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October 21, 2016
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Clash of the online titans

Google's encroachment into the online travel space will change travel distribution

By Dannon Har

As Google expands its ever-increasing suite of travel products, the prospects of the Internet giant encroaching deeper into the online travel space has become a growing area of concern for industry players.

Google already boasts a bevy of travel products including metasearch tools Google Flights and Google Hotels, and most recently launched itinerary planning app Google Trips. It is now rolling out Google Assistant on Allo, its own chat app, and on its Google Pixel smartphones released earlier this week.

Observers think that the rising travel ambitions of Google will put it in direct competition with metasearch engines, which will be forced to transform in order to survive. OTAs, on the other hand, having spent billions of advertising dollars annually with Google and sell travel products, are less likely to have their positions jeopardised.

When asked what the near future holds for travel metasearchers during the WIT 2016 roundtable earlier this week, HotelsCombined CEO Hichame Assi said he would be watching Google closely to decide the next course of action while Qunar co-founder Fritz Demopoulos said he expects more vertical integration to happen until OTAs and metas become indistinguishable from each other.

This echoes the findings from a recent Amadeus-commissioned study by the London School of Economics and Political Science that cites this as the nascent beginning of the "mega meta-OTAs".

These entities will come into existence as they are allowed greater negotiating power in relation with suppliers even as



Zimmerman: no OTA ambitions yet

Google gains greater foothold in the industry.

Already, most major metasearchers are owned by OTA conglomerates such as Kayak under The Priceline Group, Qunar under Ctrip and Trivago under Expedia.

Holger Taubmann, senior vice president distribution at Amadeus, is expecting "rapid and large-scale changes" to take place in the mega meta-OTA scene, as the consumer expectations of a younger tech-savvy generation spill over into the travel distribution space.

This doesn't mean Google is overtaking the entire travel booking chain. Guillaume de Marcillac, co-CEO of Fastbooking, which provides hotel channel management solutions, is convinced Google will come out a winner but will not become an OTA.

"What Google doesn't have is the ability to source for suppliers in a highly frag-

mented market such as with independent hotels, which accounts for two-thirds of all hotel rooms," he said. "What they love is to work with big OTA partners to simplify the connectivity."

Fastbooking, which uses Google as one of its distribution partners, is seeing growth of Google Flights and Hotels "exploding" in the past 18 months, added Marcillac. "I can confirm Google is the fastest growing, but they also start from a lower base. Internationally, the biggest metasearcher for hotels in terms of absolute volume is still TripAdvisor."

Google is currently in full product innovation mode, said Eric Zimmerman, director for Google Travel, during a Q&A session at WIT. He points to artificial intelligence technologies as trends that travel industry stakeholders should keep watch on and that will become a reality in a significant way in the near future.

Speaking to the *TTG Asia Show Daily* on the sidelines of ITB Asia, Jenn Villalobos, head of travel & hospitality Asia-Pacific at Google, states that it is not Google's plan to become an online booking portal but a travel search player aimed at "leveling the playing field".

Zimmerman also assuages worries brought up by OTAs, adding that Google is "very focused on a wide gamut of travel problems (but) we don't want to be in the OTA business. There are many great OTAs and suppliers out there and we are not the right entity (to do that)".

He reiterated that Google is only interested in the experience of consumers and will not bother about the backend of travel, the only caveat being "it's very hard to predict the future".

Golden partners for ASEAN@50

By S Puvaneswary

With just months to ASEAN's 50th founding anniversary in 2017, the 10 member states have joined hands to promote South-east Asia as a single yet diverse destination with a year-long campaign to commemorate the bloc's golden jubilee.

Set to be officially launched at the upcoming ASEAN Tourism Forum in Singapore in January 2017, the *Visit ASEAN@50* campaign aims to raise awareness through ASEAN brand building and drive travel multi-destination bookings in South-east



Ng: special commemorative issues

Asia and boost tourist arrivals to 121 million and tourism receipts to US\$83 billion by end-2017.

Strategic partners including TTG Travel Trade Publishing, Air-Asia, Mastercard, Go ASEAN, ASEANTA, and the ASEAN Centres in China, Japan and South Korea have come on board to support the campaign with their own initiatives.

For example, TTG Travel Trade Publishing on its part is backing the campaign through ASEAN 50th Anniversary special editions to inspire and promote tourism business in the region, said managing director Darren Ng.

AirAsia's head of commercial, Spencer Lee, commented: "We will aggressively promote the ASEAN Pass next year and will come out with special promotions and a livery to promote the campaign."

Muhamad Daud, culture and tourism unit head at ASEAN-Korea Centre, said the centre will promote ASEAN at the Busan International Tourism Fair next year and introduce digital promotions.

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News

Singapore scoots closer to new Indian markets

Travel players predict more Indian arrivals, longer stays, thanks to new direct LCC flights

By Paige Lee Pei Qi

Budget carrier Scoot's new direct connections from Singapore to Chennai, Amritsar and Jaipur, launched earlier this year, have given travel agents selling Singapore high business hopes of growing numbers

out of these emerging Indian cities.

Prior to Scoot's move, there were no direct flights from Singapore to Amritsar and Jaipur.

Welcoming the new air links, Ajambar Basnet, director of Chariot Travels in Sin-

gapore, said: "Travellers from those cities no longer need to get to tier-one gateways to catch an international flight to Singapore. This saves time and money, and (eliminates) long overland journeys."

Basnet added that Scoot's new services

are likely to grow Indian arrivals, as travellers who have never visited Singapore before will now be able to do so. Moreover, the LCC services would encourage budget conscious travellers to make the trip.

"We are hopeful that these travellers can even extend their stay in Singapore by another night or opt for an additional tour due to the savings they make from the airfare," Basnet added.

Likewise Ramesh Travel Service Singapore's general manager Ram Samtani, is confident that the improved air links will enable Singapore to "tap into new markets". He said:

"The (flights) provide greater convenience and more travel options for the increasingly demanding passengers."

According to Kumara Guru, executive director of India-based Aaya Journeys, Singapore is already one of his top-selling destinations and these new flights will help to cement the city-state's position.

Meanwhile, Singapore Tourism Board chief executive Lionel Yeo has named Ahmedabad and Hyderabad as high-growth source markets, and revealed that trade engagement and marketing efforts there would be intensified.



Samtani: more time in Singapore



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Rooting for repeats

By Paige Lee Pei Qi

Brand USA wants to grow South-east Asian arrivals by enticing travellers to return to the US and explore new destinations beyond the major gateway cities.

Speaking to *TTG Asia Show Daily*, Chris Ellis, director of global trade development with Brand USA, said there is a lot of "untapped potential" waiting to be unlocked in places besides the popular cities of San Francisco, Las Vegas, Los Angeles and New York.

According to Ellis, South-east Asian arrivals rose five to six per cent YOY over the past few years, with more than 772,000 trips made in 2015 from Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam. He recognises the potential to further grow numbers by encouraging repeat visitorship.



Ellis: more to see and do in the US

Citing San Francisco as an example, he said: "There is far more to see and do in the greater Bay Area than most visitors realise, and on our part we aim to share this knowledge with the trade."

For instance, just two to three hours' drive from San Francisco are Nevada City and Santa Cruz.

To educate the trade on promoting the "less visited" cities, Brand USA is revamping its website to offer suggested itineraries and tourism products. This will be launched towards the beginning of 2017.

Ellis is optimistic about the South-east Asian market, saying travel from the region will rise as more air links materialise.

United Airlines launched direct flights between Singapore and San Francisco in June, while Singapore Airlines will embark on the same route this month.



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News

A more crowded marketplace for Thai DMCs

But with Thailand's growing arrivals, DMCs think there's enough pie to go around

By Xinyi Liang-Pholsena

The constant addition of new players entering into Thailand's established DMC scene has many questioning if the market is facing saturation, but players in the field are contending that the pie is growing bigger – and has a slice for everyone.

A newcomer is HG Travel Thailand, launched this April as a joint venture led by managing director Andre van der Marck. Thailand forms part of HG Travel's wider expansion strategy into the region, adding to the Hanoi-based DMC's presence in Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar.

Van der Marck sees a gap still in the small- to medium-sized grounds for bespoke operators like HG Travel Thailand, whose focus on the high-end, tailor-made sector will put it in a better position to customise “complicated itineraries spanning two to three weeks for demanding customers” than counterparts going after the mass market.

“Established DMCs in Thailand are either the small mom-and-pop variety or the big boys on the other spectrum,” said van der Marck. “We are not going up against the big boys like Diethelm or Destination Asia; we don't want to fight against Goliath.”

Exo Travel group managing director Hamish Keith perceives it as a “very normal” development for operators that have been successful in neighbouring countries to set up in Thailand, owing to growing interconnectedness and cross-border travel in the region.

“Moreover, a client expects consistent service and usually prefers to deal with one DMC for each file rather than handle several relationships. This leads to more regional DMCs or satellite operations, which of course increases competition and can lead to some saturation in the marketplace,” said Keith.

Noting that competition is inevitable with a more crowded marketplace, Destination Asia (Thailand)'s managing direc-

tor Pornthip Hirunkate also thinks that new DMCs will keep the incumbents “on their toes” and push them to “think out of the box and engage clients at even more creative levels”.

Keith agreed: “We believe that good operators who develop interesting products and are ready to invest in resources to promote the destination will help attract additional interest and attention to the region, which in turn helps to increase the size of the cake and ultimately benefits everyone, especially the destination.”

While new DMCs in South-east Asia have come knocking on the doors of Easy Tours Belgium with the lure of lower fees, managing director Antoine Noens argues that it's not a simple price proposition when it comes to partnerships. “We don't often change DMCs. Good times, bad times, we don't change DMCs just for five dollars less,” he commented.

But if new players are able to “bring

something new to the market” and “add value to relationships”, Karen Sales, senior event producer at Xyhyr Brand Experiences Australia, would consider switching partners in markets where existing ones have become complacent and lack product ingenuity.

It seems like the trade generally thinks the Thai DMC playing field is wide enough to accommodate newcomers.

“Arrivals are always rising in Thailand, with over 20 million real visitors each year. There is still room for niche players (like us),” van der Marck stated.

“Thailand is a stepping stone for anyone visiting South-east Asia, especially for emerging markets like Poland which is starting to explore this region. (More DMCs in Thailand) will (benefit) both buyers and sellers alike,” said Noens.

On the contrary, he suggests that Indochina is seeing a saturated DMC sector as emerging destinations like Laos and Cambodia do not have (sufficient) visitor volume yet to justify an expanding pool of DMC players.



Noens: money can't buy partnerships

Go into Vietnam

Backed by the pan-Europe prowess of its parent travel company Der Touristik Group, Go Vacation – which is already represented in Thailand, Indonesia and Sri Lanka – is eyeing an even bigger piece of the Europe outbound market into South-east Asia with the creation of a new Vietnam outfit.

Led by general manager Erkan Tuncaakar, who previously headed Go Vacation's business in Sri Lanka and Indonesia, Go Vacation Vietnam is the result of a joint venture inked between Go Vacation and Buffalo Tours during ITB Berlin in March this year.

For a DMC which already has access to 14 European feeder markets, Tuncaakar sees strong growth opportunities for Go Vacation in emerging

countries such as Poland and Czech Republic, where tour operators there are beginning to show an interest in new outbound destinations in Asia like Vietnam.

As well, the launch of Go Vacation Vietnam will effectively shift Der Touristik's Dertour, Meier's Weltreisen and Kuoni Switzerland accounts from ICS, Diethelm and Asian Trails respectively to Go Vacation Vietnam, which Tuncaakar likens to as “bringing three siblings who were previously living in different houses back into one home”.

Furthermore, this consolidation will clearly enable Go Vacation to “consolidate strengths” to streamline its work process and efficiency as well as to gain market share, overriding its “diluted” clout in the market previously, Tuncaakar said.

Europamundo joins JTB Group, starts conquest of Asia

By Dannon Har

Leading land tour operator in Spanish and Portuguese-speaking countries, Europamundo Vacations, has set its sights on expanding massively into Asia.

It became part of the JTB Group and began selling in Asia starting February this year in the markets of India, Thailand, Malaysia and especially the Philippines, currently its strongest-growing market in South-east Asia, revealed Steven Pearson, Europamundo's regional sales manager for the region.

Come 2017, it intends to break into Singapore and Indonesia using wholesale operators, a strategy it currently employs as well in its Asian markets, such as with

the appointment of Sri Sutra Travel in March as Europamundo's Malaysian GSA.

“We don't sell directly to agents but work through wholesale operators with great local expertise and wide networks,” said Pearson. “That is the key to our success.”

In India, Europamundo Vacations has appointed four GSAs as the market is vast and differentiated. If the company ever heads to China, which there are no plans as of yet, the same multi-pronged strategy will likely be employed, Pearson added.

Emerging markets such as Vietnam and

Cambodia are more likely on its sights, he said, with plans to cover the entire South-east Asia “at some point”.

As to whether business has been good, Pearson explains it is hard to give a quantitative answer now, as they have only begun operations in Asia less than a year ago. He added: “What I can say is that we've definitely fulfilled our expectations and seen the potential for more growth.”

“Our land tours are competitively priced and the most flexible in the market with the ability to begin and end at any one of the guaranteed stops. That is our unique selling point.”



Pearson: emerging markets are hot

Genting's Best Western targets families, events

By Yixin Ng

The 246-key Best Western Premier Genting Ion Delemen, due to open by this year end, will be positioned as an urban resort that is perfect for families, couples and those who seek cooler climes close by.

General manager of the hotel in Malaysia's Genting Highlands, Ian Hurst, said the bedroom suites, numerous F&B outlets, heated indoor pools, a kids' club and more will keep these guests busy.

He added that Asian and Middle Eastern holidaymakers favour the highlands for a cool weather experience without having to fly to Europe.

The hotel has received “quite a lot of” enquiries from Iran specifically. “Iran is opening up and Iranians want international holidays. As a Muslim country, Malaysia is seen as a good stepping stone for these travellers,” he explained.

Hurst also hopes to attract the weddings segment with the hotel's ballroom for 500 pax and deck which overlooks the misty mountains.

Pugeneswary Mudukasan, the hotel's spokesperson, added that the “spectacular” meeting rooms – all with floor-to-ceiling windows that provide “180-degree views” from up high – and extensive teambuilding facilities are attracting meeting planners. Michelin recently enquired about a teambuilding retreat in the hotel, while Mini Cooper is planning a drive up from Singapore.

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TTG Travel Trade Publishing is a business group of TTTG Asia Media

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FINNAIR

News

Stopover spotlight

The Helsinki hub continues to feature prominently for Visit Finland's latest campaign

By S Puvaneswary

Visit Finland is taking advantage of the Helsinki Airport hub, which allows for the shortest connection times between Asia and Europe via the polar route, as the strongest drawcard for its new StopOver Finland programme.

Speaking to the *Daily* at the global launch of the campaign at ITB Asia, StopOver Finland programme director and Visit Finland global sales promotion head, Heli Mende, said the programme targets travellers from Asia-Pacific transiting via Helsinki Airport.

Developed in collaboration with Finnair and other Finnish

travel experts to showcase the best of Finland, the programme provides more than 100 services, experiences and package tours spanning a wide range of interests, lasting from five hours to five days.

To reach out to a wider global audience, Visit Finland has entered into a new marketing partnership with Travelport to launch an online competition for travel agents to promote Finland as a key stopover destination among their friends or clients.

Heli revealed that the East and South-east Asia markets com-

bined showed a 23 per cent year-on-year growth for the first seven months of 2016.

The Singapore market, which recorded a 44 per cent year-on-year surge in overnight stays from January to July 2016, is expected to show further growth in the coming months. Finnair had on October 17 changed its aircraft type on its daily Helsinki-Singapore route from Airbus A340 to A350, increasing the capacity on this sector by 15 per cent to 297 seats.

Other core markets in Asia are also showing growth potential as Finnair steps up frequencies on

popular routes in summer 2017 with its fleet of A350s.

The carrier will add four more weekly flights to Narita from June 5 to October 27, 2017 and three more weekly flights on the Helsinki-Hong Kong route between June 6 and October 28, 2017, bringing the weekly number of flights up to 10 on both routes.

Juha Järvinen, chief commercial officer at Finnair, said: "With increased frequencies for Tokyo and Hong Kong on the A350, we are now tapping into the growth of Asia-Europe traffic and increasing our presence in cities that have been popular with our customers in recent years."



Mende: growth in Asia's core markets

HOT LEADS

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European contacts wanted

Akbar Shareef, chairman/CEO, Rakaposhi Tours Pakistan, is looking for European DMCs, particularly in Italy and Germany, to work with on some luxury incentive groups he's bringing into Europe for the first time. He wants DMCs that can provide exclusive incentive ideas for at least 50 pax. Email akbarshareef1943@gmail.com.

Blacklane on the fast track in Asia

By Yixin Ng

Blacklane is looking to cruise into more cities in Asia as it rapidly consolidates the fragmented car services market and expands its global distribution, being the first ground transport provider to fully integrate with Amadeus.

"We started (the year) with only a handful of cities in Asia, and are now expecting to be in 100 cities in Asia-Pacific by year-end," said co-founder and CEO, Jens Wohltorf.

The company's expansion will be centred on Asia, given how this region makes up the "fastest-growing piece of (Blacklane's) global operations" and

its competitively-priced offering will appeal especially to Asia's intra-regional corporate travellers who tend to prioritise budget, Wohltorf told the *Daily*.

To build brand presence and drive sales, Blacklane is leveraging distribution channels both in corporate and leisure segments.

"The shortest and most powerful (sales and marketing) mechanism is leveraging partnerships with large travel players (such as) GDSs, OTAs, airlines or frequent flyer programmes to create brand awareness."

Notably, Blacklane's integration into the Amadeus system provides "a major lever" to ex-

tend its service to the airline industry, corporate customers and TMCs, said Wohltorf.

"The same applies for OTAs, we are available on Expedia and Booking.com, and are starting the dialogue with dominant OTAs in Asia so we can repeat the success that we've seen in our earlier (European and North American) markets," he added.

Integrating with major distribution channels also anchors Blacklane's position as a provider of "smart mobility", Wohltorf said.

"Smart mobility is about serving the first and last mile of the travel chain... That's why we integrate with airlines and OTAs so they can offer the entire package and a true door-to-door experience," he explained.



Wohltorf: partners with big players

Explaining how the business model speaks to the affordability and security concerns of corporate travellers, Wohltorf said: "Our local supply partners are licensed regulated, insured providers in the local markets.


"They were lacking capacity utilisation in the past - operating at only 20-25 per cent. Blacklane brings this up significantly, unit economics go down, and rides become more affordable at the

end of the day."

Meanwhile, Blacklane this month announced Blacklane for Business, which provides organisations with online booking, expense management and reporting solutions for Blacklane rides.

Touting the product, Soon-Hwa Wong, Blacklane's regional director for Asia-Pacific, said: "TMCs or corporate accounts (will) appreciate being able to have transport expenses centralised and within a single view."

For now, little seems to be in the way of Blacklane scaling up its operations. Said Wong: "Since we rely on existing capacities and infrastructure, we can expand into any new markets where there is demand without having to worry about buying and managing assets."




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Analysis

Living the glory days

Our reporters find out why destinations should not rest on UNESCO laurels as industry players share how the coveted status interplays with tourism in the region



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>> Singapore Botanic Gardens Blossoming into maturity

Established in 1859, Singapore Botanic Gardens was inscribed a UNESCO World Heritage Site in July 2015, marking a first for the city-state.

Highlights at this tropical garden paradise include the National Orchid Garden, home to the world's largest orchid display with over 60,000 plants and orchids.

Nigel Taylor, group director at Singapore Botanic Gardens and National Parks Board (NParks), said: "Following its inscription, NParks is committed to sustaining Singapore's green legacy through the gardens' site management plan. Measures such as the protection of the gardens' centuries-old trees have been set in place."

There are also plans to add more orchid varieties to the National Orchid Garden, introduce a new Learning Forest and extend the Jacob Ballas Children's Garden, he shared.

As well, the gardens in April announced it will develop a new Ethnobotany Garden to allow visitors to learn about plants used by indigenous cultures of South-east Asia.



Singapore Botanic Gardens

Taylor added: "This will enhance the gardens' role as an educational provider, which is in line with UNESCO's mission."

And since its UNESCO inscription last year, the gardens has recorded an increase in footfall, said Taylor, and now attracts more than 4.7 million visitors annually.

However, the garden does not rank top among Singapore's must-sees, Ajambar Basmet, director of Chariot Travels noted, urging strong marketing to raise awareness of and leverage the gardens' new UNESCO status.

Likewise, Samson Tan, CEO of GTMC Travel, wants more marketing to promote the gardens, especially at the ground level.

He said: "The venue management needs to sit down with the NATAS inbound committee to brainstorm new marketing (activities) and get the industry to roll out (the initiatives in a concerted way)." – **Paige Lee Pei Qi**

>> Great Barrier Reef, Australia Wounded coast still a star

The world's largest coral reef, which stretches over 2,000km along the Queensland coastline, continues to be a tourist magnet despite currently facing a mass bleaching crisis.

Alex de Waal, CEO of Tourism Tropical

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Analysis



Clockwise from top: Great Barrier Reef, Australia; Khao Yai, Thailand; George Town, Malaysia

tremendous transformation from its 18th century beginnings as the first British Straits Settlement, to becoming UNESCO listed in 2008 and globally recognised for its vibrant arts and culture scene.

In honour of the UNESCO designation, the George Town Festival was inaugurated in 2010. Every year, the month-long event transforms the city into a stage showcasing local and international acts. The festival attracts some 250,000 visitors annually, both domestic and international.

In addition to the George Town Festival, Penang island also boasts a trio of cultural festivals in the last quarter of the year – the George Town Literary Festival, In-Between Arts Festival and Penang Island Jazz Festival.

Its growing array of festivals aside, George Town's UNESCO status is also deemed advantageous for tour operators.

"The branding is important as travellers will trust an internationally recognised brand more than they would a tour operator. It makes it easier for operators to promote," Manfred Kurz, managing director, Diethelm Travel Malaysia, said.

Henry Ong, head of business development, Holiday Tours, agreed: "The branding is an endorsement by a world body and it is important for the Caucasian markets such as Australia and Europe since they are travelling from afar to come here."

On what more can be done, Kurz said: "Most of our Penang programmes are based around its heritage. The local government should train more special guides to conduct heritage tours and special interest tours in George Town. There is also room for improvement on the maintenance of the old site."

In 2015, Penang saw a 4.7 per cent increase in arrivals to 683,897 tourists, a feat considering the 6.3 per cent decrease in overall arrivals into Malaysia in 2015. – **S Puvaneswary**

>> Khao Yai, Thailand Lush tourism potential

Located in Thailand's north-east is the country's oldest national park, Khao Yai, which was proclaimed a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2005.

Covering more than 2,000km² of forest and grassland, the park teems with natural life and features such as the Haew Narok Waterfall (left) where Leonardo DiCaprio's famed jump in *The Beach* was filmed.

Travel operators interviewed see value

in the park's UNESCO status.

Pornthip Hirunkate, managing director – Thailand, Destination Asia, said: "The UNESCO brand is a useful selling tool in bringing the right kind of exposure – it is also attractive as people aspire to visit renowned destinations."

Samuel Desmier, Abercrombie & Kent's regional managing director for South-east Asia, commented: "It is always a huge draw for travellers planning their vacations in South-east Asia. It's a stamp of approval from the foremost authority on culture and natural beauty, and travellers commonly believe that a UNESCO Site shouldn't be missed."

Khao Yai's developments over the last 10 years have made it a destination "of potential" for the luxury tour operator.

Added Desmier: "If the vineyards in Khao Yai continue to develop, the area has the potential to become the Napa Valley of South-east Asia. (Together with) its UNESCO status and the small collection of boutique five-star properties such as Kirimaya and Muti Maya, we expect the area to shine in the next five years."

But illegal land encroachment has become an issue for Khao Yai as it grows as a hillside resort location, with the Thai government recently clamping down on properties built in the national reserve.

Pornthip remarked: "Khao Yai is a unique destination in Thailand – currently the state of tourism in and around the park needs to be controlled for the ecological future of the park and its inhabitants." – **Xinyi Liang-Pholsena**

>> Angkor Wat Archaeological Park, Cambodia

A push for conservation

Angkor Wat is undoubtedly Cambodia's largest tourist attraction, drawing more than 2.1 million visitors to explore the ancient temple complex in 2015.

Spanning over 40,000ha, the archaeological park in Siem Reap is home to hundreds of temples dating from the 9th to 15th century, including the iconic Angkor Wat, Bayon and Ta Prohm.

Agents say Angkor is Cambodia's biggest selling point, with its World Heritage badge offering no additional incentive to travellers.

"Angkor sells itself," says Exo Travel's Cambodia general manager, Pierre-André Romano, adding that 80 per cent of clients include Angkor in their itineraries. "The challenge is always to sell other elements

of Cambodia."

Likewise, Angkor also forms the centrepiece of Discover the Mekong's itineraries, said CEO Kimhean Pich. However, the company has created tours that showcase the wider area of Siem Reap province to travellers. "We need to show there is more than just Angkor Wat," he added.

Angkor's World Heritage status – awarded in 1992 – has brought with it benefits, such as conservation and restoration efforts. During the last decade, decaying sections of Angkor Wat, Bayon Temple and Ta Prohm have been restored to their former glory, with work ongoing.

In June, the Cambodian government requested further help from UNESCO to assist with restoration training, claiming erosion, tourist traffic and pollution were creating a greater need.

In response to fears raised over whether the ancient structures can cope with heavy visitor volumes, the governing Apsara Authority has installed designated walkways and wooden steps to protect vulnerable areas and promoted the use of bicycles and electric bikes.

In May, all traffic was banned from the front of Angkor Wat to cut down on congestion. – **Marissa Carruthers**

North Queensland, said half of the visitors to the site are domestic but the number of international tourists is growing rapidly. Top source market China supplied approximately 200,000 visitors last year, followed by the US and Japan at about 130,000 and 100,000 respectively.

In recent months, the reef has reportedly been plagued with one of the worst coral bleaching crises in history with at least 35 per cent of corals in the northern and central areas killed.

Professor Terry Hughes, director of the ARC Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies at James Cook University, stated: "This year is the third time in 18 years that the Great Barrier Reef has experienced mass bleaching due to global warming. The current event is much more extreme than we've measured before."

Nevertheless, Waal emphasised that this environmental issue has "minimal impact on the tourist".

"This doesn't mean the death of the reef. It's like having a sun tan, you get burnt but don't die. Visitors are still able to see the beautiful colours of the reef."

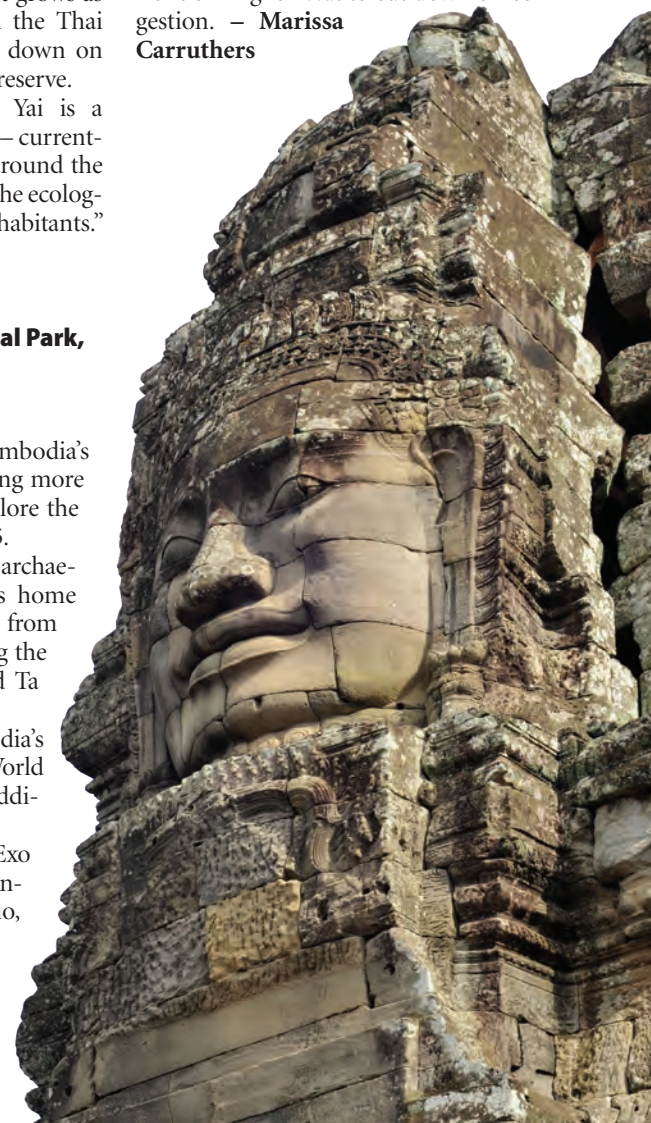
Caitlin Williams, a spokesperson from the Capta Group, agreed: "We still have huge numbers of people wanting to visit the reef and there is no change in any of the sites that they visit."

Williams added that the reef remains a top "must-do" for any visitor to Queensland.

Likewise, Andy Indra, senior sales manager of Experience Tour Australia, said the reef is still a popular destination and with its identity as renowned UNESCO World Heritage Sites clearly cemented, there is no lack of awareness of this spectacular site. – **Paige Lee Pei Qi**

>> George Town, Malaysia A market for festivals

Penang's George Town has undergone



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Analysis

>> Luang Prabang, Laos Keeping development in check

Dubbed the best-preserved city in South-east Asia, Luang Prabang was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1995, but the status has not been particularly important in marketing the town.

“(The UNESCO status) is a plus and nice to have,” said Laurent Granier, co-founder and general manager of Laos Mood Travel. “But I have not noticed any agency and clients telling me they come to Luang Prabang because it is listed.”

Jon Bourbaud, Laos general manager at Apple Tree Group added: “The label is more important to ensure that future development does not happen too fast (and) bring negative impacts to Luang Prabang.”

Luang Prabang’s World Heritage Site status has helped to protect its rich architectural heritage, as regulations are placed on hotel sizes and buildings, remarked Bourbaud. He shared that Apple Tree Group’s new Parasol Blanc hotel, for example, cannot have a swimming pool due to its location is in a wetland area surrounded by natural ponds.

Granier believes the UNESCO label has helped attract newer markets like China and South Korea, especially with Lao Airlines launching new air routes to China.

But Luang Prabang’s pre-eminent status as a World Heritage site tends to overshadow other destinations in Laos.



Clockwise from above: Luang Prabang, Laos; Puerto Princesa Subterranean River National Park, the Philippines; Sundarbans National Park, India; Himeji Castle, Japan; Kandy, Sri Lanka



Added Granier: “Luang Prabang has so much ‘charm’ that visiting anywhere after it is somehow challenging to propose. Sadly, Vientiane and other provinces do not have the matching profiles to be featured confidently.

“(That said), Luang Prabang is still too often the object of an extension from Bangkok or Hanoi,” he elaborated.

– Xinyi Liang-Pholsena



>> Puerto Princesa Subterranean River National Park, the Philippines Ebb and flow of a famed site

Although it is home to the world’s longest underground river, the Puerto Princesa Subterranean River National Park does not draw the resounding praise from tourists and agents that one might expect.

The site has had its UNESCO badge since 1999 but it only found fame in 2012 when it was recognised under a separate accolade, the New Seven Wonders of Nature.

Tourists started arriving in droves, leading the city government to limit visitation to 800 pax a day or half the daily demand.

Still, this left some concerned about the environmental impacts of tourism and whether the UNESCO committee’s recommendations are being followed.

Although the use of audio guides in place of local boatmen has helped to minimise noise in the cave, Felise Cruz, marketing and operations manager of Trips Travel, opined that tours now are less interactive and lack the touch of local humour.

Moreover, Cruz opined that Asians, in contrast to Europeans, are less awed by the attraction since neighbouring countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia and Vietnam share similar geography with the Philippines.

Wilson Techico, vice president for business and product development, Uni-Orient Travel, would like to see more activities introduced in the area so tourists can spend more time there.

It takes two hours to get from Puerto Princesa to the river but the river tour alone only takes about 45 minutes.

Techico said a programme packed with more activities can make the experience more memorable, adding that the few restaurants in the area serve just “basic” food.

– Rosa Ocampo

>>> Sundarbans National Park, India No roaring reception

Inbound operators acknowledge that this UNESCO World Heritage Site has far from met its full tourism potential.

“Until now Sundarbans has been projected (mostly) as the home of the royal Bengal tiger. The challenge is to reposition it in the international market as a magical world of mangrove, rivers, flora and fauna and a site for (ecotourism),” said Surajit



Bose, joint director, tourism, government of West Bengal.

Trade sources shared that roughly 5,500 foreign tourists visited the park during last year’s inbound season.

Rajib Banerjee, director, East Wind Holidays, said international demand is weak due to inadequate marketing.

“Despite being a UNESCO site, Sundarbans received less traction compared to some other sanctuaries because of the lack of infrastructure and regional connectivity,” explained Dipak Deva – managing director, Travel Corporation, India.

“A lack of forest lodges, boats and improper safety measures make it difficult to sell to foreign tourists,” added Ravi Gosain, director, Erco Travels.

Compounding the challenge is the lack of guides who speak foreign languages, both Amaresh Tiwari, managing director, AT Seasons & Vacations Travel and Arun Anand, managing director, Midtown Travels pointed out.

Nevertheless, the park’s UNESCO title brings a glimmer of hope. Tiwari remarked: “We always highlight (the UNESCO badge) in our brochures and marketing material to sell the destination.”

Also optimistic, Anand added: “There is a segment of international tourists who always keep in mind to visit such sites.”

– Rohit Kaul

>> Himeji Castle, Japan Location matters

Among the most popular of Japan’s 18 UNESCO World Heritage Sites is the ancient Himeji Castle, also known as the White Heron castle.

A record number of over 2.8 million people visited the castle in the town of Himeji, Hyogo Prefecture in the financial year ending March 31, 2015, of which 306,348 were from overseas, nearly four times the figure of the previous year. The previous record of over 1.7 million visitors was set in 1964.

The UNESCO tag carries great weight for visitors to Japan. Shigeki Misawa of the sales division of inbound specialists Freeplus said: “In our experience, virtually all tourists coming to Japan on a package tour will go to at least one UNESCO site.”

However, agents expressed that there are other important factors such as location and proximity to other attractions.

“Himeji Castle is very popular with

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UNESCO World Heritage Sites in the country.

Famous for the 17th century Sacred Temple of the Tooth, the city is also home to the Kandy Esala Perahera, a 10-day Buddhist ceremony replete with elephants in ceremonial gear, dancers, drummers and stilt-walkers that parade the streets.

Rodney Armstrong, past president of the Kandy Hoteliers' Association and resident manager at Mahaweli Reach Hotel – Kandy, said the city, 115km north of Colombo, has great potential of serving as a hub and destination for three-night stays if roads are widened and traffic congestion is alleviated. Currently, single-night itineraries are more typical of visits to the city.

Similarly, traffic poses the biggest problem in growing Kandy's tourism for Colombo-based inbound agents like Mahen Kariyawasam, managing director of Andrews Travels, who added that the authorities have plans to build tunnels to help road users bypass the busy city centre.

Government plans include the widening of entry roads. A new four-lane highway from Colombo is on the cards, aimed at shaving the trip time from at least 180 minutes to 60-80 minutes.

Both Mahen and Armstrong also see value in adding a dance theatre to the city, which they suggested could be the cultural centre of the city where authentic Kandyan dances and other cultural events are showcased.

At least 80 per cent of foreign visitors to Sri Lanka visited Kandy last year, according to Sri Lankan Tourism. – **Feizal Samath**

overseas groups because it is convenient to reach, while somewhere like Shiretoko is much harder to get to," said Hayashi Nori, director of sales of Tokyo Asean Service.

He added: "Places like Shiretoko or the Iwami Ginza Silver Mine in Shimane Prefecture have relatively few other attractions... Groups will not be happy to travel for three hours just to see one thing."

Nori opined there are ways to better capitalise on the appeal of UNESCO sites. "The national government and local authorities need to do more, such as providing information on how to get to the more remote sites or details on accommodation," he said.

"It would (also) be helpful if local governments hold workshops for agents to inform us of additional attractions in their regions." – **Julian Ryall**

>> **Kandy, Sri Lanka** **Paving the way**

Widely seen as Sri Lanka's cultural capital, the pre-colonial kingdom is one of eight

Asia's newly inscribed sites in 2016

Newly inscribed UNESCO World Heritage Sites this year include gems from India and China. Here's a summary:

Nalanda Mahavihara, Bihar, India

The Nalanda Mahavihara (Nalanda University) stands out as the most ancient university in the Indian subcontinent, engaged in the transfer of knowledge for an interrupted 800 years. The site comprises its archaeological remains dating from the 3rd century BCE to the 13th century CE and includes stupas, shrines, viharas (residential and educational buildings) and important artwork in stucco, stone and metal.

Hubei Shennongjia, China

The site in Hubei province comprises both Shennongding/Badong to the west and Laojunshan to the east, which protect the largest primary forests remaining in Central China. It is also a habitat for rare animal species such as the Chinese giant salamander, golden or Sichuan snub-nosed monkey, clouded leopard, common leopard and the Asian black bear.

Le Corbusier, transnational, including India and Japan

This comprises the work of Swiss-French architect and urban planner Le Corbusier, comprising 17 sites spread over seven countries – Argentina, Belgium, France, Germany, India, Japan and Switzerland – which are a testament to modern architecture. Built over a period

of a half-century, the sites include the Complexe du Capitole in Chandigarh (India), the National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo (Japan), the House of Dr Curutchet in La Plata (Argentina) and the Unité d'habitation in Marseille (France). These masterpieces also attest to the internationalisation of architectural practice.

Zuojiang Huashan, China

This comprises 38 sites of rock art on steep cliffs in the border regions of south-west China that illustrate the life and rituals of the Luoyue people. They date from around the 5th century BCE to the 2nd century CE. In a surrounding landscape of karst, rivers and plateaux, they depict ceremonies that have been interpreted as portraying the bronze drum culture once prevalent across southern China. This landscape is the only remains of this culture today.

Khangchendzonga National Park, Sikkim, India

The park includes a unique diversity of plains, valleys, lakes, glaciers and spectacular, snow-capped mountains covered with ancient forests. It is also home to the world's third highest peak, Mount Khangchendzonga. Mythological stories are associated with this mountain and with a great number of caves, rivers, lakes, etc, that are the object of worship by the indigenous people of Sikkim. The sacred meanings of these stories and practices have been integrated with Buddhist beliefs and constitute the basis for Sikkimese identity.

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Sustainability champions

Hotel companies that have been advocating sustainable practices internally are doing much more today to help their clients meet with minimal negative impact on the environment and with maximum returns to the local community. Our reporters spotlight some of these inspiring hotel companies



From left: Starwood offers a reef rehabilitation programme for corporate groups at its property, The Andaman in Langkawi; Food waste from events are minimised at Pan Pacific Singapore, as unconsumed food is redirected to the staff canteen

Starwood Asia Pacific Hotels & Resorts

Starwood Asia Pacific Hotels & Resorts rolled out in March a programme that encourages planners to do more for the planet during their corporate gatherings.

The *Sustainable Meeting Practices* programme rewards meeting planners and organisers who are Starwood Preferred Guest and SPG Pro members with 2,000 bonus Starpoints for every event booked at nearly 300 participating hotels across the region. The offer is valid up to October 31 for arrivals by December 31, 2016, and a minimum spend of US\$10,000 is required.

As part of the programme, participating hotels offer a comprehensive range of options that are environmentally friendly and socially responsible, and these promise to enhance the delegate experience. Steps taken towards this end include featuring locally sourced produce and sustainable seafood on the menu, doing away with table coverings or using reusable ones, and having recycling bins in all meeting spaces.

The Andaman A Luxury Collection Resort in Langkawi, for example, uses its unique location close to an 8,000-year-old fringing coral reef in Datai Bay to offer corporate clients a unique teambuilding programme that involves coral transplanting activities to help restore The Andaman Reef which had thousands of coral colonies destroyed by the 2004 tsunami.

The hotel holds The Andaman Reef especially dear, as it had helped to break the force of the destructive tsunami waves. Furthermore, the reef is home to a wide variety of marine life, which in turn helps the local fishermen earn a living.

At the heart of the reef rehabilitation programme is The Andaman's Coral Nursery, a purpose-built facility where

guests can get up close with different species of live corals and learn about the reef under the guidance of Gerry Goeden, head of marine environment at The Andaman, and his team. Delegates can snorkel in the pond, touch the corals and learn about their function in the underwater ecosystem.

Both the Coral Nursery and the reef rehabilitation programme are supported by the hotel's Marine Life Laboratory, a multipurpose indoor space at the lobby.

Through the teambuilding exercise and visits to the Coral Nursery, delegates will play a direct role in conserving the marine environment at Datai Bay and in creating a more sustainable local fishing industry.

The Andaman's general manager, Christian Metzner, said: "Multinational companies with headquarters in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore are increasingly looking for corporate social responsibility programmes involving meaningful projects which can be incorporated into the meeting and incentive programmes.

"It gives us an edge during the bidding process that we can offer this programme which is unique to Langkawi and I believe, the only one of its kind."

Starwood also provides a free Meetings Impact Report (MIR) that assesses the environmental impact of individual events via indicators such as energy and water consumption, waste management and sustainable food choices. Once the MIR is calculated using the Hotel Carbon Measurement Initiative, meeting planners can offset the event's carbon footprint through donation opportunities offered by South Pole Carbon, Starwood's global carbon-offset partner.

Starwood vice president, sales – Asia Pacific, Nicholas Maratos, said: "We recognise that besides making sure that our internal operations and infrastructure are ecosystem friendly, our efforts should also

include our customers and make it possible for them to actively participate in and be involved in this initiative."

He added: "We see it as our ongoing efforts to educate our customers about how much they can do for the environment if they took up sustainable options."

– S Puvanewary

Pan Pacific Hotels Group

Pan Pacific Hotels Groups (PPHG) has an active community outreach programme in Singapore. Among them is a periodic activity that sees chefs from various properties in Singapore visiting Bakery Hearts – a local social enterprise that provides women from low-income families an opportunity to supplement their household income by making and selling baked goods – to teach the women how to bake tasty and beautiful pastries.

But PPHG takes its partnership with Bakery Hearts further by involving the organisation in three public fund-raising events held at the Parkroyal on Beach Road hotel in July and November 2015 and April 2016, during which guests were able to purchase baked goods.

The Singapore Cheshire Home is another beneficiary of PPHG's corporate social responsibility programme, and the hotel company had featured handicraft created by the residents at an internal Chinese New Year function this year. More than 300 guests in attendance were invited to purchase the art pieces.

Ng Culi, a spokesperson with PPHG, told the *Daily* that the company is presently exploring opportunities to involve both beneficiaries in corporate events hosted at Pan Pacific and Parkroyal branded properties in Singapore.

Ng said: "The Singapore Cheshire Home is happy to work with us to make their handicraft available for sale at corporate events held at PPHG properties, and we are discussing how to make this a regular initiative."

While such a collaboration is still being discussed with Bakery Hearts, Ng said her team is ready and "happy" to connect interested corporate clients with the organisation.

To help guests and meeting clients conserve the environment during their stay and events at the Pan Pacific Singapore, the hotel participates in *Soap for Hope*, a soap-recycling project which involves the collection and donation of unfinished soap bars in guestrooms, reprocessing and sterilising them, and then donating them to rural areas and communities in South-east Asia.

The hotel also re-distributes uncon-

sumed food and pastries from events held on premises to the staff cafeteria and unused notepads to internal associates.

Throughout the hotel's F&B outlets, condiments are provided in refillable containers instead of convenient packs to minimise packaging waste.

To reduce paper wastage, the hotel's express checkout feature allows guests to view their bills from the in-room IPTV while soft copy invoices are emailed to registered guests' emails, should these be required. – Karen Yue and Paige Lee Pei Qi

Hilton Worldwide

Last May, Hilton Worldwide announced an expanded carbon emissions solution, the *Clean Air Program*, which aims to reduce the environmental impact of meetings and events held at more than 90 hotels and resorts in Asia-Pacific.

Under this programme, event planners are given a free analysis of the carbon emissions from their event. Hilton uses LightStay, its proprietary system to calculate environmental performance and track carbon emissions from every meeting and event. Its 'meeting calculator' feature takes into account the function room's water and electricity usage, and the food consumed at the event.

Hilton then purchases the equivalent carbon credits to finance environmentally-friendly projects across the region in partnership with carbon offset solutions provider Climate Friendly.

Martin Rinck, president Asia Pacific, Hilton Worldwide, said: "The awareness of carbon production has been profiled especially over the past five years. It is at the forefront of everyone's mind.

"As a responsible organisation, it is important to do the right thing than to do things right. When we come out with such a programme, it is about provide organisations who are planning events the ability to offset their carbon footprint."

Hilton has identified nine projects across Asia-Pacific to be funded under the *Clean Air Program*, including the Tasmanian Native Forest Protection Project in Australia, 45-Turbine Wind Project in Tamil Nadu India, Borneo Rainforest Rehabilitation Project in Sarawak, Malaysia, and the Siam Cement Biomass Project in Thailand. The programme covers all events held in participating hotels and resorts. – Paige Lee Pei Qi

InterContinental Hotels Group

InterContinental Hotels Group (IHG) properties are guided by the *IHG Green Engage* system in their operations by way of a checklist of actions that helps hotels monitor, reduce and manage energy, water, waste consumption and carbon emissions.

Such actions include the use of environmentally-friendly event materials, the avoidance of disposable dining ware, cutlery and single-serving containers, provision of restaurant menus that indicate the local origin of food and beverage options, and the display of bathroom signs to guide efficient use of water.

According to Michael Blanding, director, corporate responsibility, Asia, Middle East, Africa and Greater China, the checklist takes into account costs and guest experience.



Specific to meeting groups, IHG hotels “promote local sustainability initiatives such as low carbon alternative means of transport, and provide meeting delegates with feedback on their energy and resource usage”, said Blanding.

“We also promote each hotel’s participation in the *IHG Green Engage* system and their associated certification level on IHG booking sites to help meeting delegates make sustainable travel choices,” he added. – **Paige Lee Pei Qi**

Shangri-La Hotels and Resorts

Shangri-La Hotels and Resorts’ effort in sustainability can be traced back to 2013 when it launched the *Experience It* team-building philosophy to differentiate its meeting product as well as to engage and inspire guests through activities tied to hotels’ corporate social responsibility and sustainability initiatives.

Within this philosophy are three touchpoints: one, to partner with one of Shangri-La’s community engagement programmes; two, to participate in special biodiversity conservation projects and habitat-protection initiatives; three, to be involved in healthy, on-site activities and sustainability initiatives.

The *Experience It* programme is unique in the way that each Shangri-La property has the flexibility to develop its own offerings. Shangri-La’s Mactan Resort & Spa, for example, offers an *Experience It* programme that gets meeting delegates to build a fish house, plant corals and go on a Shangri-La Marine Sanctuary Discovery Tour.

Shangri-La Hotels and Resorts’ director of CSR and sustainability, Yui Ku, told the *Daily* that event planners want opportunities to deliver memorable experiences.

“Through interaction with local children or participation in an eco-themed teambuilding exercise, (meeting delegates) can do things differently and for a purpose,” she said.

According to Yui, events often run on a tight schedule and planners, restricted by a limited budget, are normally unable to conduct an activity as impactful as an *Experience It* programme.

In addition to *Experience It*, Shangri-La properties also actively work to reduce the carbon footprint of events held on premises, such as by using water dispensers, substituting glass containers for bottled mineral water (its resorts have their own water bottling facility), using ingredients sourced locally, and re-purposing wine

crates and boxes as food stands, litter bins or ornaments.

Yui added: “The reduction of carbon emissions is part of our overall efforts to reduce environmental impact across all our hotels. The group-wide target in 2015 was to reduce the carbon footprint intensity by 20 per cent from 2010 levels; specific targets were allocated to each hotel.”

– **Prudence Lui**

Hyatt Hotels & Resorts

Since Hyatt first introduced sustainability in meetings across hotels in Asia, it has seen this commitment growing in importance and relevance. In the initial stage, the concept was to engage Hyatt hotels around the region to create custom opportunities for clients interested in hosting green meetings. For instance, Grand Hyatt Singapore encourages guests and planners to make green choices for their meetings through its *Meet and Be Green* programme.

Senior vice president for brand and commercial strategy, Asia Pacific, Carina Chorenge, said: “These initiatives become part of a larger sustainability effort that goes beyond green meetings and events, and is integrated into our global operations. Our current 2020 vision includes a set of measurable and actionable goals across three focus areas, namely using precious natural resources wisely, building smarter and greener hotels to meet the challenges of tomorrow, and inspiring innovation among our colleagues, suppliers and other stakeholders to develop more sustainable ways of doing business, today and in the future.”

She added: “Currently, we integrate sustainability into our daily hotel operations. Our efforts involve everyone from meeting delegates, associates and guests, to hotel owners as they all play a key role in these efforts.”



Clockwise from right: Conrad Tokyo is among 90 properties under Hilton Worldwide that help clients offset carbon emissions from their events; Pan Pacific Singapore’s Soap for Hope project helps residents in rural parts of South-east Asia keep clean; The Andaman houses a Marine Life Laboratory



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MICE feature



From left: Grand Hyatt Singapore encourages clients to make sustainable choices for their events; just like its sister Amari Watgate Bangkok, Amari Ocean Pattaya's meeting rooms are set-up in a sustainable way and event F&B is prepared using locally sourced produce to help clients minimise their carbon footprint; meeting delegates at Novotel Clarke Quay are supplied with pens made of recycled paper

Hyatt's internal drive for sustainability saw it removing shark fin dishes from its event menus in 2012. By 2014, it established a complete ban on the item in all its restaurants and F&B outlets worldwide.

Meetings are also able to reduce their carbon footprint before they even begin, thanks to Hyatt hotel's use of LED lighting, sustainable menus, recycling practices and reusable materials.

Participating Hyatt hotels around the region are also able to provide clients with an estimated carbon footprint of their meetings using the Hotel Carbon Management Initiative. – **Prudence Lui**

AccorHotels

AccorHotels has made 21 commitments to sustainable development under its *Planet 21* programme. These commitments include establishing 30 per cent less food waste, 100 per cent low-carbon new buildings and renovations for its owned and leased properties, and 1,000 urban vegetable gardens in its hotels, among others – all by 2020.

And under the guidance of *Planet 21*, AccorHotels is currently rolling out sustainable seminar packages under the *Meeting 21* brand.

Gaynor Reid, AccorHotels vice president communications, Asia-Pacific, explained: "The *Meeting 21* standard covers our offerings from amenities, equipment, furniture and floor coverings in meeting rooms to F&B packaging and menu."

What this means is meeting attendees at AccorHotels properties can expect to see more recycling bins, LED lighting and locally sourced furnishings being used in meeting rooms, and sustainable food options on the event menu, for instance.

Reid added that "sustainable experiences for participants" will also be available. Such experiences could be teambuilding programmes or group activities that are related to nature or the local community.

In Bangkok, seven hotels under AccorHotels came together in 2012 to start the *Food for Thought* initiative that collects unconsumed food at the hotels and trans-

form them into nutritious dinners for people under the care of Fatima Centre.

"Unconsumed food from events (held at the hotels) are also donated towards this cause," Reid said.

At Novotel Singapore Clarke Quay, meeting delegates get a stationery set that comprises eco-pens which are made out of recycled paper by the Yayasan Peduli Tunas Bangsa foundation in Indonesia, established by the hotel giant to help alleviate poverty by providing maximum education to underprivileged children while protecting the environment.

At the same time, AccorHotels provides the Carbon Optimizer, a tool that enables guests to measure and reduce their meetings' environmental footprint and offers suggestions on what can be done to offset that impact.

However, Reid is cautious about projecting the results of *Meeting 21*, saying that the programme is optional for hotels and that it is still in its infancy.

Still, she said the company is "optimistic that (*Meeting 21*) will make a difference in the long run". – **Michael Mackey**

Onyx Hospitality Group

Onyx Hospitality Group has a green meetings programme that is executed by its two properties in Thailand – Amari Watgate Bangkok and Amari Ocean Pattaya.

According to David Barrett, executive director of events, Amari Watgate Bangkok and Amari Pattaya, the *Green Meetings Package* allows "our MICE activities and delegates to become a part of our commitment to corporate responsibility while meeting our business objectives".

Barrett pointed out that meetings create a "sizeable carbon footprint", so the hotels' *Green Meetings Package* "is the first step to reducing such negative impact on the environment".

In line with the *Green Meetings Package*, meeting rooms in participating hotels are set up in a sustainable manner. Drinking water and stationery are supplied in a communal style to conserve resources, rooms use natural light and energy ef-

ficient equipment, coffee beans used for coffee service are sourced from certified producers, and set lunch is prepared with locally sourced produce.

In addition, through a partnership with Trees Trust (Asia), one tree will be planted for each delegate at an event held at the hotels. Delegates will receive photos of the tree being planted as well as regular photo updates to instil a long-term interest in the activity.

"We anticipate our *Green Meetings Package* will reduce the carbon footprint of a full-day or half-day meeting by 20 per cent," said Barrett, although he admitted that "green meetings remain a niche segment, as most clients are driven by price and not environmental savings". – **Michael Mackey**

Carlson Rezidor Hotel Group

Carlson Rezidor Hotel Group hotels worldwide follow a sustainability policy that is built on three pillars: Think Planet – minimising its environmental footprint; Think People – taking care of the health and safety of guests and employees; Think Community – community action and business ethics.

In keeping its Think People promise, Carlson Rezidor hotels work on reducing their environmental footprint by certifying the hotel building, eco-labelling hotel operations, making specific Think Planet investments, and engaging staff and guests.

Inge Huijbrechts, vice president responsible business, Carlson Rezidor Hotel Group, told the *Daily*: "In EMEA (Europe, the Middle East and Africa) Think Planet activities have reduced our hotels' energy consumption by 22 per cent over the last four years, and in APAC (Asia-Pacific) the Earthcheck eco-label of our properties has reduced energy by 23 per cent."

"This significantly reduced energy consumption in the hotels lowers the carbon footprint of the meeting for the corporate client," she added.

Besides the company's internal sustainability drive, meeting planners who are members of the Club Carlson for Planners loyalty programme can utilise the *Meeting Minus Carbon* carbon offsetting service. The free service uses the Hotel Carbon Measurement Initiative to calculate an event's carbon footprint and Club Carlson will then purchase carbon credits to offset the impact. The service is managed by Carbon Footprint, which purchases and invests carbon credits in projects in India, Brazil and Kenya.

Huijbrechts said Carlson Rezidor's sustainability programme for meetings stands out in the marketplace because each tonne of carbon generated is offset twice. She explained: "Once in Verified Carbon Standard wind energy projects in

India, and again in a REDD certified (Reducing Emissions from Avoiding Planned Deforestation) forest conservation project in Brazil or in a tree-planting initiative in Kenya."

Furthermore, *Meeting Minus Carbon* is "the only programme to consistently offset the meetings and events carbon footprint for all Carlson Rezidor hotels worldwide", and its "reforestation and forest protection projects have a considerable local community benefit".

Huijbrechts described the adoption of *Meeting Minus Carbon* as being "fantastic", having offset 35,000 tons of carbon since its launch on Earth Day 2013.

"In addition, the Blu Planet towel reuse programme at Radisson Blu Hotels (one of the hotel brands in the Carlson Rezidor family) had helped to provide safe drinking water for life to over 5,000 children just one year (into) its launch. Since we have introduced the connection to community water projects, the towel reuse take-up by stayover guests has increased on average from 20 per cent to 40," she added.

Hotel brands under the Carlson Rezidor group take the green commitment further by weaving sustainable practices into their own meeting offerings.

Huijbrechts shared that an essential part of a responsible and sustainable meeting lies in the F&B offering.

One of the two features under Radisson Blu's *Experience Meetings* concept is *Brain Food* which follows six principles including the use of primarily fresh, locally sourced ingredients, and pure ingredients with minimal industrial processing which therefore have minimal impact on the environment.

Park Inn by Radisson's *Smart Food* makes using local ingredients a priority.

Radisson RED adopts a No Food Waste policy and abides by it by pricing breakfast by the item to encourage guests to take only what's needed, providing RED merchandised containers to regulars to reduce waste, using only disposables that are made of responsible materials, and finding ingenious ways to incorporate misshapen fruits and veggies in its dishes.

Huijbrechts observed that large corporations with their own sustainability programmes tend to be more interested in Carlson Rezidor's Responsible Business features in general and Think Planet activities at the hotels.

She said: "A number of key corporate clients – mainly in the Nordics and North America – want to have a detailed follow-up of the carbon footprint of their stays and events in Carlson Rezidor hotels. We provide this information based on the Hotel Carbon Measurement Initiative tool and discuss with clients how we can help them further reduce their footprint by staying and meeting at our hotels." – **Karen Yue**



Radisson Blu hotels' *Brain Food* meeting concept sees the use of locally sourced, pure ingredients that have minimal impact on the environment while presenting maximum nutrition to event delegates



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Destination Hong Kong

When the going gets tough

Hotels are hoping that the few new attractions in Hong Kong will lift arrival numbers. By Prudence Lui

Hong Kong's tourism industry has been battered by both the soft global economy and aggressive destination marketing by competing destinations in Asia.

According to Hong Kong Tourism Board's (HKTB) executive director, Anthony Lau, the sluggish global economy since early 2016 has hurt consumer's travel and spending confidence.

"They are opting for more shorthaul travel," Lau said. "As a result, we have invested our marketing budget on shorthaul markets, including South-east Asia. We are collaborating with local trade partners, hotels, and tourist attractions to roll out *Family Fun* and *Getaway to Hong Kong* campaigns."

Longhaul markets are not neglected though, as HKTB is pursuing these travellers through partnerships with destinations in the Pearl River Delta region as well as "exploring opportunities brought about by China's *One Belt, One Road* initiative to boost arrivals from longhaul markets".

Cross-border partnerships in marketing Hong Kong are necessary, as over 90 per cent of longhaul visitors travel to Hong Kong adopt multi-destination itineraries, according to Lau.

In 2H2016, HKTB will bump up its events and festival line-up with a new phase of Hong Kong Pulse 3D Light Show, a larger Hong Kong Cyclothon as well as a number of high profile international



The Hong Kong Observation Wheel

Destination in numbers

7

The amount in millions of Hong Kong dollars (US\$902,562) in the Matching Fund for Overseas Tourism Promotion by Tourist Attractions that has been set aside to tackle Hong Kong's declining arrivals. The money will support eight local attractions, covering 95 proposed promotional programmes in 10 visitor source markets

13.3

The percentage decline in Russian arrivals to Hong Kong in the first five months in 2016, making it the biggest loser among five new source markets

sports events such as Hong Kong Tennis Open and Formula E.

Nature lovers can also look out for new guided activities and hiking guidebooks that will roll out this year with heightened promotions of the *Great Outdoors Hong Kong* campaign, which showcases the commercial city's lush, green side.

In terms of tourism hardware, Hong Kong has nothing major to show this year besides a new Iron Man-themed attraction (opening late 2016) and a third hotel called Explorers Lodge (2017) within Hong Kong Disneyland.

Visitors to Ocean Park can look forward to quicker, easier access with the opening of the MTR's South Island Line later this year, which will have an Ocean Park Station. Journeys between Admiralty and the theme park will only take a mere four minutes.

Hong Kong hotels are excited about the

hardware improvements, believing that they will help re-energise the destination's tourism business and arrest the sliding trend in hotel occupancy and room rates.

Sherona Lau, director of marketing for China South, Hong Kong and Taiwan with The Peninsula Hong Kong, said: "We welcome the opening of new attractions in the city as they will draw more visitors to Hong Kong, which ultimately benefits the hotel industry."

Lau shared that her hotel is playing its part to offer travellers more reasons to visit Hong Kong. The Peninsula Academy conducts a culture programme that highlights Hong Kong's time-honoured arts. Guests may reminisce the past through paper-lantern-making workshops with a master and go on a tour of an original joss paper shop prior to the class.

New World Millennium Hotel, meanwhile, is banking on its refurbished facilities to lure more travellers. Work started in 2015 and beneficiaries of the project include the lobby, lobby lounge, guestrooms, meeting and event spaces and restaurants.

The hotel's director of sales and marketing, Francesco Wong, said: "Our hotel has been striving to diversify our feeder markets. With the unveiling of the new facilities (later this year), we will be able to uplift our hotel's profile and take advantage of it when promoting (our property) to our clients."

George Wang, general manager of Sav Hospitality, said Hong Kong should use the "down time" now to improve on its hardware, events and activities. Wang said his team is walking the talk by fine-tuning service during the current slow period, which he believes will build customer loyalty when travel picks up again.

PRODUCTS

1 Hong Kong Disneyland

The Space Mountain at Tomorrowland area within Hong Kong Disneyland now tantalises with a new Star Wars facility. From June 11, guests have been able to enjoy the *Star Wars: Tomorrowland Take-over* attraction that comes with special experiences that are unique in Asia. A three-hour VIP tour is also available for groups of up to six people.

2 Hotel Sáv Hong Kong

The hotel has added more speciality floors, following the debut of its Floor of Love in 2015. The latest addition is the

Floor of Ocean, which will be made available in 4Q2016, and rooms will celebrate arts, fashion and nature.

Additionally, the hotel has installed Wi-Fi capability into its shuttle buses and private cars. Taking its technology enhancements further, a system is now in place to identify guests' needs, from housekeeping to check-outs.

3 Kerry Hotel, Hong Kong

Shangri-La Hotels and Resorts will take the Kerry Hotel brand to Hong Kong this December. The 545-room hotel on Kowloon's waterfront will feature a uniquely

designed podium that will provide hotel guests with indoor and outdoor spaces that come with spectacular views. More than 60 per cent of the guestrooms promise harbour views.

For meetings and events, there is a 1,756m² Grand Ballroom with capacity for 1,030 people in banquet style as well as 17 flexible meeting rooms.

4 Hong Kong Geopark

Accessibility to Hong Kong Geopark has been improved with a new ferry service between Ma Liu Shui (Sundays and public holidays) as well as Lai Chi Wo (weekend, Sundays and public holidays). A shuttle bus tour service has also been added in May, plying the Sai Kung and Geopark route.

5 Hong Kong Movie Tour

Launched in mid-July, this 2.5-hour activity takes Hong Kong movie fans on a walking tour to nine sites near Sheung Wan, Hollywood Road, Wing Lei Street and Man Mo Temple to trace the footprints and memories of local movie stars. Participants will learn about the eight local movies were filmed on these sites.

Available every Saturday at 14.30, tours are led by veteran movie critics and are conducted in Mandarin. Cantonese and English tours are available upon request.

VIEWPOINTS

Which source markets do you think will perform best this year?



Christina Cheng,
general manager,
Harbour Plaza 8
Degrees

FIT markets from the UK, the US, Canada and Australia grew over

30 per cent while shorthaul markets like India rose over 75 per cent. We think it is due to initiatives like flexible room types with extra beds, availability of Halal certified menus and our participation in HKTB campaigns to offer attractive accommodation deals to travellers.

Paul Leung,
managing director,
Holiday World Tours

South-east Asian markets did well, with the Philippines performing the best.

This may be attributed to the 20-30 per cent decline in hotel rates during this challenging time, plus Hong Kong is a popular destination for Filipinos.



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Destination Cambodia

Luxe expeditions beckon

Cambodia may not be backpacker haven for much longer as it spruces up for luxury travel. By [Marissa Carruthers](#)

Cambodia is well on its way in transitioning from backpacker haunt to exotic boutique destination as it prepares to welcome more business travellers and tap into the eco-tourism market.

In 2015, Cambodia welcomed 4.77 million international travellers – a 6.1 per cent increase on the previous year – generating US\$3.1 billion. This accounts for 10.5 per cent of the GDP. By 2020, the government aims to attract 7.5 million international visitors and generate an annual income of US\$5 billion.

Once renowned for its cheap guest-houses, bars and eateries, the last five years has seen Cambodia – Phnom Penh in particular – plant itself on the map as the jewel in South-east Asia's boutique hotel crown.

And in the coming years, the country is looking set to welcome a swathe of global luxury hotels, with the likes of Okura Prestige, Rosewood and Shangri-La adding to the current handful available, including Sofitel, Raffles le Royal and Intercontinental. The country's first Marriott is also set to open in Siem Reap come October.

As well as catering to luxury travel demand, the flourishing of five-star accommodation is poised to serve the growing international business and MICE markets.

"Phnom Penh is an up-and-coming destination for business and large corporations," said Daniel Grau, managing director of Rosewood Phnom Penh, citing Asian Development Bank, Manulife, AIA Group, Hitachi and Diethem Travel as ex-



Traffic rush around the Independence monument, with its Khmer architecture style, in Phnom Penh

amples of businesses that have existing or soon-to-open offices in the CBD.

Cambodia's heritage, culture and natural sites have also led to a surge in experiential travel with eco-tourism elements. Amy McLoughlin, cofounder of Ayana Journeys, said: "Visitors worldwide are

searching for authentic experiences as they travel, and Cambodia holds many opportunities in this area."

This has seen growing demand for more off-the-beaten track tours into remote areas of Cambodia, such as trekking through the rainforest in the Cardamom

Mountains, visiting elephants in their natural habitat in Mondulkiri and meeting tribes that live in the jungles of Ratanakiri.

Jo Crisp, general manager of Peak Cambodia DMC, said: "Infrastructure development, such as bridges, roads and hotels, are making it possible to venture out in relative comfort to sections of Cambodia which only a few years ago were only visited by die hard adventure seekers who could endure 10 hours on the back of a truck driving through mud."

However, the challenge is ensuring the development is sustainable, with Cambodia's culture and environment protected, environmental issues tackled, and wealth shared across all communities. "The future of not only tourism but the country itself is in our hands," added Crisp.

In a bid to hit its 2020 tourist target, the Ministry of Tourism is focusing efforts on the Chinese market, launching a five-year Chinese ready plan, which includes having Chinese speaking staff in every hotel and restaurant, Chinese signs in airports and tourist spots, three-year multiple entry visas and direct flights.

Beautification schemes have also been carried out to get more people to the coast. Campaigns to clean up the beach and open more upmarket offerings has seen Sihanoukville shake off its seedy reputation, while similar initiatives in the nearby Kep and Kampot have helped boost tourism. In November, Cambodia Tourism Federation and travel organisations will hold a forum to discuss how to develop the coast into the future.

VIEWPOINTS Which source markets will perform best for you this year and why?



Jo Crisp, general manager, Peak Cambodia DMC

Given the relative ease of travelling from Australia to Cambodia, the Australian market will continue to be a key market for the Intrepid Group (which houses a portfolio of brands including Peak Cambodia DMC). For short break adventures and Urban Adventures, we see a growth in visitors from surrounding countries, including Singapore, India, China and Hong Kong, who are choosing to take mini-breaks that allow them to experience the country.



Pierre-André Romano, general manager, EXO Cambodia

China is the fastest growing market here, as is the case in most other countries. The trend may be starker in Cambodia because of the Ministry of Tourism's efforts. Americans benefit from Cambodia being a dollarised economy, while Europeans have to face exchange rates issue, especially now as consequence of the Brexit. Asian markets in general are interesting, with travel professionals working with airlines companies and airports on short-stay outbound travel to Cambodia.



Bamboo train, in Battambang

DESTINATION TO WATCH

Battambang: history, art paradise

Dubbed Cambodia's rice bowl, the north-western province of Battambang boasts all the elements that make the country unique. Home to seemingly endless shimmering rice fields, Battambang's flat landscape makes it the perfect place to jump on a bike and explore authentic rural life.

Cycling along the dusty orange tracks that snake past farmers working the rice fields, grazing buffaloes, children screaming "hello" as they race by, hilltop temples and traditional stilted wooden houses, Battambang showcases authentic rural life. It is also home to the country's sole surviving bamboo train.

The provincial capital city – also called Battambang – is steeped in history and home to some of the country's last remaining colonial architecture. While much of it is teetering into disrepair, a walk around the compact, riverside city offers a glimpse into the Kingdom's Golden Years heyday of the 1950s and 1960s. Another draw of Battambang city is its rising reputation as the country's artistic hub. Its quaint streets present galleries and studios, wall murals and boutiques selling local crafts.

As Battambang emerges from behind its shroud, more quirky cafes, restaurants, bars and hotels are cropping up, helping to plant this rising destination on the map.

Destination in numbers

1

The number of tourists, in millions, arriving in Sihanoukville in 1H2016 – a record high and 17 per cent year-on-year increase

14.5

The year-on-year percentage rise in Chinese arrivals, prompting the Cambodian Ministry of Tourism to launch a five-year plan to attract even more Chinese

972,753

The number of visitors to Angkor Wat Archaeological Park between January and May 2016. The weak 0.25 per cent increase has agents calling for the promotion of other local attractions

PRODUCTS

1 NagaCity Walk

NagaCorp, which runs NagaWorld casino and hotel in Phnom Penh, opened the country's first underground retail mall in September. Aimed at Cambodia's growing number of Chinese tourists, the mall is home to a range of luxury brands.

Operated by China Duty Free Group, the mall is divided into three zones, containing well-known duty-free brands, high-quality locally-made products and rented space to authorised dealers of luxury brands. The walkway connects the current Naga complex with Naga2, which includes a new hotel, restaurants and entertainment.

2 Topaz Conference Hall

The prestigious Topaz restaurant in Phnom Penh lifted the curtains on its new look. Now larger and can cater for up to 110 guests, the venue also boasts a cigar bar lounge area and seven VIP rooms for private dining. In

August, it unveiled its banquet and conference hall, which caters for up to 250 guests. Designed to meet the needs of international clients, it is kitted out with state-of-the-art sound and audio equipment.

3 Sokha Siem Reap Resort and Convention Centre

Homegrown hotel brand Sokha is preparing to open its latest venture in the form of Sokha Siem Reap Resort, located close to the entrance of iconic Angkor Wat Archaeological Park.

Phase one was completed in September, presenting 224 guestrooms, a swimming pool and conference centre – the country's second largest hotel conference facility after Sokha Phnom Penh. By the end of the year, the resort will be fully open, with a total of 776 guestrooms.

4 Garden City Hotel and Golf

Opened in October, Garden City Hotel



Garden City Hotel and Golf

& Golf occupies 3,000ha of land about 20km outside Phnom Penh. The 254-room property features a range of meeting rooms and conference space – including a ballroom for up to 1,500 people – a business centre, spa, fine dining restaurants, spacious pool and a kids' club. An 18-hole championship golf course sits next to the hotel, while there are plans to open a performance zoo and waterpark by the end of the year.

5 Six Senses Krabey Island

Six Senses is gearing up to make its Cambodian debut with the opening of Six Senses Krabey Island in 2017. Sprawled across an intimate island, just off the coast of Sihanoukville, the resort comprises 40 pool villas with outdoor showers and private plunge pools. Fine dining and a spa complete with a meditation cave and outdoor yoga sala are just a handful of treats that will be on offer.



Hotel Santika



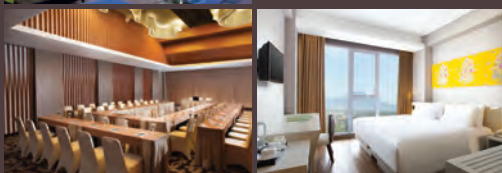
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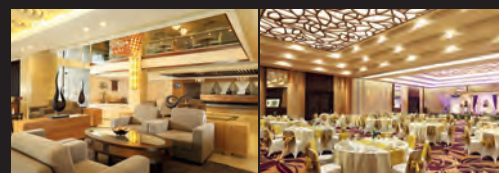
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Destination Japan



Sleepless in the big cities

Japan's popularity among travellers has resulted in a room crunch in the hottest cities and the government is taking rapid steps to boost room inventory before the 2020 Olympics comes to town. By [Julian Ryall](#)

Japan is suffering from a shortage of accommodation across all hotel categories in the country, and it is most acutely felt in the cities most popular with tourists.

In a 2015 report, property analysts CBRE suggested that Tokyo is likely to have a shortage of 14,000 rooms per night by 2020 – the year the country hosts the Olympic Games.

In an effort to fix the problem, the Japanese government has introduced a number of new initiatives.

Earlier in June, the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism announced that it had agreed on a plan to relax the floor area ratio of new buildings by 1.5 times, effectively enabling hotels with significantly larger floor space to be built.

At present, the City Planning Law limits the maximum floor area for a hotel to 400 per cent of the land area on which it stands. For a plot of land that is to be exclusively for a hotel, that ratio is to be raised to 600 per cent of the land area. Similar increases have been recommended for buildings that have half their floor space set aside for hotels.

Local governments have been informed of the change and are expected to review their own ordinances before end 2016.

“We feel that altering the laws on accommodation facilities is one way of adapting to the growing needs of visitors,” said Maiko Zenki, a spokesperson with the Japan National Tourism Organisation (JNTO).

Meanwhile, both international and local hotel companies have embarked on a massive development campaign, providing some immediate respite from the room shortage. No fewer than seven hotels have opened in the Ginza district of Tokyo in the 18 months up until June 2016, while work has begun on a further 59 hotels

VIEWPOINTS

Which source markets will perform best for you this year and why?



Shuichi Ohno, director of sales and marketing, Andaz Tokyo Toranomon Hills

Our best-performing source market changes every year, depending on the status of the Tokyo market, but we have been receiving more enquiries from overseas since Tokyo was confirmed as the host city for the 2020 Olympic Games. We generally receive many enquiries from the leisure, business and MICE sectors.



Kotaro Takada, corporate officer, Huis Ten Bosch

Taiwan – primarily because we have a sales office in Taipei and the sales team there has been successful in attracting customers to our theme park. Around 50 per cent of all our foreign guests will be from Taiwan, followed by around 25 per cent from South Korea, where we also have a sales office. Another big help to our business are the direct flights from Taiwan to Fukuoka Airport, which is not too far from us.

across the city in the fiscal year that ended in March. This is double that of the previous year.

Moreover, a panel set up by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare and the Japan Tourism Agency has also recently given its seal of approval to property owners who wished to rent out accommodation in private homes that are not registered as hotels.

Known in Japan as *minpaku*, owners will be limited to renting out private accommodation to 180 days a year, with a new bill to be submitted before the end of the fiscal year in March.

“While there is a shortage of accommodation in large cities currently, there are still plenty of options in rural areas

of Japan. JNTO’s mission is to promote these rural areas and decentralise the concentration of visitors, as well as promote ryokans as an accommodation option,” Zenki added.

On July 12, prime minister Shinzo Abe further instructed his minister for economic revitalisation to make the tourism industry one of the main pillars of Japan’s economy in the years to come. As part of a 10 trillion yen (US\$97.5 billion) plan, money is to be invested in the development of ports and harbours for cruise ships, and high-speed railway infrastructure such as the Tokyo-Nagoya train.

Additional funds are also being earmarked to help small and medium-size companies in the tourism sector expand

Destination in numbers

47.1

The percentage increase in inbound tourists to Japan in 2015, bringing the total for the year to 19.7 million, according to the JNTO

78

The amount in millions of yen, equivalent to US\$751,511, that will be spent on recreating a mediaeval Japanese town at Nagoya castle

32.6

The amount in billions of yen, equivalent to US\$314 million, spent by foreign tourists in Japan in 2015, up 70 per cent from 2014

their operations.

The Japanese government has also introduced a number of measures designed to attract more visitors to Japan, such as relaxing visa regulations for tourists from other parts of Asia.

These efforts are aided by broader factors in Japan’s favour – the proliferation of regional LCCs which has vastly improved accessibility, and a growing middle-class.

While the government has set a target of 20 million arrivals to Japan by 2020, footfalls hit 19.7 million by the end of last year, prompting confidence among trade stakeholders that the country will surpass targets before deadline. As a result, the government has now raised the bar to 40 million arrivals.

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QATAR

Destination Japan



Sunayama beach in Miyakojima, Okinawa

DESTINATION TO WATCH

Okinawa: a rising star

Japan, as a whole, is riding high on a tourism boom, but a couple of factors have conspired to put the nation's most southerly prefecture in a strong position to further benefit from an influx of overseas visitors.

Okinawa is close to the key markets of China and Taiwan, while it's not much farther for South Korean travellers than mainland Japan. And, given its distinctive history, cuisine and culture, these islands offer a whole new take on Japan at the same time as retaining all of the mainland's attractions. Plus, Okinawa has some superb beaches, particularly on the outlying islands, and a number of surprises. Who knew that Japan has mangrove swamps?

Perhaps most significant is the effort that the prefecture is putting into developing itself as a tourist destination, as well as a MICE location. The islands have seen a sharp increase in the number of hotels opening, with several more big names waiting in the wings to launch their own projects. Similarly, a new runway is scheduled to open at Naha Airport in 2017, which will dramatically increase capacity, while the port facilities in both Naha and Motobu are being enlarged to meet demand for cruise ships, primarily from China.

PRODUCTS

1 Tokyo Skytree

Overseas visitors to Japan now have a shorter wait time and smoother visit at the Tokyo Skytree thanks to an exclusive fast-track ticketing system and a simplified admission fee. Launched in July, the Fast Skytree Combo ticket allows access to both the tower's observation decks, Tembo Deck and Tembo Galleria, and costs 4,000 yen (US\$39.70).

A mere 6.8 per cent of foreign visitors had the Skytree on their agenda in 2013, but that number rose to more than 15 per cent last year.

2 Tsukiji Market

Tokyo's world-famous Tsukiji Fish Market will close its doors for good on November 2, although visitors to the city need not fret as its replacement is due to open five days later.

The new market in Koto Ward – about 3km east of the current site – will be a state-of-the-art facility that incorporates a sushi-making school, restaurants and shopping for the thousands of visitors who are expected to flock there daily.

3 Shochu from Izu Oshima

The island of Izu Oshima, a ferry ride south of Tokyo, is looking to attract visitors with a unique new product: locally-produced *shochu* spirits aged for six months at a depth of 20 metres off Akino-hama beach. The island was in the path of a major typhoon in 2013, which killed 36 and crippled the local tourism industry. Locals are trying to attract travellers once again with a *shochu* that ages undersea – more mildly due to the stable temperature, reduced sunlight and gentle motion of the current on the seabed.

4 All Nippon Airways

All Nippon Airways (ANA) is extending the benefits of its frequent-flyer programme to the LGBT community. Passengers in same-sex partnerships will be able to share their miles with each other. ANA will also relabel its multipurpose bathroom facilities at Haneda, Narita and Osaka airports to make it clear they are for the use of passengers of either gender as well as transgender travellers.

Additionally, the airline is embarking



Clockwise from above: Mount Fuji and the Chureito Pagoda; Tsukiji Market will soon be relocated; Tokyo Skytree; Daimon-zaka slopes along the ancient Kumano Kodo pilgrimage route

on a number of initiatives to promote diversity and inclusion policies among its employees.

5 Mount Fuji

Mount Fuji will boast Wi-Fi coverage for climbers during the popular climbing season in summer. Some 49 free Wi-Fi stations have been installed at accommodation huts and other public facilities on the 3,776m-high mountain, enabling foreign tourists to use their own smartphones to send messages, images and videos while on their trip.

6 Walk Japan

Kyushu-based tour operator Walk Japan has launched a self-guided walking tour along the Kumano Kodo pilgrimage route, one of only two in the world with UNESCO World Heritage status.

The 7D6N self-guided Kumano Wayfarer tour begins from Kyoto's Nakahechi trail, taking participants on a hilly, winding path through forests to get to the sacred Kumano Sanzan shrines. Participants will also pass oji sub-shrines, carved deities and local villages, with opportunities to catch scenic views of tea fields and the Pacific Ocean.

Accommodation will mostly be in



family-run inns offering home-cooked cuisine and onsen baths, with a resort stay rounding up the tour.

7 Sheraton Okinawa Sunmarina Resort

Sheraton Hotels & Resorts is converting a property in Okinawa into one of its own. Okinawa Sunmarina Resort has completed renovations in its main building, which now offers 200 refreshed guestrooms and a new front lobby, while works on two new wings are slated to complete later this year. The new Wellness Wing will come with an indoor pool, a spa, a gym and a Japanese bath. The South Wing will have 46 guestrooms, new F&B facilities and activity areas for guests.





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Destination Thailand

Thailand aims higher

With several of its cities regarded as mature destinations, Thailand is beginning its transformation into a luxurious destination. [Michael Sanderson](#) reports



Plaza Athenee Bangkok, A Royal Meridien Hotel, one of the many hotels in Bangkok to have undergone a recent renovation to update its luxury offerings

With ASEAN neighbours snapping at its heels, Thailand is repositioning itself towards high-end, “quality” travellers and is getting a suite of new luxury hotels to match.

In July, governor of the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) announced a change in marketing position from a “value-for-money to value-for-experience” destination.

Luxury hotels will add to this transition, with a new Park Hyatt about to open in the heart of Bangkok, while recent openings and renovations in Chiang Mai and Phuket put the focus firmly on the traveller who is willing to pay for indulgence.

Bangkok-based Exo Travel said it was trying to push the Park Hyatt and Riva Arun in Bangkok, Chiang Mai’s Akira Manor, Phuket’s Nai Harn and Keemala and the Hloyo mud house in Mae Salong.

Citing the TAT’s successful use of themed marketing campaigns in recent years, Exo added it has participated in a TAT project to develop marketing material to appeal to luxury travellers.

“This included shooting both a short

and long-length video at particular participating hotels and places,” an Exo spokeswoman said. “The campaign was successful and it worked well for us because it (targeted) the high-end traveller niche.”

Exo is also keen to join a sports tourism campaign the TAT is starting to push, which will emphasise the country’s facilities for golf, water sports, tennis and yoga/pilates.

Bill Barnett, managing director of hospitality consultancy C9 Hotelworks, pointed to the resurgence of business travellers and the MICE sector after “some dark days in 2014” as a sign of the country’s strong position.

Barnett said resorts had rebounded, with improvements from the Eastern European and Russian markets in the first five months of this year compared to the same time in 2015. Phuket alone has recorded 19 per cent growth in domestic and international passenger arrivals at the airport for the first five months, which was on par with Bali at 19.7 per cent and well ahead of Hong Kong, which had suffered lower year-on-year trade with the Chinese market.

“(The situation in Hong Kong) pushes the message back, how reliant we are on the China market,” Barnett said. “I hate to be Phuket-specific but I looked at the Phuket figures and it wasn’t just the Chinese that were growing this year, we saw proportionate growth against all the markets of 19 per cent. So it’s not just a China story.”

But Thailand’s quest for more leisure tourists will not be without challenge.

Firstly, the increase in flights to Cambodia and Vietnam meant Thailand faces greater competition across the region.

Barnett added Vietnam is a force to be reckoned with when it comes to competing for tourists.

“We saw Vietnam bottom out a few years ago, (but) it’s rising again now and becoming more of a competitive force to Thailand’s traditional leisure market. That’s something we have to be aware of,” he opined.

Outside the region, Brexit gives reason to be optimistic.

“Everyone’s bating their breath, waiting to see what’s going to happen with Brexit and people are viewing 2016 with

Destination in numbers

5.7

The amount in billions of US dollars that could be spent on the expansion of Thailand’s six largest airports

29.2

The YOY percentage increase in number of passengers flying between Suvarnabhumi and Hong Kong in 2015, according to the World Air Transport Statistics. Three million made the trip in 2015

16.7

The number of tourist arrivals, in millions, in 1H2016, up 13 per cent on last year, putting Thailand on track to hit 30 million for the year

VIEWPOINTS

Which source markets will perform best for you this year and why?



Lisa Fitzell, group managing director of Diethelm Travel Group

Our highest performing markets include Russia, Eastern Europe and India (a new market for us). The US is also showing good signs of growth. And while the UK has performed well this year, we’re expecting it to flatten a little as a result of the recent Brexit decision. The Latin American market has been challenging this year, due to the economic issues in Brazil, but we are seeing solid growth in forward bookings so we believe it will remain flat.



Max Jantasuan, managing director of Events Travel Asia

For us, APAC is still the majority – we get a lot of requests from Singapore but not so much Hong Kong or Malaysia. Australia and America are doing very well too. For the US, we’re quite fortunate to have a direct contact with an American corporate and PCO to hold events in Asia, not just Thailand, so we’re getting ongoing support from them for four or five events a year.

cautious optimism. Our expectations are for growth. (Although) we are widely leveraged in Asia...and are not entirely dependent on the impact of Brexit, sometimes when global events happen they do have an impact here in Thailand. You can’t be ignorant of what’s happening in the broader world,” Barnett said.

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Destination Thailand



Krabi draws sun and adventure worshippers

DESTINATION TO WATCH

Krabi: sun, sea and everything in between

Overshadowed for a long time by neighbouring provinces Phuket and Phang Nga, and even the fame of its own Phi Phi archipelago, Krabi is finally coming into its own.

The province offers beaches, islands and dive sites in the Andaman, along with mangrove forests, rock-climbing and caves for those who want a bit of everything. But Krabi's true appeal is its charm: a fisherman will take you on a tour and grill the catch of the day for you on the beach; there is a museum dedicated to prehistoric beads; and many communities have maintained their customs and lifestyles.

Krabi is an affordable option compared to other destinations in Thailand's south, particularly in terms of accommodation. There are about 500 hotels with more than 19,000 keys.

According to government statistics, Krabi welcomed 5.5 million domestic and foreign visitors in 2015. Local and national governments are bracing for even more to flock in, and are pushing for private investment to speed up the expansion of Krabi's international airport to cope with demand. A rise in direct international flights has contributed to this demand surge, with Qatar Airways announcing it will add Krabi to its roster by the end of the year.

Already a hit with Chinese, Indian and Middle Eastern tourists, the Tourism Authority of Thailand is now promoting Krabi to the Germans.

PRODUCTS

1 RamaYana Water Park

Located 20 minutes south of Pattaya on the eastern coast, the RamaYana is Thailand's newest and biggest water park. With 21 water slides, two dedicated children's zones, a wave pool, lazy river, floating market and elephant rides, the park boasts a total of 50 independent attractions. Private cabanas are available, the smallest for two to four people and the largest good for eight to 12. Wi-Fi is available throughout the attraction.

Entry costs 1,190 baht (US\$12) for adults and 790 baht for children. Family packages are available.

2 Thai VietJet Air

The Thai subsidiary of VietJet Air began operations in September after much delay. It operates twice daily flights between Bangkok and Phuket and Bangkok and Chiang Mai, and three Phuket-Chiang Rai trips a week. It has plans to launch regular flights to Vietnam before the end of the year. The LCC is based at Suvarnabhumi Airport, unlike other LLCs in Thailand which are based in northern Bangkok's Don Mueang airport.

3 Amara Bangkok Hotel

The Singapore luxury hotel brand's first foray into Bangkok comes in the

Surawong neighbourhood, parallel to the business district of Silom and Sathon roads. With 250 rooms and suites, a restaurant, a rooftop bar on the 26th floor and an infinity pool, the hotel also features two ballrooms and function rooms plus an executive club floor and lounge. Unusually, Amara offers a 24-hour boutique mini bar whereby guests can select their desired food and beverages at convenience store prices.

4 Avani Khon Kaen Hotel & Convention Centre

Centara Hotel & Convention Centre Khon Kaen has been rebranded under Minor Hotels' Avani flag since July 1, 2016. Avani Khon Kaen Hotel & Convention Centre boasts 4,000m² of meeting space, 196 guestrooms across five room types, an outdoor pool, a fitness centre and a spa. It is a 15-minute drive from the Khon Kaen Airport and located close to a number of leisure attractions such as the Dino Park water park and a nearby shopping district.

5 Boxtel

Located within Suvarnabhumi Airport, Boxtel offers solo travellers soundproof, non-smoking, air-conditioned rooms, each just 4m² in size. Each room comes with an adjustable work station and free



Avani Khon Kaen Hotel & Convention Centre

Wi-Fi. A wake-up service is available to ensure flights are not missed, but guests are required to use the airport's toilet facilities. Four-hour stays start from 1,250 baht (US\$35.80).

6 Away Chiang Mai

Away Chiang Mai Hot Springs Resort opened in March, located close to a jungle, a national park and caves. With 34 rooms and a 100m swimming pool, Away also offers shuttle services to the airport, a 30-minute drive away, and the San Kamphaeng hot springs. Managed by Bespoke Hospitality Management Asia, the hotel is

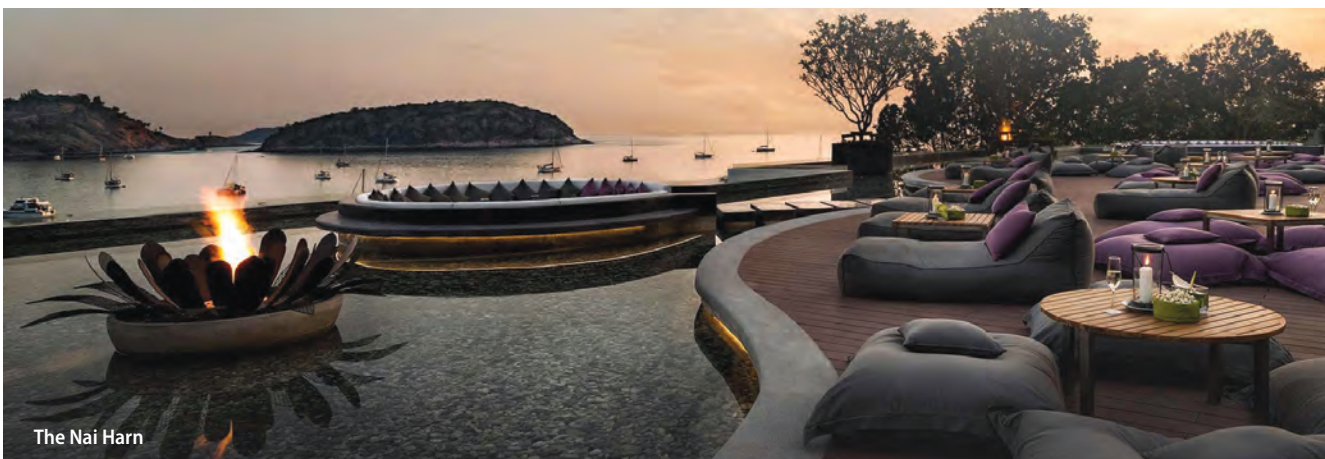
one of five resorts under the Away brand in Thailand.

7 The Nai Harn

After 18 months of extensive renovations, the Royal Phuket Yacht Club has transformed into The Nai Harn luxury resort in Phuket. The only hotel directly on the Nai Harn beach, all 130 rooms and suites have Andaman Sea views while the 50m wide rooftop can be used for weddings or other events. While there are two meeting rooms and flexible outdoor space for the business-minded, a sense of luxury comes from the beachside butler service, private transport (limousine, helicopter or motor-yacht) and spa therapies.

8 Phuket Marriott Resort and Spa Nai Yang Beach

A five-minute drive from Phuket International Airport, the country's newest Marriott hotel is on a secluded beach in the island's northwest. The 180 guestrooms range from 46m² garden view suites to two-bedroom villas on the beachfront. Several rooms have direct access to the pool and all have high-speed Internet access, international satellite TV and safes. There are four restaurant and bar options, including one on the beach highlighting seafood, plus fitness, children's and spa facilities.



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Destination Brunei

Key to the kingdom's heart

Brunei saw visitor numbers decline in the first quarter, but inbound agents are hopeful that the recent easing of visa requirements for one of its top source markets will turn things around, writes **S Puvaneswary**



Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddien Mosque, Brunei

Foto: Mohamad's Shutterstock.com

Chinese visitors to Brunei Darussalam can now more easily obtain a visa-on-arrival for single entry over a maximum stay of 14 days, a change implemented in an attempt to encourage Chinese visitors – who form Brunei's second largest inbound market – to stay longer in the Sultanate.

Previously, tourists from China had to book a package and get approval for the same visa through an agency.

Peter Chieng, managing director of PJ Majestic Tours, said: "Visa-on-arrival helps as it removes the time consuming

process and hassle of (us) applying for a visa. It makes it easier for wholesalers to sell Brunei and receive last minute bookings just before departure. The Chinese are spoilt for destinations as there are so many countries trying to woo them."

Inbound agents have found it is easier to sell short Brunei trips as part of multi-destination itineraries.

Executive director of BonAsia Holiday Management Services, Caroline Ang, said it is easier to pair Brunei with Labuan in Malaysia rather than sell Brunei as a mono-destination. The Brunei leg is usually

over one or two nights out of the full five-night package.

Century Travel Centre (CTC) general manager, C P Foo, agreed it could be a challenge to sell Brunei as a mono destination over a one-week period. Century Tours hence combines Brunei with Bali or Kota Kinabalu as part of a charter tour.

On Brunei's allure to the Chinese market, Chieng said: "The Chinese market, in particular, are interested in Bruneian Royalty and we take them to the Royal Regalia Museum and outside the palace. They (also) love soft adventure and nature, and we promote nature tours to see the proboscis monkey along the Brunei River and visits to Ulu Temburong National Park."

Similarly, Foo said Brunei's strength remained on eco-tourism and culture and this was what CTC was pushing for the Chinese market.

He added: "There are new products at Ulu Temburong National Park such as Ulu Ulu Resort and just outside the national park, at Batang Duri, the Freme Rainforest Lodge was recently upgraded (with) more teambuilding structures."

For BonAsia's Ang, clients from China are middle- and upper middle- class who usually opt for four- or five- star properties. The group considers Kampong Ayer

Destination in numbers

56,431

International visitors to Brunei via Brunei International Airport in 1Q2016. Of this, a total of 42.2 per cent visited Brunei for leisure and holiday, while 17.4 per cent travelled for business. In-transit visitors formed 15.8 per cent

2.2

The average length of stay, in days, in the first quarter of 2016 compared to 2.1 days in the same period last year

40.7

The hotel occupancy rate in Brunei in 1Q2016 compared to 37.3 per cent in 1Q2015

VIEWPOINTS

Which source markets are likely to perform well this year?



Sugumaran Nair,
manager, inbound
& MICE division,
Freme

China, which has always been the top performer for Freme.

China is also a year-round market. We hope the introduction of the visa-on-arrival will boost numbers further.



Leslie Chiang,
managing director,
BorneoGuide

We see good business coming from FITs especially from Germany, UK, Australia, Japan and South Korea

because they enjoy eco-tourism and soft adventure products that we are promoting.

PRODUCTS

1 Parkview Hotel Brunei

This 123-room hotel in Jerudong, formerly known as LR Asma Hotel, was re-branded as Parkview Hotel last year and came under a new management, Times Square Group of Companies. Located at Jerudong, the hotel has six meeting rooms, a banquet hall, a gym, an outdoor pool, and separate Jacuzzis and saunas for men and women.

2 Escape Square

Escape Square is a home-grown business with a similar concept to the global Escape Room franchise. It features four rooms, each with a different theme – Murder in the Office, Kidnapping in the Classroom, the Scorpio Killer's Residence and The Pirate Ship: Blackbeard's Treasure. At Escape Square, groups of up to six are tasked to solve puzzles within 60 minutes.

Escape Square is located on the first floor of Abdul Razak Complex in Kg Gadong.

3 Waterpark at Jerudong Park

Attractions at the waterpark include water

slides, waterfall jet, water gun, water mill, umbrella jet, tipping bucket, pipe fall, net bridge, water volcano, interactive arching jets and floor jets. Jerudong Park also has a ferris wheel, roller coaster and mini-golf course.

4 Eco Adventure Park and Rainforest Lodge

Both these facilities promise exciting activities and the modern comforts of home in a pristine rainforest environment.

The lodge can accommodate over 40 pax in new wooden bunker beds and a further 15 or so in large tents. It also boasts a new terrace dining area and new kitchen.

The new park's adventure course includes a 135m flying fox, a high rope bridge course, a hanging bridge across the river and a canopy platform for bird watching and a viewing tower.

5 Kg Sungai Bunga homestay

Kg Sungai Bunga fishing village has allocated a few houses for homestay tourism, where guests can learn about the local culture over short stays with a local family.



Tourists can also request for a demonstration on preparing prawn crackers or watch a local music performance known as *mukun*, where traditional drums accompany a group of local singers.

For details, email mpksungaibunga@gmail.com

6 Sumbiling Eco Village

Sumbiling Eco Village has enhanced its facilities to include four glamping tents for those interested in camping in the Temburong rainforest. The glamping accommodations vary in size, with the largest being able to accommodate up to four people.

and the Royal Regalia Gallery among the must-see attractions in Brunei.

And while Brunei is not a place that comes to mind for shopping, some affluent Chinese tourists will leave Brunei with luxury goods like Rolex watches, said Michael Lee, managing director of Freme. This year, the company will do a couple of sales calls to Hong Kong, Shanghai and Guangzhou, to keep agents updated.

Brunei saw a slight drop in tourist arrivals in 1Q2016, with visitors totalling 56,431 compared with 58,038 in 1Q2015. The Tourism Development Department, under the Ministry of Primary Resources and Tourism, attributed this decline to annual seasonal fluctuation, an overall fall in travel demand and negative growth from the main source markets.



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Destination Laos

A better positioning for Laos

Asian arrivals are rising but concerns about the destination's quality abounds, writes [Bernie Rosenbloom](#)

The recent influx of Chinese and South Koreans into Laos have forced members of the trade to reassess the situation.

"Both the Chinese and South Koreans come with a very different approach," said Luang Prabang View Hotel's general manager John Williams. He said the main concern is "overkill" on the city, though these markets fill rooms during the generally slow Green Season from April to October.

Exo Travel's sales manager Laos Jason Rolan further warned that waves of low-spending, high volume Chinese groups may dilute the destination's quality.

"This is changing the dynamic of tourism in Laos from being one that was slightly more upscale and boutique, to something a bit less so."

But five-star Luang Say Residence's general manager Rodolphe Gay has a different view.

"The arrival of Asian markets is a welcome change to the luxury sector. In other markets there may be cultural challenges, but in the high-end market, we find Asians polite, educated, and respectful."

On the luxury front, the country will have three more five-star hotels this year – Crowne Plaza Vientiane, and the Pullman and Serai hotel in Luang Prabang.

"The 198-room Crowne Plaza Vientiane is the first international brand with full MICE facilities in the capital," said general manager Oliver Horn.

Meanwhile, the 123-key Pullman Luang Prabang covers 16ha of countryside, and worked with P49 Deesign to ensure the resort village met UNESCO guidelines while providing a modern interior.

"We're focusing on younger travellers who mix business with leisure," said general manager Arnaud Rouchon.

Lastly, the Serai hotel – on the site of the former Phousy Hotel – wants to "hit the ground running when it opens", said general manager Gary Tyson.

Arrivals in Laos jumped 13.9 per cent from 4.16 million in 2014 to 4.68 million last year, topping predictions by more



Reclining Buddha statue at Wat Pha That Luang

Destination in numbers

13.7

The percentage of international visitors to the country, who account for 50 per cent of the tourism revenue

29

The percentage of Thai visitors to the country. To attract more Thais, Laos is opening more border crossings, and simplifying access by car

72

The year-on-year increase in the percentage of South Korean arrivals. This makes it Laos' fourth largest market and third in revenue

than five per cent, according to the Lao Tourism Development Department.

Top market Thailand increased its numbers by 14 per cent to 2.32 million, while third place China showed a solid gain of 21 per cent and South Korea leapt to four place with 165,328, a 72 per cent spike. Overall, tourism revenue jumped 13 per cent to US\$725 million.

Saly Phimphinith, director general of the Lao Tourism Marketing Department, said: "In 2015, South Korea and China outperformed expectations."

However, figures from 1Q2016 were less robust. Overall arrivals dipped six per cent year on year, with Thailand's number shrinking 13 per cent, and South Korea and China growing at a six and 13 per cent respectively.

To raise Laos' profile among the Thais, Phimphinith said the marketing department is working with the Tourism Au-

thority of Thailand to organise fam trips for travel agents. Also, the department continues to upgrade the national tourism website, and recently redesigned its promotional materials.

Moreover, Phimphinith realises that Laos is a secondary destination, but notes: "Our four bridges with Thailand and new roadways connecting to our four neighbouring countries perfectly position Laos for multi-nation itineraries."

When asked about new air routes in Asia, Phimphinith said: "Lao Airlines is now focusing on China and Korea."

Meanwhile, Air Asia launched a daily Bangkok Vientiane-Luang Prabang service earlier this year. SilkAir and HK Express plan to commence Luang Prabang services from their national hubs in October. Domestically, Lao Skyway now flies to less-travelled destinations from Vientiane.

DESTINATION TO WATCH

Khammouane: waiting in the wings

Khammouane's Konglor Cave cruise and Buddha Cave have lured tourists, but the province offers much more. Years ago, a simple rest area on Route 8 to Vietnam overlooked the rarely viewed karst spires of Limestone Forest. Today, that scene is eyeing UNESCO World Heritage status.

Travellers are realising Khammouane's potential and are heading its way. The provincial lap starts in Old Thakaek, a Mekong port rich in colonial architecture and which buzzes with travellers tackling the Khammouane Loop by mountain bike or motorbike to caves, lakes, ethnic villages, and waterfalls that few know. The loop can also be covered by van.

Visitor numbers to Khammouane in 2010 stood around 175,000, according to the Lao Tourism Development Department. In 2015 the figure topped 500,000. In 2010, the province offered 1,287 rooms. The count soared to 2,798 last year. Occupancy rates jumped from 52 per cent to 71 per cent during the same period. Access is easy: a five-hour drive from Vientiane and two hours from Savannakhet's international airport.

Adventure tour operator Green Discovery Laos offers 17 itineraries in Khammouane, and its 2017 plans call for more zip lines, rock climbing, and spelunking. That's a good indicator for Khammouane's future as Laos' next big destination for adventure.



Sikhottabong pagoda

VIEWPOINTS

Which source markets do you think will perform best this year and why?



Markus Neuer, director and co-owner, Tiger Trail

I have been seeing a steady increase in middle-class Thai FITs as well as South Korean, Japanese, and Singaporean travellers. I also expect the Hong Kong market to perform well, and Hong Kong visitors to South-east Asia are expected to grow 60 per cent this year, as new connections by HK Express will create an easier and cheaper, yet more spontaneous access to Laos.

Andreas Hofmann, Laos managing director, Asian Trails

Asian Trails focuses on leisure travellers and for 2016, we will continue to rely on traditional performers – the UK, Germany, Switzerland and France. However, the global crisis is not helping. But Israel is a positive surprise and they are growing steadily from a low base – travellers from Israel like the mix of culture, nature, good fresh food, as well as that Laos is a safe destination.



PRODUCTS

1 President by Akaryn

One of the newest hotels in Vientiane, President by Akaryn occupies a building that marries traditional Laotian design with French neoclassical influences. It sits between the Parliament House and the Presidential palace, and opposite of Chao Anouvong Park.

With only 32 spacious and luxuriously appointed rooms and suites, the property is perfect for travellers desiring privacy while being in the heart of the city.

Guests can enjoy dining in six different establishments and pampering treatments at the Ayurah Wellness spa.

President by Akaryn also welcomes corporate groups with an event facility for 200 guests as well as expansive gardens perfect for creative functions.

2 Phongsaly Loop

EXO Travel Laos introduced the Phongsaly Loop, a nine-day programme based in Luang Prabang. It calls at three northern provinces and offers a glimpse into a unique corner of Laos most people overlook. A Mekong cruise to Pak Beng and an elephant camp start the journey. Muang La in Oudomxay and the Reclining Buddha Trek come next. Phongsaly and its mountain treks top the itinerary.

3 Pha Tad Ke Botanical Garden

After seven years of research and planting, Pha Tad Ke Botanical Garden, the first of



Clockwise from above: President by Akaryn; The Vang Vieng Challenge

its kind in Laos, will open on 1 November. A Mekong cruise lands at the 14-hectare “ethno-botany” centre which focuses on the relationship of Lao people with local plants and trees, their medicinal and spiritual properties, and handicrafts.

Pha Tad Ke’s 30 staff offer edu-tours through its grounds and riverside trips. The property also features a restaurant, accommodation, spa with an herbal massage and handicraft shop. Tours leave from Pha Tad Ke’s downtown Luang Prabang office.

4 SilkAir

This month SilkAir is launching a circular Singapore-Vientiane-Luang Prabang-Singapore route, with three weekly flights on Monday, Thursday and Saturday. Further, a codeshare agreement with Lao Airlines will allow SilkAir to market the former’s services between Vientiane and Singapore, and Luang Prabang and Singapore.

5 The Vang Vieng Challenge

The Vang Vieng Challenge raises the bar in hardcore Lao adventures. Green Discovery Laos’ latest two-day thrill combines a



steep mountain ascent by via ferrate (iron way) using steel cables, ladders, and suspended bridges with abseiling down a waterfall and zip-lining. Accommodation on the mountain peak includes a wooden platform for camping and a three-room bamboo hut.



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MICE feature

18 Top Incentive Ideas

From reenacting the high life of old Shanghai's crime lords to dancing along with Japanese festival revellers, there is something fascinating for your next reward programme



Gangsta lovin'

1 Gangsta lovin'

Slide back in time to the notorious past of Shanghai when the city's most powerful Chinese crime lords ruled like kings. Have your incentive winners don colonial era costumes, and explore the mansions and villas where once wealthy banking families and rich opium dealers live, and learn how crime lords stashed their ill-gotten gains.

Participants also get an exclusive chance to "spy" on the insides of an old Jewish club where secret conversations took place and gain insight on how they changed the fate of Shanghai. Your winners can conclude the adventure by sipping on complimentary cocktails inside a mansion that once belonged to one of Shanghai's most influential families.

Capacity: Minimum three pax

Email: info@newmantours.com

2 A bottle of rum to warm the tum

Visit a young French couple's award-winning rum distillery at Phuket's Chalong Bay and meet the owners for a private tour at Chalong Bay Rum. Learn how natural white rum is made from Thai sugarcanes cultivated on the premises. With ample space available at this boutique plant, events and programmes can be customised and personalised, ranging from distillery discovery tours with a master distiller to cocktail-making workshops to full dinner receptions with live music.

Capacity: 50 pax for full-option dinner and activities; 200 pax for cocktail parties

Email: marine@chalongbayrum.com

3 Eat your way around town

What better way to get a feel of a city than through its local cuisine. UnTour Shanghai offers culinary excursions that deviate from usual tourist hotspots. Three regular food tours with bilingual guides are offered: Shanghai Night Markets; Street Eats Breakfast; and Dumpling Delights, which ends with a one-hour hands-on cooking class for *shengjianbao* with a local chef. Private tours for corporate groups can be arranged.

Capacity: 6 to 20 or 30 pax, depending on the tour

Email: info@untourshanghai.com

4 Luxury voyage down the Mekong

The customisability of Aqua Expeditions' luxury offerings is just what incentive planners need to effectively dangle a carrot. Unlike its competition, Aqua does not rely on third parties, and even has its own skiffs for excursions – the only cruise plying the Mekong to offer this. With the added flexibility, foodies, for example, could choose to attend cooking lessons on board and visit markets and villages when they hit shore.

Aqua Expedition offers a four-night itinerary from Ho Chi Minh City to Phnom Penh, and a three-night itinerary from Phnom Penh to Siem Reap, with two shore excursions each day.

Capacity: 20 suites for 40 passengers

Website: www.aquaexpeditions.com

5 Regal home of the winners

Hidden among the lush undulating hills of Bali's highlands is The Chedi Club Tanah Gajah, an intimate retreat with twenty individual villas, each one uniquely featuring original Balinese artwork, spread across a five-hectare plot.

And within this private, serene complex, poised at the edge of a steep valley along the

Petanu River, is the Bumi Duadari, an enchanting residence of renowned Indonesian art collector and designer Hendra Hadiprana. Constructed in traditional Balinese style, the handsome residence also supports local Ubud-based artists by fitting out its interior with their art pieces.

While Bumi Duadari is not open for stays, select spaces are available for private event hire: Bale Barong, which has capacity for 45 pax seated or 60 in a standing cocktail arrangement; Dua Dari Statue, which can seat 20 pax or hold 60 in cocktail style; the scenic poolside and The Hadiprana House, each good for 45 pax standing.

Capacity: Varied

Email: sales@thechediclububud.com



6 Forbidden no more

Holding a gala event on the grounds of the iconic Forbidden City in Beijing can be a very prestigious and exclusive affair. It costs about 10 times more to use venues and event spaces that are not open to the public. Participants can dress up in imperial costumes and enjoy five-star dining in the main hall of the Imperial Ancestral Temple while being entertained by performers playing traditional instruments.

For a modern twist on entertainment for a gala event, a mini Beijing Olympic Games-style opening ceremony with artists and performers can be staged in the courtyard.

Capacity: 300 pax

Email: kris.vangoethem@thomascook.com.cn

7 Don't forget your broolly

Umbrellas are a symbol of good luck for the Hakka people. From a small Hakka Village situated in the countryside of Kaohsiung, Taiwan, Li Rong-qun and his wife hold a 1.5 hour workshop in the century-old craft of Chinese umbrella making. They then offer participants brushes and colours to beautify their creations. Moreover, with only a handful of surviving umbrella makers left today, your group's participation could go towards supporting the continuation of this traditional handicraft.

Capacity: 30 pax

Email: kcsumbrella@yahoo.com.tw

8 Master The Jungle Cook Book

Love Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*? Now you can step into the very landscape that inspired the setting of the classic tale – Pench National Park – through a stay at Vannraj by Ayana in Madhya Pradesh, India.

The luxury safari lodge is a short drive to the Turia entrance of Pench National Park, and blends in with the surrounding landscape and indigenous vegetation. Spread across nine hectares of deciduous forest are 12 independent lodges that provide ample indoor and outdoor spaces for guests to interact while being afforded the necessary privacy.

Landscaped gardens and various open spaces make perfect locations for exclusive get-togethers, or host a welcome dinner under an old Mahua tree and a post-dinner cocktail party on a romantically-lit pool deck or on a suspended deck on the lake. These venues can accommodate 100 to 150 pax.

But wait, there's more to do. Ready your group for a lesson on tribal cooking techniques used by the local Gond and Baiga tribes. Interactive sessions, led by the executive chef, can be arranged for groups of eight to 10 guests.

Capacity: Varied

Email: vannraj@ayanahospitality.com





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The event was very successful. I met potential suppliers who gave detailed explanations about their products and I gained updated knowledge about their offerings.

PT. Multi Holiday, Indonesia
Rudy Tchrinsa Satyadi, Managing Director

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深圳新景界国际会议展览有限公司
吴立辉, 会议文化交流中心主管

EXHIBITOR 展商

It was the first time that we participated at IT&CM China and I felt that the 3-day event was organised efficiently. I interacted with many professional Chinese and International buyers and media and look forward to developing my relationship with them in the future.

Daimaru Matsuzakaya Department Store, Japan
Li Meng Ying, Project Manager

眼见为实。作为本次开幕典礼及欢迎晚宴的主办方,我们借此机会邀请有影响力的业内人士前来参观我们的酒店,以及我们举办这种活动的的能力。所以我相信这次合作会给我们带来巨大的惠宜。

上海宝华万豪酒店, 中国
Johnnie Chen, 驻店经理



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MICE feature

9 Purify this soul

Your top achievers are invited to experience this time-honoured tradition of the Hindu-Balinese culture and take part in a one-of-a-kind spiritual experience.

The 45-minute programme takes place on the beaches of The Ritz-Carlton, Bali in the early morning, when Surya, God of the Sun, is believed to rise.

Balinese Hindus believe that the blessings from Surya and Baruna, God of the Ocean, are required for a clean and fresh new beginning, which is why this is performed on the beach.

It started with a Balinese priest offering a devotion to both Gods, followed by a Tepung Tawar ritual – a washing of the guest's hands, feet, face, and mouth three times each with the holy water, to symbolically cleanse the body, mind, and soul, and concluding with a prayer.

Completing the journey, a piece of three-colored string called *Benang Tridatu* is tied around the guest's wrist and worn until it falls off – symbolising their quest for balance, harmony, and understanding.

Capacity: 20 pax

Website: www.ritzcarlton.com/Bali

10 Peer into Kedah's past

An international ancient trading centre and Hindu-Buddhist kingdom believed to be the oldest civilisation in South-east Asia, dating back to 110AD, is the latest historical discovery in modern Malaysia to be made available to tourists.

The archaeological site of Bujang Valley in Kedah will be the starting point of this curated tour for your top achievers. A two-hour drive from Bujang Valley will take the group to Inas Mountain Forest Reserve, where a bird's-eye view of the lush tropical jungle below can be enjoyed from the world's longest canopy walkway measuring 925m.

Capacity: 30 pax

Email: greenjohnchan@gmail.com

11 Glory of Awa Odori

The Awa Odori is one of Japan's three most famous festivals and takes place over four days in Tokushima, on the island of Shikoku, in mid-August every year. Dozens of teams – known as *ren* – wear brightly coloured costumes and chant and dance through the city's streets to traditional pipe and drum music. For anyone visiting at other times of the year, do not fret; teams put on demonstrations three times a day at the Awaodori Hall and insist on audience participation.

Capacity: 50 pax

Email: www.awaodori-kaikan.jp



The Awa Odori

12 Bask in Brunei's pristine environment

Take your top achievers out of the bustling city and into the preserved Ulu Temburong National Park in Brunei, where flora and fauna are protected for scientific research and the appreciation of low-impact travellers.

A day excursion can be organised for private groups, beginning with a ride in a local water taxi from Bandar through a network of rivers and channels around the back of Brunei Bay. As the group passes by dense mangrove islands, delegates have the chance to spot wildlife in their habitat.

From Bandar, groups continue onwards to Batang Duri for morning tea, before heading upstream through the rapids of the Temburong River using traditional longboats to the National Park entrance. Here, enjoy the panoramic view of the rainforest from the tree tops and visit a waterfall for a swim. The return journey downstream is taken on a longboat or inflatable raft to Rainforest Lodge where a lunch of local delights awaits.

Once hungry bellies are satiated, take the zipline and call at an Iban longhouse to discover the local way of life.

Capacity: 60 pax

Email: fremeinb@brunet.bn

13 Sail away in a catamaran

Get on the water in style at Mövenpick Siam Hotel Pattaya, which has partnered with Ocean Marina Yacht to offer upscale sailing in the Gulf of Thailand.

A range of fully-manned yachts are available to whisk guests around the bay or to the neighbouring islands off Na Jomtien coast in Pattaya.

Yachts include the 25-person, 16m-long *Siamese Twin*, carrying captain and crew, state-of-the-art equipment, living quarters and four bedrooms; the 13m-long *Sonic* for 20 pax; and the intimate 8m-long *Siamese Cat* for six pax.

Capacity: Yacht dependent

Email: Nattapun.Runyasewa@moevenpick.com



Glide like a bird

14 Glide like a bird

At dawn, coast over lush paddy fields, Lanna temples and the rolling mountains of northern Thailand in a two-seater microlight aircraft belonging to Chiang Mai Adventure. Take in views of the idyllic countryside and enjoy the sensation of gliding through the air like a bird. There are plenty of aerial photo and video opportunities, just make sure to come with a GoPro.

Capacity: Eight pax per day

Email: infoadventure@gmail.com

15 Roll into India's best locales in style

The Deccan Odyssey, regarded as one of the most luxurious trains in the world, rolls through India and takes its passengers to some of the country's most remarkable landmarks and locations.

Itineraries are rather lengthy for corporate incentives though – running for seven nights/eight days – but for groups who can afford the time, the journey will be a memorable one. Various itineraries are available, and each explores a different part of India, such as the Taj Mahal in the north and the heritage sites of Ajanta and Ellora caves in the west.

The Deccan Odyssey train has onboard a fitness centre, a spa, restaurants and well-appointed cabins that come furnished with twin-beds, LCD TVs, bath and shower. There are 21 royal coaches and four presidential suites.

Capacity: 88 pax

Email: trains@deccanodyssey.in

16 It is all written in the stars

In June 2012, the Aoraki Mackenzie region in the South Island of New Zealand was approved as one of only a few international Dark Sky Reserves worldwide, offering unparalleled vistas of the night sky. Nestled against the backdrop of spectacular alpine landscape, the Hermitage Hotel in Aoraki Mt Cook Village offers Big Sky Star Gazing tours of the largest gold-rated reserve of its kind, beginning at the hotel's Digital Dome Planetarium. Guests are then transferred to the Reserve where astronomers highlight the constellations of the spectacular southern sky.

Capacity: 30 pax

Email: reservations@hermitage.co.nz

17 A great stay all the way

Reward your incentive winners with a one-of-a-kind stay at Commune by the Great Wall, an award-winning contemporary architecture overlooking the Great Wall of China. Occupying the plains of the picturesque Shuiguan Mountains, the property offers tranquillity away from the city's hustle and bustle. Your winners will appreciate a private path from the property that leads to an untouched section of the Great Wall of China. The property has 40 villas with a total of 175 suites and 11 presidential suites.

Capacity: Unavailable at press time

Email: reservation@commune.com.cn

18 Playground of the gods

When The Gleneagles Hotel first opened its doors in the heart of Scotland in 1924, it was dubbed the playground of the gods. Not much has changed and it is still recognised as one of the world's grandest resorts.

This luxury hotel is set on a sprawling estate where guests can indulge in a smorgasbord of activities not easily found in the big cities. Have your top achievers train a Labrador Retriever at the Gundog School, experience the thrill of flying a Harris Hawk at the world's first dedicated Falconry School, put their motor skills to the test on two of Scotland's most challenging 4x4 off-road driving courses, and more.

Golf enthusiasts can also have a go on the PGA Centenary Course which had hosted The 2014 Ryder Cup.

Dining delights abound too at the hotel, home to Andrew Fairlie's two Michelin star restaurant.

Capacity: 232 pax on single-occupancy basis for hotel buy-out

Email: group.sales@gleneagles.com



Sail away in a catamaran

Analysis

Catering to Muslim travellers



A Muslim family at the airport

Within the Muslim travel market there are numerous travel profiles, each requiring a different level of halal adherence. **Cedomir Nestorovic** tells travel sellers what they should consider before investing

In marketing to the Muslim traveller, companies should be mindful of the differences between Islamic travel markets. Travels motivated by spiritual reasons – such as the Hajj and Umrah, pilgrimages in Pakistan, Iran or Israel – are different from pure holidays that are not motivated by religious reasons.

With pilgrimages (especially Hajj), many of the elements (e.g. access to the site, rituals, time) are regulated. Whereas for holidays, tourists usually travel for cooler climates – such as when the Ramadan falls in summer and Gulf families want to escape very hot temperatures – or they might travel to discover new countries like Korea and Japan.

While the motivations for these tourists may differ, travel sellers need not customise their marketing strategies too specifically. The elements for a traveller on a pilgrimage are quite fixed, so there is little

capacity for travel sellers to innovate.

On the other hand, holidaymakers who choose to visit a particular city (e.g. Paris, Tokyo, or Singapore) expect to discover new things unique to that place. The experience needs to be different, otherwise, they would not have chosen to travel all the way there. Having said that, a certain amount of adaptation for halal meals and prayer facilities will be appreciated, and this can be easily arranged with practically any hotel.

Before committing to any form of investment, travel sellers should first identify the traveller profile they are targeting, because travellers come from countries with diverse backgrounds. These travel-

lers may differ in several aspects, including purchasing power, cultural and social codes, religious teachings, and even political and legal conditions.

When it comes to purchasing power, an affluent customer who holds a strict observance of the Shariah likely has certain expectations of his accommodations, and a hotel operator would have to compute the trade-off.

Would a five-star hotel segregate swimming pools and gyms, remove the mini bar from the rooms, restrict access to some floors, and close the night club? The compensation must be huge because a decision like that impacts not just the economic value, but also the reputation of the

hotel. This is especially true if the property is part of an international chain, and the hotel has to respect the rules of the entire chain.

Separately, when it comes to the cultural differentiation and religious teachings, it is clear that a person from a Hanbali school of thought and Shafi/Hanefi school of thought will not require the same level of compliance with the Shariah. Companies looking to attract these travellers then may not have to make as many adjustments.

One of the most common pitfalls that travel sellers commit is to believe that Muslim consumers are all very rich, and that they ask for full compliance with the Shariah. If a hotel wants to cater only to this clientele, then it should consider transforming into a halal hotel.

In reality, Muslim travels do not justify the transformation of a hotel, because there would be insufficient number of guests and nights to sustain a complete transformation. It would be more feasible for a hotel to aim to be halal-friendly, where minimal changes are introduced to cater to Muslim travellers, yet not drive away the majority of non-Muslim consumers.

Nestorovic is the director, executive MBA Asia-Pacific at ESSEC Business School and the author of Islamic Marketing – Understanding the Socio-Economic, Cultural, and Politico-Legal Environment.



Before committing to any form of investment, travel sellers should first identify the traveller profile they are targeting, because travellers come from countries with diverse backgrounds.

Cedomir Nestorovic
Director, executive MBA Asia-Pacific
ESSEC Business School

Analysis

It's game on for tourism players

Agile travel and hospitality players are capitalising on the Pokémon Go craze in their marketing. Have they reaped tangible benefits from the game and will this mobile hit transform future travel?

The arrival of Pokémon Go has taken the world by storm – since its release in over 70 countries around the world over the past months, the augmented reality (AR) game has captured the attention of savvy marketers and tour operators as it creates a new tourist segment and opportunities to sell travel.

A GPS-based exploration game, Pokémon Go mixes AR with real-world locations, allowing players to view and hunt for the brightly coloured creatures through their smartphones, collect bonus items at designated points called Pokéstops and send their Pokémon into battle at gyms (also real locations where players train the characters).

Pokémon Go's focus on the users physically visiting and interacting with actual places also gels well with travel, as some commentators think the game will encourage players to leave their comfort zone and discover new locales.

Aussie tour operator Gecko Adventures was one of the first to jump onto the craze by launching a 45-day global Pokémon Go tour to Peru, Galapagos Islands, Egypt and South-east Asia, including stops in Cambodia, Vietnam and Thailand.

James Thornton, managing director, Gecko Adventures, said: "All this exploring creates an appetite for adventure and getting behind the scenes of a destination – so a whole new generation has been bitten by the travel bug and wants to get out there and explore the world."

Since launching the tour at the end of July, the tour company has seen a 10 per cent increase in bookings.

One enterprising Thai tour operator has also created Pokémon hunting tours.

Said Phuket Tour Holiday managing director Yongyuth Chankul, a Pokémon Go player himself: "We already have existing Phuket city tours that cover the island's landmarks, many of which are also Pokéstops, so I created tours highlighting sites where monsters are in abundance."

Interestingly, for a tour operator whose main clientele is the domestic sector, the Pokémon tours have helped to nab foreign tourists too. "All my Pokémon tours marketing is done in Thai, so I was pleasantly surprised to receive enquiries and interest from German and French travellers too," he added.

In the wake of the recent bomb attacks at resort towns, Thailand's Ministry of



Tourism and Sports has indicated interest to work with local telecom provider True Corporation to add Pokéstops and gyms to various tourist destinations in the kingdom to promote tourism.

Other Asian attractions and destinations, too, have been quick to explore the marketing benefits of Pokémon Go, seeding their sites with virtual creatures and "lure modules" as a means to draw potential new customers.

Vivian Lee, executive director of sales and marketing at Ocean Park Hong Kong, said: "We noticed over 50 Pokéstops scattered across the park. We (would) release lure modules at these Pokéstops every Friday in August from 16.00 to 20.00 to provide non-stop luring of Pokémon."

Resorts World Sentosa (RWS) has similarly unleashed lures at its two popular attractions – S.E.A. Aquarium and Universal Studios Singapore – coupled with admission discounts to attract visitors.

According to a RWS spokesman, these lures had brought "increased visitorship" to both attractions, with players prolonging their stay and patronising the resort's retail outlets and restaurants.

For Wildlife Reserves Singapore, which manages Singapore Zoo and Night Safari, Pokémon Go presented an opportunity to reach an untapped youth market, chief marketing officer Isabel Cheng shared.

She said: "Of course, real-life animals remain our main draw, but with these initiatives we hope that these youths will come to our parks for Pokémon but stay

for the animals."

While Cheng admitted that it is difficult to assess if the game succeeded in attracting more footfall to the wildlife parks over one weekend when over 500 lures were released, many visitors were spotted playing Pokémon Go in between checking out the animals, with a number of them doing that as a family.

By offering a 40 per cent discount off its admission fees for the first 100 visitors sporting the colour of the day – red, blue or yellow – each day, Sunway Lagoon in Selangor hopes to attract more than 100 players a day and some 2,700 additional visitors over the six-week campaign period, informed the park's director of marketing Michelle Sonia Gregory.

Likewise, hotels have been quick to ride the fad. Hong Kong's Ovolo Southside has its sights firmly on the millennials when it rolled out a six-week luring campaign, charging zones, and a range of themed cocktails, incentives and prizes, all of which were designed to align with tech-savvy Gen Y users.

"So far, (the Pokémon Go campaign) has provided direct sales to room bookings as well as visits to the hotel's restaurants. We have also seen a number of new enquiries to the hotel and a strong uptick in search and visitors to our website," said a hotel spokesperson.

Other hotels like Four Points by Sheraton Puchong in Kuala Lumpur and Kokotel Surawong in Bangkok, given their fortuitous proximity to Pokéstops, dropped

lures and blasted on social media the many reasons to visit or book a stay.

However, in Cambodia, the game has been marred by negative publicity after tourists descended on the capital's S-21 – Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum – where more than 12,000 people were brutally killed during the Khmer Rouge regime. It was host to two Pokémon gyms, four Pokéstops and numerous wild Pokémon.

Museum director, Chhay Visoth, said: "We do not welcome this crazy game because this is not the place to play a game." Players were immediately banned from the site.

The game also earned the irk of Malaysia's Islamic authorities, who declared Pokémon Go a no-go for Muslims in the country, citing concerns of addiction, intrusion into personal privacy and craving for power, among others.

Safety remains a top concern for Patrick Fiat, general manager of Royal Plaza on Scotts, one of the Pokéstops in Singapore's Orchard area.

"We hope that Poké trainers (stay) aware of their surroundings and exercise vigilance when playing the game," he remarked. "We would hate to see any mishap taking place at our Pokéstop."

Tim Russell, co-founder & chief marketing officer, Representasia, thinks there is "a huge market" for Pokémon Go abstinence too, especially for destinations and attractions frustrated with their unauthorised appearance within the viral

Of course real-life animals remain our main draw, but with these initiatives we hope that these youths will come to our parks for Pokémon but stay for the animals.

Isabel Cheng
Chief marketing officer
Wildlife Reserves Singapore

game.

"In this case, hotels should advertise themselves as Pokémon-free zones and request that guests refrain from playing in public areas," he suggested. "Properties can request that their property be removed from the game (as Pokéstops or gyms)."

While it may well be a major passing fad, Pokémon Go's engagement potential has proven to be immense and it's likely to spawn more useful apps that allow travellers to explore and interact with the world.

Sentosa Development Corporation's branding & communications director Tay Cheng Cheng sums it up: "The popularity of this app comes amid the convergence of technologies with location-based entertainment, and illustrates the direction in which visitor experience is headed."

"This provides valuable learning points to the industry as we look for further ways to innovate and enhance guest experience, and leverage digital technologies for self-guided learning and discovery," she said.

Reporting by Xinyi Liang-Pholsena, Paige Lee Pei Qi, Marissa Carruthers, Prudence Lui and S Puvaneswary



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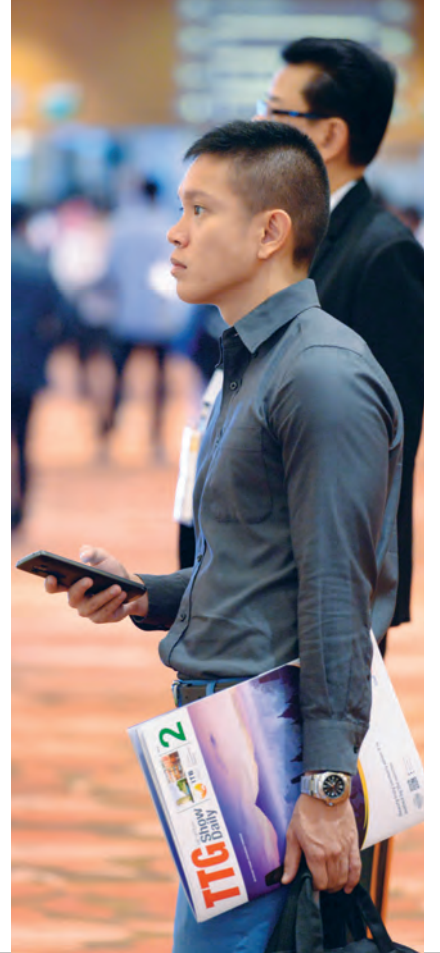
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pictorial special





Best Western Hotels & Resorts Thailand's Olivier Berivin (back row, centre) leads a strong team



The Banjaran Hot Springs Retreat Malaysia's Joanna Lee and Sunway Hotel Georgetown's Jennifer Lai



TTG Asia Media's Ar-lene Lee, India Tourism Singapore's R K Suman and TTG Asia Media's Pierre Quek



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