipei.

Scoot and Tigerair have a partnership to facilitate connection between their flights and with Singapore Airlines owning Scoot and potentially as much as 70 per cent of Tigerair, both LCCs will fur-

ther deepen their partnership and boost connectivity between them. The same connectivity is likely to be facilitated between Scoot, NokScoot and Nok Air at Bangkok’s Don Mueang Airport. VietJet, meanwhile, has expanded its network to Russia’s Vladivostok.

However, Campbell Wilson, Scoot’s CEO, noted that third- and fourth-free-dome point-to-point traffic still produce higher yield than fifth- and sixth-free-dome connections. This February, Scoot will introduce its first B787-9 Dreamliner and in late-2015 will also take delivery of the smaller B787-8 for the Singapore-Melbourne route, due to launch in November.

Challenges

With massive aircraft orders in the last few years, LCCs in ASEAN are now faced with inevitable oversupply of capacity. At the same time, desirable slots at popular airports are becoming increasingly difficult to secure, while full-service carriers are also increasingly mimicking LCCs, selling unsold seats in last-minute promotions and unbundling specific services to grow ancillary revenue.

Meanwhile, the growing strength of the US dollar will also be of significant concern to LCCs based in Malaysia and Indonesia. While a significant portion of revenue is ringgit- or rupiah-denominated, most of its expenditure and new aircraft cost are denominated in the US dollars, further inflating operational costs and new fleet investment.

It has become increasingly necessary for LCCs to move from a pure-LCC to a hybrid model in which travellers pay more to change bookings, secure seats with better access and legroom, enjoy inflight meals, and bring more hand-carried and checked luggage. In essence, some of these are exactly what their full-service counterparts are doing and the lines between LCCs and full-service carriers are now more blurred than ever before.

The establishment of subsidiaries in various ASEAN countries is one way for LCCs to take advantage of traffic rights available in those foreign markets. Along with the liberalisation of flights under the ASEAN Open Skies, this will have the cumulative effect of expanding the market size.

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Destination Singapore

Despite the rouble's ongoing depreciation, deep-pocketed Russian travellers have found a new vacation destination in the Lion City, and hotels are rushing to serve the expanding market with customised services. **Paige Lee Pei Qi** reports



Destination in numbers

\$S\$258

The ARR, equivalent to US\$193, from January to October 2014, growing by a mere 0.1 per cent year-on-year

85.9%

The AOR across all hotels in Singapore from January to October 2014, a year-on-year drop of 0.8 per cent

13.7 million

Number of international arrivals from January to November 2014, a year-on-year drop of 3.4 per cent

Deep-pocketed Russian travellers are attracted to Singapore, with its broad array of luxury hotels and retail outlets

A NEW PLAYGROUND FOR RUSSIA'S RICH

A weak economy and a plunging currency aside, the number of Russians vacationing in Singapore is on the rise, and they are staying longer and splurging on high-end accommodation and luxury items in the Lion City.

According to statistics from the Singapore Tourism Board (STB), Singapore recorded 82,603 arrivals from Russia from January to November 2014, a 13.6 per cent year-on-year increase. The average Russian visitor was aged between 35 and 44 years, stayed for an average of four days and each spent an average of S\$1,456 (US\$1,101) per trip, making them one of the highest-spending tourists.

Chuck Abbott, regional vice president, South-east Asia, Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide, said: "Growing wealth in Russia and globalisation are contributing to the rise of tourists from this region."

Abbott said while the number of Russian guests to all four Starwood hotels – Sheraton Towers, The St Regis, The Westin and W Singapore Sentosa Cove – has "definitely grown" over the years, W Singapore in particular stood out with a 400 per cent year-on-year increase in 2013.

"(W Singapore) appeals to the Russians attracted to its resort location and avant-garde design," he explained.

Abbott added that Russian guests tend

to stay between five and 10 nights, the majority of them opting for the standard or executive rooms.

"However, we are also seeing an upward trend in the higher room categories, such as suites or even the presidential suite from this market," he said.

Over at Pan Pacific Singapore, director of sales and marketing Elaine Kum said the Russian market is one of the hotel's fastest growing, with a 70 per cent hike since 2012 and an average stay of four nights.

Kum said: "Russian guests typically opt for rooms and suites that include club access and located on the higher levels for views of the Singapore skyline."

Likewise, at The Ritz-Carlton, Millenia Singapore, director of public relations and marketing communications Nathalyn Fong said the property saw a 67 per cent year-on-year increase in Russian guests last year, a significant spike compared with the 20 per cent increase in 2013 over 2012.

Fong said: "Our Russian guests often opt for our club rooms and suites, which include exclusive benefits. They are also willing to splurge on dining and alcohol, and other luxury services such as spa treatments, butler-drawn baths and limousine transfers."

Services are also being tailored to the Russian market to better serve them.

Kum shared: "Apart from introducing Russian TV programmes, we also recog-

nise that Russian guests are most comfortable conversing in their mother tongue. (Our) hotel has added a Russian-speaking associate as part of the guest services team to specialise in caring for our Russian guests."

According to Abbott, W Hotel and The St Regis Hotel also offer Russian-speaking staff to welcome guests. In addition, The St Regis is in the midst of offering the website in the Russian language as an additional option.

However, Judy Lum, vice president of sales and marketing for Tour East Group which specialises in the longhaul market, cautioned against setting an overly optimistic outlook for the Russian market.

"The Russian rouble has devalued to an all-time low since 1998 and this will affect the growth forecast for this market," said Lum. "Sanctions from Europe and the US is affecting the Russian economy and although the government is looking to Asia, the adverse economic impact will remain for a long while."

According to STB data, the Russian market started showing a decline towards the last quarter of 2014, with a year-on-year dip of 3.7 per cent and 13.6 per cent recorded for Russian arrivals in October and November respectively.

When contacted at press time, The Ritz-Carlton, Millenia Singapore and Pan Pacific Singapore did not observe notable slowdown in the Russian market.

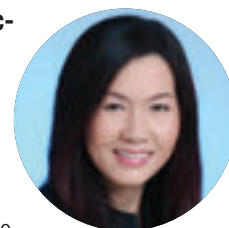
Viewpoints

What are your business prospects for 2015?

Jaclyn Yeoh, director, Siam Express

The inbound business for 2014 was quite bad so I think 2015 will not be rosy for inbound travel consultants too – I would be lucky if I could maintain the same sales revenue.

I predict the main inbound market will still be driven more from China, Japan and niche markets such as Africa and Mongolia.



Judy Lum, vice president of sales and marketing, Tour East Group

UK tour operators have reported year-on-year double-digit growth in forward bookings compared with last year. We are also seeing improvement in some parts of Europe. As our core markets are primarily longhaul, this is good news for Tour East.



Destination Singapore

TRIED & TESTED



Sofitel So Singapore

Paige Lee Pei Qilands in a state of grandeur at a 1920s heritage building turned luxury boutique hotel with designer touches

LOCATION Sofitel So Singapore's central location on Robinson Road, right in heart of the CBD, is unparalleled. Situated literally just a stone's throw from Lau Pa Sat, an established food centre in the city, the enticing aroma of satay enthralled my senses before I entered Sofitel So – needless to say, guests will find plenty of local culinary delights at the hotel's doorsteps. But upon stepping through the revolving doors of the iconic heritage building, I was immediately transported into another world – one brimming with extravagant luxury.

ROOMS Separated into two wings (heritage and hip), the hotel boasts design touches courtesy of Karl Lagerfeld and 134 lavish guestrooms conceptualised by French interior designer Isabelle Miaja. My 40m² So Urban room wowed me with its colourful Parisian-influenced interior, especially the cupola-inspired ceiling light box that resembles a palatial glass dome typical of traditional architecture in Europe.

Equipped with the world's first Apple-based guest technology, the room further intrigued me when I realised that its default in-room phone is the iPhone and the master remote control panel – which activates everything from the TV to the air-conditioning and the window curtains – are powered by an iPad mini.

Coffee is taken seriously here with the Illy coffee machine, plus selected free drinks and snacks for indulgence.

FACILITIES For a lazy night, guests can chill out by the poolside cabanas at Hi-So, the rooftop bar with a gold-tiled infinity pool. I wasn't that impressed because the gold tiles gave the water a yellowish tinge, so I skipped the swim. Nevertheless, the

strategic location of the hotel offered a 360-degree view of the CBD area, perfect for photography aficionados.

For workout junkies, the well-equipped gym awaits with bottled waters and towels.

F&B The hotel's signature restaurant and bar, Xperience, promises diners an interactive culinary journey for the senses – and I could see why. Guests are able to design their own customised menus, based on the flavours they are craving for – for instance, crunchy, juicy, smoky, creamy, spicy and zesty. You can even order dishes in three different sizes, from tasters to “enough-for-one” to “large enough to share”.

I like how the open-concept kitchen allows diners to watch French chef Anne-Cecile Degenne expertly combine flavours of East and West onto your plate – her adroit skills are definitely a performance in itself.

SERVICE The enthusiastic hotel staff, dressed in crisp white jackets, were ever-ready to greet me with a smile. Upon check in, I was puzzled when they asked me what time I would be heading out for dinner, and it turned out that they were preparing for turndown service. A box of chocolates arrived at my doorstep too.

VERDICT There was definitely a lot of inertia for me to get out of the plush room that pampered me to no end. It would be an understatement for me to say I had a good night's sleep there.

Name Sofitel So Singapore
Rates From SG\$279++ (US\$209++)
No. of rooms 134
Contact details
Tel: (65) 6701-6800
Email: h8655@sofitel.com
Website: www.sofitel.com

NEWS IN A MINUTE

1 Changi Airport adds Jewel

Construction of Jewel Changi Airport, a mixed-use complex featuring attractions, retail outlets, a hotel and facilities for airport operations located in front of Terminal 1, broke ground in December 2014.

A joint venture between Changi Airport Group and CapitaMalls Asia, Jewel will dedicate about 22,000m² of indoor space for plants, comprising the five-storey garden Forest Valley, four different gateway gardens each featuring unique landscaping elements, and the 40m-high indoor waterfall Rain Vortex. The development will be ready in 2018.

2 A new Jen-eration of hotels

Shangri-La International Hotel Management has launched a new brand of fuss-free mid-range hotels, with the first two properties located in Singapore.

Hotel Jen Orchardgateway Singapore opened in September 2014, offering 502 keys, dining outlets and technology-driven complimentary services such as free Wi-Fi, mobile charging stations throughout the hotel, iMac stations and a Press-Reader app with free access to 2,500 online publications.

The 546-room Hotel Jen Singapore, occupying the former Traders Hotel Singapore on Cuscaden Road, has embarked on a three-phase renovation since last November. The revamp is scheduled for completion in 1Q2016, and the hotel will remain open throughout this period.

Future rooms will feature modern, apartment-style furnishings and smart technology including interactive TVs with multi-device enabled streaming and in-room check-out.

3 South Beach rises in Singapore

Due to open in 1Q2015, South Beach will blend four historic buildings on site with two new towers featuring a 654-room designer hotel conceptualised by Philippe Starck, luxury residences, offices, retail spaces and a members-only arts club on Beach Road. The architecture for this mixed-use development is conceived by London's Foster + Partners.

A joint venture between Singapore's City Developments Limited and Malaysia's IOI Group, the project is located opposite Raffles Hotel Singapore on the Beach Road side and is directly connected to Suntec Singapore via an overhead bridge on the Nicoll Highway side.

4 Premier Inn debuts in Lion City

Premier Inn, the UK's largest budget hotel chain with over 670 properties globally, is expected to make its Singapore debut in mid-2016 with Premier Inn Singapore Beach Road.

Located within walking distance to the cultural districts of Haji Lane and Arab Street as well as the Marina Bay Sands business district, the 300-room Premier Inn Singapore Beach Road will have 300 rooms starting from 18m². It will feature amenities like a swimming pool, gym and meeting room facilities.

How to sell



The rooftop garden at Potato Head Folk

SEE In a highly urbanised Singapore, those seeking closer interaction with Mother Nature can head over to the **MacRitchie Reservoir** for the TreeTop Walk, the highlight of several long hiking routes there. The first of its kind in Singapore, the free-standing suspension bridge connects the two highest points in the reservoir and offers a bird's eye-view of the forest canopy.

STAY **Naumi Hotel**, which reopened its doors after a multi-million dollar renovation in 2013, impresses with its 73 guestrooms sporting designer furnishings, work desks with built-in phone chargers, organic bath amenities from Malin + Goetz, free high-speed Wi-Fi, and Apple TV's AirPlay Mirroring, which lets guests play videos from their Apple devices on the in-room TV.

DO At the Singapore Flyer, the **flight simulator** induces an immersive experience of controlling a Boeing 737-800, with a fully enclosed cockpit featuring full-functioning avionics and photorealistic visuals. The simulator also boasts a 180-degree wrap-around screen projecting stunningly accurate visuals of scenery and terrain – think flying into Paris in semi-darkness at dusk or enjoying a bird's eye view of picturesque Rome.

EAT **Potato Head Folk** at Keong Saik Road is the first international venture of Jakarta-based dining and lifestyle group Potato Head. Decorated with whimsical sculptures and murals, the four-storey project includes a restaurant serving tasty burgers, sides and cocktails; a lounge called Studio 1939; and a rooftop garden with a tiki bar.

TRIED & TESTED

Morton's of Chicago, Singapore

The old favourite, which has been operating in Singapore for 16 years, ushers in the new year with a bold change in design. *Raini Hamdi* takes a look

LOCATION Fourth level of Mandarin Oriental, Singapore.

AMBIENCE The place is buzzing, as though the year-end isn't over. It isn't even TGIF yet, rather, another dull Thursday evening. But Bar 12.21, which fronts Morton's dining room, is packed with after-office drinkers. I'm surprised, as bars in hotels usually aren't this crowded. But one bite of generous-sized Morton's steak sandwiches that are being served to every guest at the bar at no charge makes me do a mental note of returning again soon.

From where I sit at Bar 12.21, I catch a glimpse of the new Morton's. My recollection of the steakhouse from many years ago was, in one word, 'velvety'. It had the traditional 'old-money' look, with deep-red tapestries and polished dark wood, as

well as partitions that created cosy seatings.

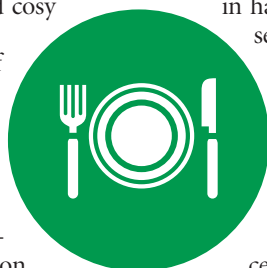
The new Morton smells of new money – fit for young spenders who want to dine, whatsapp and romance all at the same time in one big open space.

At a glance, its open concept gives me the impression of a hotel coffeehouse. But, having settled at my table by the window, which looks into the dining room and enables me to see all the action, I begin to like the fun and refreshing feel of the new Morton's. There isn't much real design work, frankly, just a good renovation that results in a warm, casual, comfortable atmosphere and a trendy Morton's indeed compared with the previous one. That the restaurant is full and sizzling with chatter and laughter are a sure sign that Morton's is popular as ever.

MENU A large part of its popularity lies

in having top-quality US beef and seafood served to perfection. I love the prime ocean platter comprising oysters, lobster, crab meat and prawns that are so sweet and fresh. It's such a shame people often forget Morton's has an extensive menu and there is certainly plenty of choices other than steak, as the Chilean sea bass that I ordered for my main course shows. My partner, meanwhile, is over the moon with his centre-cut prime ribeye.

SERVICE With many long-service staff, it's no wonder Morton's sticks like Teflon in Singapore's competitive culinary scene. I'm being served by Achang; 16 years with Morton's, he knows the menu inside out, never misses a detail and interacts well with me. The staff are so 'tight' together; it is heartening to see general manager Seth Balgden himself serving and clearing tables, and restaurant manager Edwin



Name Morton's of Chicago, Singapore

Location 5 Raffles Avenue

Contact details

Tel: (65) 6339-3740

Website: www.mortons.com

Seow taking a dig or two at Achang. Such young-at-heart people with a great sense of humour actually go better with a contemporary-looking Morton's.

VERDICT This place is prime cut.

MY WAY

What do you do during your free time?

Time off work is dedicated to family and friends. I love to dine out with friends, and experience the wonderful array of restaurants that Singapore has to offer. From international cuisine to local fare, we are never short of food choices on this island nation.

Can you share one favourite hobby?

It will be hard for me to choose a personal favourite, but I rank skiing, golfing and working out at the gym as my top choices. It is my belief that a healthy body and mind is what drives you further in work and life.

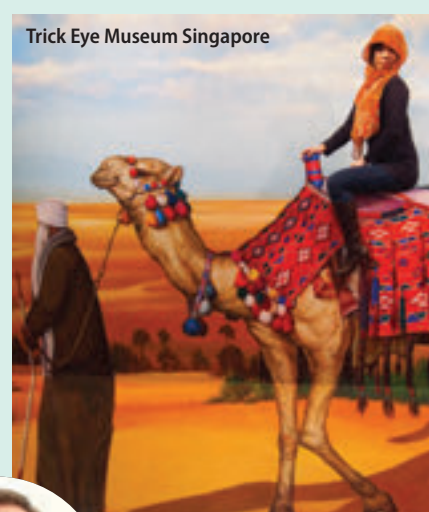
What is a must-do/see in Singapore?

It will be hard to come up with an exhaustive list, (but) a visit to Sentosa Island and the Harbourfront precinct is a must. There is an incredible array of attractions to experience, from Singapore's largest shopping mall to world-class attractions including Universal Studios Singapore, S.E.A. Aquarium, Singapore 4D AdventureLand, as well as vibrant beaches, golf courses, marinas and spas.

Beyond that, the Night Safari and Gardens by the Bay will appeal to nature lovers, while Little India and Chinatown will provide a taste of local cultures. Singapore is a shopping haven so Orchard Road is not to be missed.

Which are the top dining spots?

My personal recommendations will include celebrity-chef restaurants such as

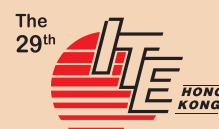


Noel Hawkes
Vice president, engagement
& partnerships, Resorts World
Sentosa

L'Atelier de Joël Robuchon at Resorts World Sentosa and Jamie's Italian at Vivo City, as well as hawker fare at Malaysian Food Street. There is also a great selection at Tanjong Beach Club, as well as Quayside Isle at Sentosa Cove, which makes a good getaway from the hustle and bustle of the city.

Which is your favourite attraction in Singapore?

That would be a tie for many in that number one spot! For adrenaline junkies, I would recommend Universal Studios Singapore, iFly and MegaZip Adventure Park. And for those who prefer a more relaxing family day out, my top picks will be S.E.A. Aquarium, Madame Tussauds and Trick Eye Museum.



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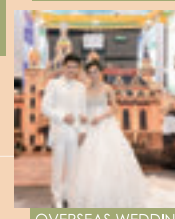
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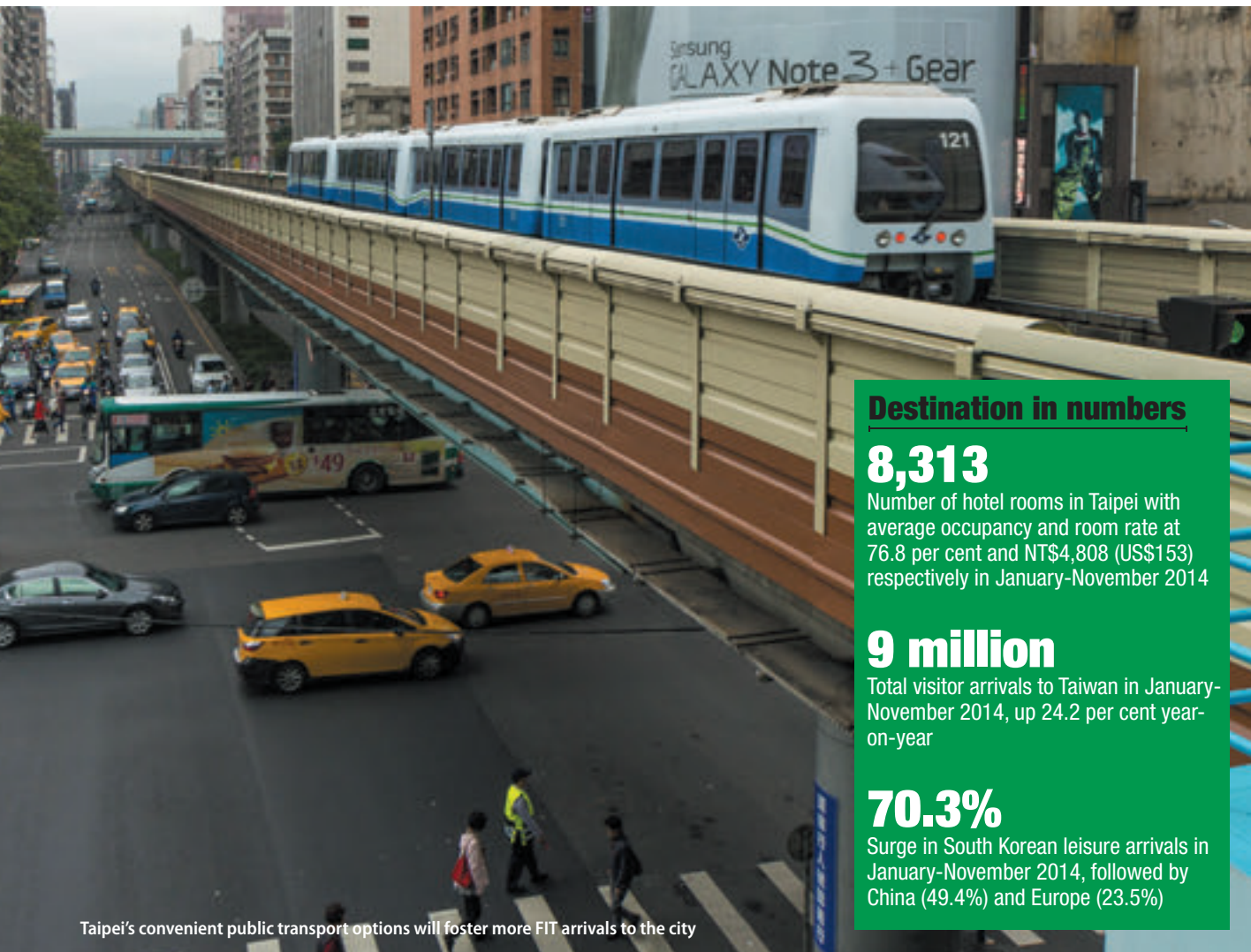


Supporting Organizations



Destination Taiwan

OILING THE WHEELS OF CONNECTIVITY



Taipei's convenient public transport options will foster more FIT arrivals to the city

Destination in numbers

8,313

Number of hotel rooms in Taipei with average occupancy and room rate at 76.8 per cent and NT\$4,808 (US\$153) respectively in January-November 2014

9 million

Total visitor arrivals to Taiwan in January-November 2014, up 24.2 per cent year-on-year

70.3%

Surge in South Korean leisure arrivals in January-November 2014, followed by China (49.4%) and Europe (23.5%)

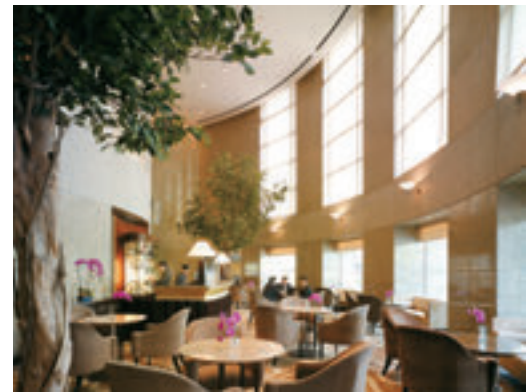
How to sell

DO Nothing beats visiting leisure farms to experience the local lifestyle. Owners of the various themed farms can serve as professional guides to lead the countryside tour. Popular picks include the **Flying Cow Ranch** in Miaoli County and **Sheng Yang Water Grass Park** in Yilan County.

EAT Besides night markets, Taipei is also home to many cosy bakeries and cafés. An example is **Neverland Bakery & Restaurant** in Neihu District, which serves quality food and beverages. To raise its offerings and service up a notch, the café has invited an expert from Hong Kong to teach the staff how to make milk tea and hired a pastry chef from The Sherwood Taipei.

SEE Located at Jinshan District of New Taipei City, **Juming Museum** houses the artworks and masterpieces of internationally renowned sculptor Ju Ming. Guided tours can be booked for groups of over 20 people.

STAY **Shangri-La's Far Eastern Plaza Hotel, Taipei** is expected to complete its revamp this March. The upgrade covers its 420 guestrooms and suites, the lobby and driveway, as well as two F&B outlets on the lobby level. All guestrooms and suites will be equipped with complimentary high-speed Wi-Fi, flat-screen TVs with an HDMI device for connecting to personal laptops, among other amenities.



Leveraging the growing availability of tourist-friendly infrastructure in Taipei, the city government is pushing the *BMW Travel in Taipei* campaign, which encourages visitors to explore the destination by bus or bicycle, metro or walking.

As of December 2014, Taipei offered 12 metro lines, 4,000 public buses and 196 YouBike bicycle rental stations. Surpassing 70,000 daily rentals with a fleet of 6,406 bicycles, YouBike aims to increase to 250 and 300 stations in 2015 and 2016 respectively.

Last November, Taipei also welcomed the Songshan Line, a new 8.5km metro line boasting six transfer stations among a total of eight stations, connecting to local night markets and temple attractions.

Trade players are positive that Taipei's transportation network will benefit FITs.

K&A International managing director, Kitty Wong, said: "The BMW is not just for FITs. Operators of group tours could also arrange bike rides for clients, especially for commuting between the hotel and nearby shopping areas. First promoted in Beijing, the programme is also well received in Malaysia, Japan and Singapore."

Said Cary Gray, general manager of W Taipei, located right above a metro station and near a YouBike station: "We believe we'll see more guests because of BMW. But infrastructure, such as the MRT from the international airport to Taipei, can be enhanced."

Meanwhile, Lion Travel inbound department manager, Leo Yeh, expects FITs to exceed group travel in two years, up

from current 50:50 ratio.

"The convenience afforded by YouBike and the metro may not benefit travel consultants much, unless we add value to enrich visitors' travel experience, such as telling the story behind sightseeing points," he pointed out.

Last June, Lion Travel cooperated with EasyCard to issue 20,000 smart cards for its overseas agent partners. Yeh said: "(This) enables smooth and seamless travel in Taipei for our clients. So far, our orders mostly come from travel partners in China."

Beyond Taipei, Taiwan has been steadily ramping up its transport network too. For over a decade, Taiwan Tour Bus, with support from the Taiwan Tourism Bureau, has rolled out bus excursions operated by local tour agencies to major scenic spots across the island. Nine new bus routes

have been added to Taiwan since January, bringing the total to 86 routes.

Having bidded for the route operation since six years ago, Best Travel now handles 11 routes. Its chairman, William Lu, said: "The bureau pushes the option through its website and overseas so travelers feel safe to take it up. So far it's popular with Asians, especially with the Chinese. The tour costs only NT\$1,000 (US\$32) per day. Some routes cover areas outside Taipei and complement YouBike, allowing exploration at a slow pace."

Viewpoints

What challenges does Taiwan's tourism sector face?

Jason Yeh, CEO, GIS Group

"Taipei needs more international five-star hotels to boost its image. Moreover, the luxury resort market in popular leisure locations such as Hualien and Taichung have not been tapped, so it'd be a big opportunity for global chains to expand their footprints there. In terms of business events, the government should be more proactive with a long-term strategy, like setting up a CVB and approaching potential organisers rather than just advertising."

Cary Gray, general manager, W Taipei

"Visitors from China accounted for almost 40 per cent of Taiwan's 2014 arrivals; W Taipei has noted the risk of relying heavily on one single market, so we continue to diversify our feeder markets through relevant talent recruitment and attendance of tradeshow in those markets. The authorities also ought to emphasise and ensure the safety and quality of tourism attractions through appropriate regulations and their sound implementation."

NEWS IN A MINUTE



1 Two amba hotels on the way
Following the launch of amba Taipei Ximending in 2012, Ambassador Hotel Group will add two more properties to its amba portfolio, a boutique brand targeting FITs.

Opening in Q2, the 90-room amba Taipei Zhongshan offers only one all-day dining outlet, but it compensates with its convenient location in Zhongshan commercial, shopping and entertainment district.

Amba Taipei Songshan will open atop Songshan Railway Station complex in Q4.

2 Songshan metro line debuts
The 8.5km Songshan metro line was inaugurated last November as the third east-west route covering eight underground stations. The terminal station, Songshan, connects with Taiwan Railways Songshan Station via an underground passage. Beimen Station will connect with the future airport line's Taipei Main Station via a moving walkway. The Songshan line increases Taipei's MRT network to 134.6km and 116 stations.

3 A refreshed Grand Hyatt
Grand Hyatt Taipei will don a new look when its full refurbishment is completed in March. Guestrooms will offer a brand-new East-meets-West design in line with Grand Hy-

att's signature red and white colours, multi-media functional dock, and TV with Bluetooth. Each Grand Club room and suite will have a Nespresso coffee machine.

To enhance the experience for female guests, all rooms will also provide free hand cream, shaving cream and shaver, plus other amenities upon request.

4 New LCCs take off in Taiwan
Last November, China Airlines kicked off Tigerair Taiwan with a daily Taipei-Bangkok route and four-times weekly Taipei-Chiang Mai services.

Meanwhile, TransAsia Airways Group has launched V Air and inaugurated its Bangkok-Taipei route last December. V Air will expand its network to other Asian destinations like Japan and South Korea this year.

5 World Chocolate Wonderland
The World Chocolate Wonderland debuted in Danshui Fisherman's Wharf in Taipei last July, spanning two floors of themed zones.

A mecca for chocolate lovers, the Chocolate Theatre offers interactive games and performances while the retail zones display chocolate-related gifts imported from all over the world. Groups can book DIY chocolate-making classes in advance.

MY WAY

What are your hobbies?

Apart from skiing and golf, I love jogging, a hobby I started a year ago. I run about seven kilometres per night after work, which allows me to enjoy the precious moments with nature.

Where do you normally go jogging?

There is a large sports field beside a local school so I go straight there after work on weekdays. Taipei has numerous scenic jogging areas, such as Taihu Lake Park. I would also drive to riverside parks for a jog during holidays.

How do you spend a day off work?

My busy work schedule prevents me from visiting distant places so I usually patronise the café near my home for a leisurely breakfast. Then I would watch a movie or chat with my friends in a café in the afternoon. Taipei has many small, themed cafés and Da An is a popular spot. After that, I will go prawn fishing at a farm in north Taipei for a couple of hours before heading home for dinner.

Any recommendations for local Taiwanese cuisine?

I strongly recommend local family-run outlets serving local snacks such as dumplings and beef noodles. Small local eateries are worth a try as they also serve excellent dishes, with many scattered over Taipei. I especially love those near my home in Neihu.

Where are the best spots in Taipei to shop for sports equipment?

The chain store Metroasis is a one-stop shop for sports gear in general. For skiing, I go to Prince Outdoor at Nan-



YouBike boasts over 190 rental stations in Taipei

Andy Yu
Vice president, special interest tours
Lion Travel

chang Road in Zhongzheng District. For biking, Neihu has many large-scale bike shops while mountain expedition equipment stores are clustered near Taipei Station.

What's the best way to explore Taipei?

The metro system here is well developed and connects to different districts. Visitors can use the metro and/or rent a bicycle to explore the city. Most YouBike rental stations are near metro exits and the rental is free for the first 30 minutes. Walking is a good alternative.

TRIED & TESTED

Mandarin Oriental, Taipei

At the Mandarin Oriental's newest outpost in Asia, *Prudence Lui* finds that the property stays true to the group's promise of refined luxury

LOCATION The hotel, situated on Dunhua North Road, is just a five-minute taxi ride from downtown Songshan International Airport and 40 minutes from Taoyuan International Airport. The Xinyi shopping and business district is a 15-minute ride away.

ROOMS I stayed in a comfortable 55m² Deluxe room – the smallest room size – that has a king-size bed. The elegant style and exquisite craftsmanship were evident in the marbled bathroom, walk-in closets and handcrafted wallpaper. The floor was a combination of parquet, marble and carpeting delineating different purpose zones.

There was a deep bathtub and rain-forest shower, but the toilet was situated

separately near the entrance, which was a little inconvenient. The bright lighting and spacious writing desk, however, were much appreciated when I had to do some work at night.

As a tea lover, I was impressed by the tailor-made, stylish tea boxes filled with various tea brands all made in Taiwan, adding a local touch.

F&B The hotel houses six F&B outlets, including fine-dining Chinese restaurant Ya Ge and contemporary French brasserie Café Un Deux Trois.

I enjoyed a tasty Italian lunch at Bencotto, which is run by the Michelin-starred chef Mario Cittadini. The spacious setting allows enough privacy between tables.

At the Mandarin Cake Shop, a must-buy is its signature rose petal strawberry jam, and the patisserie also sells unique Taiwanese jam flavours like pink guava and lime.



Unfortunately, I did not have a chance to try the renowned afternoon tea at the Jade Lounge, which usually requires reservation two to three weeks ahead.

FACILITIES Besides the 12-suite spa, the 20m outdoor pool and the 24-hour gym, the property also boasts the 960m² Grand Ballroom that accommodates up to 1,200 guests, five Oriental rooms and a pre-function area on basement two. The 185m² Grand Salon on the eighth floor can host up to 140 guests while The Chairman's Residence a floor down is Taipei's first luxurious private event space.

SERVICE Very personalised and attentive; exceeding my expectations.

VERDICT An ideal choice for business and leisure travellers alike.

Name Mandarin Oriental, Taipei
No. of rooms 303
Rate Deluxe rooms from NT16,500 (US\$521)
Contact details
Tel: (886) 2-2715-6888
Email: motpe-sales@mohg.com
Website: www.mandarinoriental.com/taipei

Destination Brunei

TREADING IN NEW WATERS

Destination in numbers

-0.2%

Year-on-year percentage decrease in air arrivals in 1H2014 which totalled 101,668

238,000

Air arrivals target for 2015. Brunei Tourism targeted 231,000 air arrivals to the sultanate in 2014, a three per cent increase over arrivals in 2013

42%

Average occupancy rate of Brunei's hotels in 2014, a dip from the 52 per cent in 2013 when the sultanate was chair of ASEAN

Brunei's pristine coral reefs are a draw for seasoned divers in the region

Brunei is seeking to promote itself as a new dive destination, offering an alternative to traditional sites in Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand.

Due to little fishing in its waters, many diving sites in the sultanate are still in pristine condition. Brunei Tourism wants to promote the fact that the destination has shallow coral dives perfect for inexperienced divers as well as more challenging reef and wreck dives.

Recently, it was discovered that there are more unique dive sites off the Abana Reef that have never been explored before, said Brunei Tourism acting director, Mariani Sabtu.

"Being a new dive destination, we attract seasoned divers who have never been to Brunei before. Being new, there are also few divers in the water," pointed out Bandar Seri Begawan-based Poni Divers general manager Thye Sing Wong, who works with travel agencies and consumers alike in South-east Asia.

Shipwrecks along Brunei's coastal waters make the best dive spots, Wong opined. He added: "We have one of the most numbers of shipwrecks in South-

east Asia and they are easily accessible.

"It is very easy to get to the dive sites as Brunei is a small nation. From Bandar Seri Begawan, it is about 30 minutes to the beach, and about a 30-minute boat ride to the dive area."

According to Thye, the company's foreign clients are mainly from the Asia-Pacific region such as Singapore, Thailand, China, Hong Kong, the Philippines and Australia, with some divers from the UK.

Said Sugumaran Nair, inbound & MICE division manager of Frema Travel Services, which combines diving with land tours: "Sabah is a lot more popular for diving as it started promotions earlier whereas our destination is still new. But with the negative publicity caused by the recent kidnapping cases off the east coast of Sabah which has resulted in safety concerns, Brunei Tourism should take advantage to promote our dive sites more aggressively and attract divers here."

He notes that divers usually spend at least three nights in Brunei.

Adam Kamal, CEO of Malaysia-based Rakyat Travel feels that the NTO has to embark on more promotions and fam trips as little is known about this new

product.

"Brunei is attractive to the Malaysian Muslim market because getting halal food is very easy. Diving will give Malaysians another reason to visit Brunei. It is an opportunity for us to start selling new diving sites to repeat divers."

Khurul Zainie, managing director of MegaBorneo Tour Planner, added: "Brunei Tourism has to educate tour operators on the dive sites and what the destination has to offer in terms of diving. Dive operators do not have the expertise to package accommodation and land tours on their own, thus the involvement of tour operators is important to grow this new segment."

At least one hotel has also seen the opportunity in this space.

Major dive operator Oceanic Quest managing director, Steven Ng, said his company will from 1Q2015 offer dive programmes for adults and children at The Empire Hotel & Country Club, currently the only luxury beachfront hotel. The pair will also team up to offer dive packages with accommodation.

Ng added: "With this expansion as well as marketing efforts in 2013 and 2014, we expect business to double in 2015."

How to sell

SEE To help visitors gain a better understanding of Bruneian royalty, schedule the **Royal Regalia Museum** into the itinerary. On display are the sultan's full royal regalia, including the crown and royal chariot, along with a vast collection of opulent treasures given to His Majesty.

EAT Serving traditional Bruneian specialties and showcasing local handicraft such as Brunei brocade, silverware and ornamental dagger keris, **Tarindak D'Seni** is a great place to get a feel of the country's food and



Viewpoints

What are your business prospects for 2015?

Khurul Zainie,
managing director,
MegaBorneo
Tour Planner

It looks good. Royal Brunei Airlines' direct flights to Bali, Ho Chi Minh City and other parts of ASEAN make it easier to combine Brunei with other parts of this region. Traditionally, we used to sell Borneo as a single destination, but we are slowly expanding into other ASEAN countries such as the Philippines, Indochina, Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand to provide complete inbound and outbound tours within ASEAN, targeting longhaul markets.



Peter Feran,
general manager,
Radisson Hotel
Brunei
Darussalam

Positive and optimistic following on from a very successful 2014, contributed by our newly renovated guestrooms and suites. We are confident that with the numerous other product upgrades together with the introduction of new Radisson service concepts and our exceptional service standards, we will continue to be the market leader and hotel of choice in Brunei.



The sultanate wants to shout out about its marine attractions and diving sites, which remain unspoiled and unknown to the world, writes **S Puvaneswary**

culture at one go. It also provides a view of Kampong Ayer.

STAY **The Empire Hotel & Country Club** is the only five-star beach resort in the sultanate. Besides a vast private beach offering a wide choice of water sports, there is also a Jack Nicklaus-designed golf course. Other facilities include a gym, swimming pool, bowling alley, tennis, squash and badminton courts, plus a movie theatre.

DO Brunei's **shipwrecks** have been described as being in pristine condition, so don't miss out on them. They are scattered between Brunei and the Malaysian island of Labuan.

NEWS IN A MINUTE

1 River cruise service

Launched last November, *MV Sentosa* ferry cruise provides guests a comfortable option of touring Brunei River and Kampong Ayer (Water Village). Operated by Sha-Zan Marine in compliance with international maritime standards, the vessel can hold up to 60 passengers and has fully enclosed air-conditioned decks. It can also be chartered for private functions, meetings and trips to Temburong.

For enquiries, contact AZ B2N Tour Services at (673) 224-0529/ (673) 881-8530 or visit www.b2n-brunei.com



the arrival of up to 10 A320neo (new engine option) aircraft at the end of 2017. Overall, we will soon operate one of the youngest shorthaul fleets in the world, to complement our state-of-the-art Dreamliner B787 fleet on longhaul (routes)."

Last October, the airline also resumed services to Ho Chi Minh City with four-times weekly flights. The service, previously terminated in October 2011, will be operated by an Airbus A319 on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays. On Sundays, an Airbus A320 will be utilised.

3 Brunei Darussalam Sports Gallery

Brunei Darussalam Sports Gallery was opened in April 2014 to showcase the history of sports development in the country.

Comprising five zones, the museum exhibits cover the sporting events Brunei has engaged in over the years, the participation of national athletes in the Southeast Asia Games and the Sultanate's milestones in regional competitions as well as sporting events involving athletes with special needs.



From left: The Empire Hotel & Country Club; Royal Regalia Museum



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Tourism Expo 2015
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26 to 28 Jun 2015



Guilin International
Tourism Expo 2015
www.cgite.com.cn
29 to 31 May 2015



China Xi'an Silk Road
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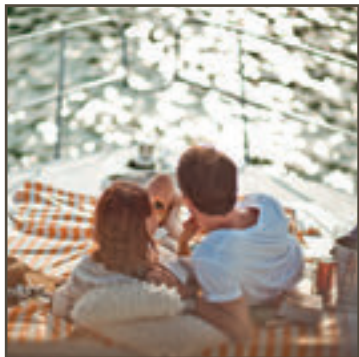
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