

# LUXURY

for buyers of premium travel and luxury meetings

## MARKETS

*India, Hong Kong/China,  
Japan, Australia*

## LUXURY-AT-SEA

*Private yachts, river  
cruisers, ocean liners*

## WELLNESS

*Rich sources*

## QUALITY DESTINATIONS

*New Zealand, Switzerland,  
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# editor's note

At the time of writing this, it's just a month to go before we say goodbye to 2014 and welcome 2015.

Japan just announced it was in a recession. The Eurozone is trying to avert a deflation. The growth of the Chinese economy is slowing. And there's rouble trouble in Russia. These are all important markets that have sustained the luxury travel industry worldwide and, certainly, they account for a chunk of Asia-Pacific's inbound arrivals. The prospect of a headwind facing luxury travel demand is a bit worrisome.

On the supply side, there is a surfeit of luxury hotels and resorts, private yachts and high-class river/ocean cruisers, quality destinations and those aspiring to attract quality tourists – thus stiffer competition for top dollars can be expected if demand softens.

As purveyors of luxury travel, it's time to reflect on how we can give better luxury experiences, and to whom, in order to keep our market share intact. Remember, even in bad times, everyone needs a little luxury in life, there will always be a market and our job is to make sure it comes our way, then we won't have a recession even if there is one!

On that note, my team and I wish you a happy and prosperous 2015.

**Raini Hamdi**, Senior Editor



Raini in Panarea, Aeolian islands, Sicily, Italy

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for buyers of premium travel and luxury meetings

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**TTG** Publishing   
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TTG Travel Trade Publishing is a  
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# *Asian luxury markets*

Uncertainty as Japan enters recession. But over in India, the new government is propping up confidence. Meet also the Chinese 'super tourist' and the loving-it-now high-end Aussie traveller. *TTG Asia Luxury* has the latest on four key Asian luxury markets



# Modi goodie

As India's new prime minister Narendra Modi strives to make his mark, confidence rises among India's well-heeled, reports

Gracia Chiang

**The recovering** Indian economy is giving the trade a reason to cheer, with the Modi government – sworn in earlier this year – anticipated to further stimulate the luxury travel sector.

According to data from the Central Statistics Office, India's GDP grew by 5.7 per cent during the April-June period, expanding faster than it did in any quarter over the last two years.

Dove Travels India's managing partner, Ashwani K Gupta, said: "Last year was so-so. But with the new government in India, we are hopeful that businesses and the economy will grow. We see that budgets are increasing."

He pointed out that the imposition of martial law in Thailand had resulted in the cancellation of groups, although there was still FIT business.

However, Gupta noted demand in general for destinations such as Hong Kong, Singapore and Thailand had decreased compared to previous years.

Prakhar Travels director Atul Dhir added: "Most have done South-east Asia, Hong Kong and Macau, while Dubai is too hot for summers. Europe and Canada are becoming very popular.

"Indian travellers are getting more adventurous. They are ready to spend and want to be pampered. The Indian luxury market is always underestimated," said Dhir, highlighting that clients are comfortable splurging on business-class air tickets and US\$500-700 per night for a holiday that spans 10-15 days.

"Besides travelling with their families in summer, they now also travel out for golf and spa at the drop of the hat, as well as for anni-





Nisarg Lakhmani/Dreamstime.com



Jian Kranenbonk/Dreamstime.com

**Left** India's new prime minister Narendra Modi **Above** Indian luxury travellers: "underestimated"

“

**Over the last 12 months, all these Indian clients are going to Siem Reap, which I've not seen before.**

Gordon Bell, director of sales, ICS Travel Group



versaries and birthday parties.”

Despite the surge in Internet usage in India, Dhir said that high-end clients still prefer to book offline. His business has been experiencing growth of 15-20 per cent annually for the last five years.

Mayfair Airtravel Services India managing director, Sharad Thadani, said: “Luxury travel is a good space to be in. FITs now come with ideas. They are seasoned travellers so they know what they want. We don't give them structured itineraries.”

Canada, Turkey, Australia, South Africa and southern Europe

are destinations that have caught the interest of his clients recently.

As for travel within South-east Asia, ICS Travel Group director of sales, Gordon Bell, said the Thailand-based DMC is now seeing Indian travellers venturing farther.

“Over the last 12 months, all these Indian clients are going to Siem Reap, which I've not seen before. They are also enquiring about Myanmar,” said Bell. “People are looking for other destinations besides Thailand, Malaysia and Hong Kong...It's not the most stable time for the region, but we've done very well this year considering what's (happened in Thailand).”

## The Indian upmarket traveller

- ✦ is ready to spend and wants to be pampered
- ✦ still prefers to book with knowledgeable luxury planners but knows what he wants
- ✦ is getting more adventurous and willing to try newer places



# Chinese 'super tourists' want adventure

Hong Kong and mainland Chinese super travellers are just becoming more sophisticated,

reports **Gracia Chiang**

## South-east Asian

destinations have had a bad year with Chinese-speaking luxury travellers, who have reacted to the martial law in Thailand, the disappearance of Malaysia Airlines' MH370 as well as Sinophobia in Vietnam and the Philippines.

At this year's ILTM Asia in Shanghai, Farrington American Express Travel Hong Kong assistant manager, marketing/product development, Yvonne Yu, told *TTG Asia Luxury*: "Before the (coup), travellers were actually going back (to Thailand), but now they are heading to Taiwan, Singapore and South Korea. Business dropped by more than 50 per cent (to Thailand)."

While South-east Asia has always been the company's bread and butter, more clients are looking longhaul and seeking unique ex-

“

**We expect to have 1,000 people buying our South Pole and Antarctica holidays in 2014, compared to 300 last year.**

Fanny Zhao,  
operation manager,  
Diadema

periences that "enrich their lives". South America is one of those new destinations, she said.

Xpert Holidays Hong Kong marketing manager, Lucina Lo, shared the same sentiments.

"With the crisis in Thailand, more Hong Kong people are looking for resorts in places like the Maldives and the Seychelles. They are seen to be safer.

"Overall, we saw growth in the first half of the year. Salaries in Hong Kong are rising, and we have seen growth in numbers and spending."

Having offices in Shanghai and Beijing as well, Lo contrasted China's and Hong Kong's rich. "The Chinese prefer places they can talk about to friends, but Hong Kong travellers are more mature. They tend to bring young kids on their holidays, so parents want

something educational, such as kids' activities and cooking classes. They also bring along their parents," she explained.

Fanny Zhao, operation manager of Diadema, which develops thematic leisure tours for the Chinese market, added: "South-east Asia has great luxury products. Vietnam, for example, has The Nam Hai in Hoi An. However, the biggest obstacle to selling more of South-east Asia is the political issues and unrest in the region."

Japan is also a no-go because of the disputed islands in the East China Sea, Zhao pointed out. Instead, clients are opting for Europe and the US as well as the South Pole and the Antarctica.

"We expect to have 1,000 people buying our South Pole and Antarctica holidays in 2014, compared to 300 last year," she predicted.



**Above** Potosi, Bolivia is 'in' because of its strong sense of adventure and excitement

Highlighting results from the 2014 *Survey on China's High-end Tourism* conducted with Diadema, Hurun Report's chairman and chief researcher, Rupert Hoogewerf, observed that adventure tourism is hotting up among 'super tourists', defined as experienced travellers who have been to 40 countries or more.

The study found that 48 per cent of the 203 respondents picked 'natural adventure', followed by 'self drive' (45 per cent) and 'South Pole and North Pole' (34 per cent) as the top three travel experiences they dream of splurging on.

For must-achieve travel within the next three years, South America – Bolivia emerged as the front runner, followed by South Pole/North Pole and Africa, "destinations that have a strong sense of adventure and excitement", the findings stated.

Hoogewerf also made special mention about medical tourism, which is starting to trend upwards (see Wellness report on page 54).

However, Easy Trip China COO, Leong Zhang, who organises self-drive holidays in Germany among other products, felt it would still take a lot of education before the bulk of Chinese luxury travellers fully embrace such adventure experiences.

"They still want to spend their money on shopping," he quipped.

Separately, Hurun Report's annual *Chinese Luxury Consumer Survey* also revealed that for 2014, Australia, France, Dubai, Switzerland and the Maldives topped the list of preferred international tourist destinations among HNWIs, in that order. The three Asian countries among the top 15 are Japan (7<sup>th</sup>), Singapore (9<sup>th</sup>) and Thailand (12<sup>th</sup>).

Last year, France ranked first, followed by the US, Singapore, Switzerland and the UK.

The  
Chinese  
'super  
tourist'

- ❖ has been to 40 countries or more
- ❖ wants adventure
- ❖ picks South America – Bolivia as the 'must achieve' in 2015

# Will recession bite travel?

Japan luxe planners were seeing rising bookings and were hoping to put behind a bad 2013 for good, but uncertainty now reigns, reports **Gracia Chiang**

nu/7711/123RF.COM



**Japanese luxury** planners interviewed at this year's ILTM Asia in June were optimistic about business prospects, saying the expansionary policies of Abenomics seemed to have borne some fruit.

Emerging from what was described as a "bad year" in 2013, several of them told *TTG Asia Luxury* that they were witnessing growth in both bookings and expenditure.

ST World managing director,

“

**The average spend per pax has risen to around US\$4,000 this year, from US\$3,000-US\$3,500 last year.**

Takeshi Kamimura  
N-1tour



global sales and marketing, Ry-oichi Suzuki, said his volumes so far were up by five to 10 per cent, while budgets were up by 10 per cent.

There was also an increase in advanced bookings. In the past, clients used to book one to two months before (the trip), now it was three to four months, he said.

Suzuki also observed that honeymooners were opting for farther destinations such as Africa and South America. These could cost as much as US\$4,000 per pax, spanning seven to eight days.

Similarly, N-1tour's Takeshi Kamimura noted that while average spend per pax last year was US\$3,000-US\$3,500, this had risen to around US\$4,000.

Having seen the popularity of Europe and Hawaii this year, he was planning next to introduce

Africa and South America to clients.

Kamimura added that demand for luxury hotels such as the Amanresorts would also continue to grow.

For luxury cruise line, Silversea Cruises, the Japanese market has continued to keep afloat. It is still the largest in Asia for the company in terms of absolute numbers.

ICM International Cruise Marketing CEO, Setsuko Nakagawa, who represents Silversea and other premium cruise lines in Japan, told *TTG Asia Luxury* at the time: "The market is growing, but at a stable rate. Last year was a difficult one. But with Abenomics, moods are lifting among the Japanese. This year all businesses are growing."

She added that the challenge is attracting a younger set of guests who have the capabilities to cruise. "We're looking at urban executive types in the fields of IT and real estate, as well



**Above** Ginza, Tokyo: Will Japanese still splurge in the face of a recession?  
**Below** Japanese are still the main Asian clientele on superdeluxe Silversea

## The Japanese upmarket traveller

- ❖ appears to be spending more
- ❖ opts for farther destinations
- ❖ may be spooked to travel as a result of current crises such as the Ebola virus

from five to eight per cent, while the impact of the recession throws a spanner into the works.

ST World's Suzuki is also concerned that the Ebola outbreak in West Africa "as some Japanese travellers are now worried about air travel", he said.

as young business owners," said Nakagawa.

Despite such upbeat moods, a look at overall outbound figures – and Japan's announcement in November that it was officially in recession – now give some reason to worry.

From January to July, all months except May recorded year-on-year negative growth in Japanese departures, according to preliminary figures from the Japan National Tourism Organization.

What is heartening, however, is that last year's steep drops in outbound travellers for the three consecutive months April-June 2013 (a decline of 12 per cent each month) have tapered off, with the worst performance this year being January's drop of 7.9 per cent. It does seem, as the trade sources suggested, that Japan might just be on the road to recovery.

Having said that, the country is still absorbing the full impact of April's hike in consumption tax,



# Swimming with the currency

The strong Aussie dollar sees Australians travelling or cruising in greater style, reports **Gracia Chiang**



Panoramic view of Berlin (**top**); Park Guell, Barcelona (**right**): strong currency makes Europe the top choice among rich Australians

**Propped up** by a strong currency, Australian luxury travellers are booking farther and dearer holidays this year, with cruising being a well-loved option.

Four Corners Travel Group supervisor-corporate and leisure, Jo-Ellen Robilliard, said because the Australian dollar is in a better position against the US dollar and the euro than in previous years, Europe has become the flavour of the month, with cities like Barcelona, Berlin and Milan being sought after.

She explained that since Asia has always been affordable, the higher spending power abroad has been “the major drawcard” for travel to Europe.

Robilliard said: “While Asia had been more of a destination, it has become a stopover for our clients. However, stopovers can be three to four days, and sometimes in both

directions and in different Asian destinations. It was usually only on the way home.”

The preference for Europe was not as evident for all luxury travel buyers *TTG Asia Luxury* spoke to at ILTM Asia this year, however.

Freedman & Turner Travel Associates mobile travel consultant, Kiran Taylor, said this year has been a busier one for bookings to Asia. His company services FITs and small groups.

Said Taylor: “The hotels in Asia do an amazing job, especially when it comes to service, which is what Australians want.

“We saw more people wanting to go to China in the last year out of curiosity but also because they want to go before it becomes over-commercialised. Vietnam is also up and coming.”

Cruising in Europe and Asia



## The upmarket Aussie traveller

- ✦ loves Europe at the moment
- ✦ loves high-end cruising at the moment
- ✦ is basically 'loving it' at the moment



Luciano Mortula/123RF.COM

has been wildly popular, pointed out Anywhere Travel operations manager, Nik Young, who added that clients like the Silversea and Seabourne brands.

He shared that revenue from high-end leisure was up by 35 per cent for the financial year ending in June, adding that the company had just joined luxury travel network Virtuoso a few months ago.

"A lot are going to Europe (Spain, Italy and Greece) where there's such good value, but also (doing) private tours in Indochina... They are also asking us to do a lot more, not just booking their flights and hotels. They want transfers, tours, everything," said Young.

Also singling out the attractiveness of cruises for the market, Ashmore & James Travel Associates general manager, Greg Ashmore, noted that budgets are getting bigger.

"We're also seeing more multi-generational travel," he said.

Four Corners Travel Group's Robilliard added: "Many clients have also gone up a room type. Where they used to book partial ocean views, they are now booking full ocean views."

It is not just ocean cruising that has gained a loyal following. Luxury river cruise company Aqua Expeditions, too, reported strong demand from Australia and New Zealand for its first ship in Asia, which began sailing along the Mekong River between Cambodia and Vietnam in September.

Earlier this year, Aqua Expeditions CEO and founder, Francesco Galli Zugaro, said forward bookings from Australia and New Zealand for the 20-suite ship "were strong across the three-, four- and seven-night sailings".

# Water world

Asians are willing to part with big dollars to sail or cruise the world, reports **Raini Hamdi**



**The thought of luxuriating** on board with no cares in the world and travelling to a string of places without having to pack and unpack is fast catching on among rich Asians as one of their favourite ideas of real luxury.

Cruise players, be they operators of luxury yachts, sleek river cruisers or prestigious ocean liners, are reporting a jump in the number of Asian guests who appear to be taking to sailing or cruising like fish to water.

Vincent Tabuteau, managing director of Asia Marine, Thailand, said his clientele used to be Europeans, British and Americans but “the new clientele” comprises Russians, Chinese and South Koreans.

“It’s new and trendy, something they have never done before. They generally come in groups and prefer to rent motor yachts, as these yachts are fast and can go

to many places in the minimum amount of time. Plus, generally, there is air-conditioning – the ladies do not like to stay too long under the sun,” he said.

Much like renting a Mercedes or a Bentley, the groups would rent a yacht for a private day tour to visit, say, a landmark in Phuket or Phi-Phi island, or rent a yacht for a week or so to go as far as Myanmar or Langkawi, explained Tabuteau. The latter are “aficionados” who have rented yachts several times for their holidays, know the boat they want and have specific demands, he said. Clients don’t need to know how to sail – six of Asia Marine’s 17 yachts are crewed luxury yachts, with capacities ranging from six to 30 pax. Anything above 30 would not be ‘luxury’,” Tabuteau pointed out.

The price for crewed yachts range from 1,200 euros



(US\$1,491) all-inclusive (i.e. boat, crew, meals, fuel, etc) to a whopping 20,000 euros.

Besides private yachting from Phuket to Langkawi, Asians are also lapping up river cruises in Europe. The Travel Corporation, for example, which has started to market its Uniworld Boutique River Cruise Collection in Asia, is seeing a steady take-up especially in Asian markets that have lots of seasoned travellers, such as Singapore. The driving force, once again, is the thirst for a new experience.

Explained Robin Yap, president, The Travel Corporation Asia, based in Singapore: "Singaporeans are well-travelled and are constantly looking for a new experience. A leisurely vacation such as six-star cruising at affordable prices appeals to seasoned travellers, families who want to bond together, honeymooners who want to spend intimate time together without checking in and out of hotels, and companies that want to reward their top achievers.

"All meals, drinks and shore excursions are included and, more importantly, they get to see Europe from the river with unobstructed views, which is a unique experience," said Yap.

After all, who could resist river cruises with names that conjure enchantment such as the range being offered by Uniworld which includes The Castles on the Rhines; Tulips and Windmills; Enchanting Danube; Bordeaux, Vineyards & Chateaux (see review on page 18); Christmas Markets; Imperial Waterways of Russia and its new Venice & the Gems of Northern Italy.

"All these are eight to 10-day itineraries which work well with Singapore travellers. Also, some of the passengers will combine the cruise with land tours with our sister brands Insight Vacations, Contiki and Trafalgar Guided Holidays to complete an air, sea and land experience," said Yap.

Adding to the choice of sea vacations for well-heeled Asians are luxury ocean liners which are also seeing Asia as a sunrise market, going by rising bookings made by their preferred agencies in the region.

Debbie Tan, general manager of Airplus Travel Services Malaysia, said: "Yes, the (Malaysian) market is growing. Fifteen years ago, our clients were more elderly but this no longer applies in recent years. The age profile now is from late 30s to early 50s, and most of our clients are active businessmen and businesswomen, of which a few are extremely rich and high profile.

"They look for luxury, pampering and a relaxing experience which cruising fulfils: one does not have to pack and unpack unlike on land tours; all meals, entertainment and lots of other activities are included, which makes cruising less expensive.

"Then, some destinations can only be visited by cruising, for example, Alaska and Antarctica. But



**Cruising in Asia on luxury yachts is something new...there is good commission in one contract.**

Vincent Tabuteau,  
managing director,  
Asia Marine,  
Thailand

most of all, it's always the relaxation on board, where their needs are taken care of and where they feel safe and at home, that appeals to the guests."

In Malaysia, Airplus is a preferred agency of Crystal Cruises although it also books clients on Celebrity Cruises, Royal Caribbean Cruises, Princess Cruises, etc, if cost is a concern.

"We send a lot of guests to sail on the *Crystal Serenity* and *Crystal Symphony*, and once a Crystal cruise, always a Crystal cruise," said Tan.

Asked how she managed to convince clients to go on board a Crystal cruise whose brochure fare is an astounding US\$33,670, Tan explained: "The cruise (for this example, *TTG Asia Luxury* picked *Crystal Symphony's* Voyage 4206, a 14-night South-east Asia cruise in March this year), the brochure fare of US\$33,670 is per person and in a Penthouse category. Since my clients know South-east Asia well, I will suggest they sail on category B, a stateroom with balcony. The cost per person after a two-for-one savings, Crystal Society Member savings and air allowance is US\$7,920 per person.

"*Crystal Symphony* offers onboard activities from a nightclub to enrichment courses and lectures. F&B is all-inclusive – drinks, wines, two specialty restaurants Nobu & Prego, etc – which will make the trip very affordable. Not forgetting free laundry!"

The Travel Corporation's Yap and Asia Marine's Tabuteau agreed luxury travel planners in Asia could earn a lot if only they would master the art of selling cruises. "Any licensed travel agency can book Uniworld and get a full 10 per cent commission, fam cruise inspection opportunities and discounted travel for themselves, subject to space availability," said Yap.

Tabuteau admitted, however, that luxury tour operators and agencies are slow to sell yacht charters.

"Cruising in Asia on luxury yachts is something new. Luxury tour operators are used to it in the Caribbean and Mediterranean but do not see Asia as a cruising destination, rather as a traditional tourism destination.

"Yet, there is good commission in one contract – imagine, it can be 60,000 euros per week in one contract, plus there are other (commissions) from pre- and post-cruise services such as private plane, villa and limousine rentals.

"Right now 30 per cent of our business is from direct bookings and we are developing a new website to get more B2C bookings. We have to educate tour operators and luxury agencies on the product; we have started to, and we find that once they know the product, they actually deliver more clients than the yacht brokers, at least for our mid-range products," said Tabuteau.

**Facing page, from left** Crystal Cruises; *Maid Marian*, one of Asia Marine's most luxurious crewed yachts

# Bragging rights



The novelty of cruising and the prestige of new places such as the Arctic and Antarctica combine to make China the fastest-growing high-end Asian cruise market, reports **Gracia Chiang**

**Above and facing page**  
The Arctic and Antarctica may be icy cold but they are hot destinations for Chinese cruise travellers

**Cruise companies** with small to mid-size ships are scrambling to tap the high-end market in Asia, which is increasingly lapping up the concept of luxury at sea. However, it comes with challenges, such as catering to the unique preferences of tourists from this part of the world.

Having witnessed exponential growth from Asia, Netherlands-based Oceanwide Expeditions attended ILTM Asia in Shanghai for the first time this year in the hope of striking up more trade partnerships in the region.

Where Asia only accounted for one to two per cent of market share five years ago, it now stands at 10 per cent for the mid-size company, with China contributing the bulk of travellers.

The polar expedition operator owns a fleet of four ice-strengthened vessels, focusing on wildlife, nature and activities in the Arctic and Antarctica.

Senior international sales manager, Florian Piper, told *TTG Asia luxury*: "Since the introduction to the China market, it's been an ava-

lanche...we are now even thinking of building a ship for the Chinese because we have that expertise."

Most clients are interested in the shorter, nine-night voyages, although the company recently received group bookings for its 31-night sailings to the Ross Sea, which incorporates helicopter landings. The latter starts from US\$24,950 per person.

Piper elaborated: "The situation has changed. The tour operators used to bring groups to start with, but now they charter ships and make it their own show. Some operators have specialised in the polar region, and they really know the trade.

"That's good because (it helps) travellers understand that the places that we visit are fragile and you have to follow a certain code of conduct. If they charter, they bring their own escorts who can translate the guidelines for visitors and make sure these are understood. Our guides onboard are normally there for educational and experiential learning, but they have had to be policemen."

When asked what kind of behavioural challenges staff have been faced with, he said these included passengers who threw stones at animals to make them move for photos, stealing eggs and lighting up and throwing cigarette butts on shore.

"The Chinese are willing to travel long distance for something special that others have not done. Maybe 20 years ago it was cool to travel to Europe, now the hip thing is Arctic and Antarctica," observed Piper, who shared that Oceanwide gets around six charters a year from China.

Other cruise lines are also chasing the dragon that is China. Monaco-based luxury operator Silversea Cruises recorded about 30 per cent year-on-year from the market, its fastest-growing in Asia.

Similarly, Antarctica is the top choice among Silversea's Chinese clientele, mainly because it's a "show-off destination", said regional director, Asia, Melvyn Yap.

He said the cruise line is seeing groups of men onboard who are possibly mixing business with

leisure. "They are also choosing our expedition ships because they prefer a more casual dress code."

The penchant for dressing down while on holiday among the Chinese was also pointed out by Piper, who said: "Most of the high-end people who hold big positions at home just want to dress casually when they are on our ships; they just want to be normal. We don't have a hairdresser onboard, butler service or a captain's dinner. We don't do suits and ties."

Despite the strong potential of China, the established market of Japan is still top for several companies.

For Silversea, Japan currently delivers the biggest volume in Asia. However, growth is flat, while in revenue terms, Japan comes after Hong Kong and China. Other markets with growth potential are Thailand and the Philippines for multi-generational travel.

Said Yap: "For Japanese clients, Mediterranean voyages are popular, as are the Baltics and polar region. However, the customer profile is getting older so there's a need to attract younger customers. This is challenging as they can't take long vacations."

Japan is also a key market that has performed well for Regent Seven Seas Cruises and Oceania Cruises.

With interest on the rise from travel consultants in Asia, US-based parent company Prestige Cruise Holdings (which Norwegian Cruise Line is acquiring) earlier this year appointed its first director of sales dedicated to and based in the region. Working out of Singapore, her mandate is to drive more business from Singapore and Hong Kong especially, where the company sees most opportunity at this time.

Oceania Cruises' mid-size ships boast fine cuisine and a country-club casual ambience among its draws, while Regent Seven Seas' all-suite and all-balcony fleet is an all-inclusive luxury cruise product that comes with the amenities of larger ships.

Director of international sales Asia, Constance Seck, said: "There are still many travel agencies and consumers that are not aware of the upper-premium and luxury segments of the cruise market.

"(Our company) felt that a local director of sales would help to increase the regional knowledge of these segments through our branding, training and marketing efforts, along with first-hand experience on the ships via fams and ship tours."

It is not just ocean cruising that's picking up speed in Asia.

Having established an office in Singapore last year to cater to growing demand from the region, luxury

“

**The (Chinese) tour operators used to bring groups to start with, but now they charter ships and make it their own show.**

Florian Piper, senior international sales manager, Oceanwide Expeditions

river cruise line Aqua Expeditions' first ship in Asia commenced sailing along the Mekong River between Cambodia and Vietnam in September.

The company began with two small ships on the Amazon River in Peru, offering nature-based adventures combined with five-star boutique hotel accommodation and gourmet cuisine. Capacity is limited on ships, ranging from 12 to 20 suites.

CEO and founder, Francesco Galli Zugaro, said: "The concept of cruising is becoming increasingly popular in this part of the world, and this is contributing to our growth.

"There is strong interest for both Mekong and Amazon cruises, with the latter enjoying more attention due to the exotic nature and uniqueness of the Amazon."

Interestingly, even though cruise lines are netting more Asian business, many don't feel they need to go out of their way to tailor their offerings to customers from the region.

Said Seck: "The success of our brands within the Asia markets has been that our clients want the product as it is presented; they are not looking for an 'Asian-style' cruise product or a luxury cruise product with an Asian influence."

Added Yap: "We are essentially an Italian product; many clients enjoy that unique experience."



# luxury-at-sea river cruising



## Bordeaux, Vineyards & Chateaux (8 Days)

*River Royale, Uniworld Boutique River Cruise Collection*



*By Raini Hamdi*

**ITINERARY** To me, this cruise is perfect for those who have never visited Bordeaux – the most important wine region in France – and who want to learn more about Bordeaux wines.

The cruise itself – along three rivers, the Garonne, Dordogne and Gironde – was not too scenic, but the itinerary unlocked many must-sees in Bordeaux via coach transfers daily. The highlights for me were sightseeing in the charming towns of St Emilion and Bergerac; a fun and well-presented wine-tasting and appreciation class in an estate called Chateau d’Arsac; a fabulous lunch paired with three Sauternes

wines of different estates and vintages in a 17<sup>th</sup> century manor located in a 40ha vineyard, Chateau d'Arche; and a night tour and a free day of shopping in Bordeaux city when we returned to the port at the end of the cruise. There was just one day of sightseeing, in Blaye, which I felt we could do without, as we were driven for hours only to see a reconstructed windmill, none-too-intriguing cave dwellings and ordinary stone houses along the coast. I would have spent the day reading onboard the beautiful *River Royale* if I had known this.

**SHIP** My heart leapt the first time I set eyes on the *River Royale*, docked in the heart of Bordeaux city waiting patiently for me to board.

What a head-turner she was, looking so elegant, sleek, lengthy (110m long) and new, having undergone a remodelling this year.

There are 26 category one staterooms (13m<sup>2</sup>); 38 category two and three staterooms (14m<sup>2</sup>); and a suite (20m<sup>2</sup>). I was happy in my category one stateroom (room 205); I thought it was the best deal given the small difference in size with category two. It had large windows to look out to when we were cruising, while the full mirror on the wall across my queen-size bed made the space appear larger.

Oh the bed! A handcrafted Savoir of England bed fluffed with 100 per cent Egyptian cotton linens and European duvets, it gave the whole room an air of luxury.

All the facilities onboard were classy. The key areas of congregation were the main dining restaurant, the salon/bar and the ultra-inviting, long sun deck. As well for me, the gym which, although small, I appreciated greatly, for I must exercise in the face of F&B abundance on a cruise.

**SERVICE** The tip-top facilities, amenities and modern trappings (the Internet worked like a dream all the time in my room) were matched by personalised and attentive service by the crew, many of whom hailed from Romania and were a credit to their country. Whether it was my maid Andrea, or service staff Constantine, they gave me this feeling they were thankful for their job. Every request was never too troublesome and was attended to immediately, despite this being a full cruise. For example, restaurant manager Cristina made a mental note that I drink freshly-squeezed lemon and hot water each morning, and this was served without me having to ask each time I breakfasted in the main restaurant.

**Facing page**  
*River Royale*:  
long, sleek,  
elegant

**Below**  
Excellent food  
and ultra-  
comfort await  
onboard

**F&B** Credit must also go to the executive chef who made dining onboard an occasion to look forward to each day. Lunch was correctly light and satisfying, while the dinner menu was fit for an epicurean, each evening offering something different and was always tasty and delicious.

The wines served onboard, however, could be better, considering this was a *Bordeaux, Vineyards and Chateaux* cruise. The reds and whites served were befittingly from the region, alas, they were rather modest. My suggestion is, rather than serving unlimited average wines as part of the all-inclusive offering, serve better wines but limited to, say, half a bottle per person per dinner.

Or, for better wines from Bordeaux to be served at least on one or two evenings – say, during the one 'epicurean' dinner which featured a menu styled by a celebrity chef, or at the farewell dinner.

**VERDICT** Uniworld prides itself on service delivery and promises guests a luxury boutique hotel-style experience. I can assure you this is no mere empty promise – both the service and product of *River Royale* live up to the promise. I can also imagine that Asian clients, especially those who want to discover the region and learn more about Bordeaux wines, will enjoy this cruise.



# luxury-at-sea ocean cruising



## Gems of Antiquity – Athens to Istanbul (8 days)

Riviera, Oceania Cruises



*By Gracia Chiang*

**ITINERARY** A dream for history and culture buffs – suffice to say that at least four UNESCO heritage sites can be visited on this sailing.

As the cruise kicked off from Athens, there was the opportunity to scale the Acropolis and take in the other famed sights of the Greek capital, and dig into some souvlaki and moussaka. Arriving in Ephesus and being led through its library and amphitheatre by our enthusiastic guide (who used to work as a university professor no less), it was mind-blowing to imagine life in this ancient city, which flourished as a commercial centre under Roman rule. Other important historical sites covered

included the archaeological ruins of Philippi, home to the first Christian church on European soil; medieval Rhodes; and, Istanbul, where we oohed and aahed over architectural marvels like the Blue Mosque.

However, in Greece, it was a pity we docked in Santorini on a day where it was swarming with thousands of cruise passengers from two other large ships. I enjoyed Mykonos more, for its shopping and also because I did not have to jostle just to take a decent photo.

Overall, I found this itinerary had a good mix of ports that incorporated both the chance to learn as well as chill.

**SHIP** A bottle of chilled champagne and box of Godiva chocolates were waiting in our concierge veranda stateroom when we checked in. At 26m<sup>2</sup>, the room felt just right for my husband and I, although huge luggage is not recommended. The 1,000-thread-count linen on our queen-size bed felt luxurious, but I would have preferred a firmer mattress.

I especially liked the generously sized marble-and-granite bathroom, which came with a bathtub and shower area as well as Bvlgari toiletries. My favourite spot was the balcony, which was ideal for reading and taking in the gorgeous sunrise. Thoughtful touches such as the provision of a ThinkPad with Wi-Fi access, cashmere blankets for windy days on the veranda, a tote bag for excursions and free pressing of garments also went a long way in making me feel welcome.

Just two years old, the *Riviera* sparkled with tastefully decorated interiors. Most of the 625 rooms are veranda staterooms and concierge veranda staterooms. The latter comes with perks available to suite guests such as the Canyon Ranch SpaClub's private pool terrace and access to the Concierge Lounge. Suites are another level altogether, with the most lavish being the

186m<sup>2</sup> Ralph Lauren-furnished Owner's Suites, each with indoor and outdoor whirlpool spas, a living room, two bathrooms, a music room with piano and butler service.

Being the restless traveller that I am, I was worried I would be bored spending seven nights onboard. Far from it. I barely had time to enjoy the chaise longues in the handsome and well-stocked Library, and the spacious gym which, with floor-to-ceiling windows, possibly offered the best views I'd ever seen on treadmills. I would have also loved to join the activities in the Artist Loft and Bon Appétit Culinary Center, as they did look like inviting studios to pick up a new skill or two. There was also ample space devoted to gaming machines, but that did not interest me. The post-dinner shows were a hit and miss, but there was a pretty good performance featuring the music of Andrew Lloyd Webber one night. The spotty Wi-Fi connection throughout the ship could also be improved.

**SERVICE** Very warm, from house-keeping staff to the sommeliers. Asian guests would feel at home, with the largely international crew ready to go the extra mile. I encountered servers who were Filipino, Thai, Indonesian and even Burmese. Expect no less than five-star hospitality standards.

**F&B** Perhaps the strongest suit of Oceania. French chef Jacques Pépin is the executive culinary director, and this showed in the high-quality fine dining that did not feel mass-produced, whether in the Grand Dining Room or Terrace Café. We were pleasantly surprised that even in-room orders were executed well. There are seven main F&B areas, many of which are only open for dinner. That is no issue though, as that's when most passengers are back from tours.

Unlike some other cruises, there

**Facing page, from top**  
*Riviera* exterior;  
Owner's Suite  
bedroom  
**Below**  
Canyon Ranch  
Terrace

is no surcharge for dining in any of the specialty restaurants. However, guests are allowed only one reservation in each, while suite guests can make two. We had a lobster dish almost every night, all cooked in different styles of course. I loved Toscana the most, the epitome of dining with a view. There was an entire menu devoted to extra virgin olive oil and balsamic vinegar options! The other specialty restaurants were Jacques, serving up French delicacies (we had baked escargots and mussels); Polo Grill steakhouse for its USDA prime beef; and Red Ginger, where diners would be spoiled for choice by the tea and chopstick selection (the ivory ones were a treat) and Asian favourites like sashimi and Pad Thai.

The daily afternoon tea at Horizons Lounge, which has a classical string quartet playing in the background as you nibble on scones and take your pick from pastry carts, was another treat.

**VERDICT** Perfect for those willing to splurge slightly more for an upmarket cruise experience. It is also a great way to get a taste of the Mediterranean, minus the hassle of packing/unpacking and self-planning. Plus, there were many couples and families onboard, some of whom told us they found this a good chance to reconnect with loved ones.





## Seaplanes cut travel time from Hanoi to Halong Bay

Vietnam's first seaplane service has been launched, cutting travel time from Hanoi to Halong Bay to 30 minutes, a new long-sought alternative to the four-hour, overland haul.

The first to launch the service was Hai Au Aviation in a joint promotion with Emeraude Classic Cruises till December 31.

The planes lift off at 10.00 from Hanoi's Noi Bai airport and touch down on water at Tuan Chau Marina. Passengers then ferry to the *Emeraude* for a noon departure to Halong Bay.

Hai Au's maiden flight took place on September 9. The airline flies a Cessna Caravan C208 EX, manufactured in June in Wichita, Kansas in the US. The 12.8m long aircraft seats 12 and cruises at 260km/h under the command of two pilots. Hai Au notes on its website that the Caravan is the largest single-engine float plane.

"The Hai Au alternative opens up a whole new market segment for Halong Bay," said Kurt Walter, Emeraude's general manager. "For many, the prospect of a three to four-hour overland drive from Hanoi to Halong Bay is an insurmountable hurdle."

The VND11,697,000 (US\$549) per person package includes a one-way flight from Noi Bai to Halong, a private cabin for two, all meals, the cruise, onshore excursions and overland transportation back to Hanoi in a private vehicle. Those who prefer to return by plane can take a 16:30 flight for an additional charge.

Meanwhile, Luxury Travel Vietnam has launched a two-day/one-night package to experience Halong Bay by seaplane and cruise its waters with Paradise Cruises priced at US\$1,097 per person.

Situated in the Gulf of Tonkin, Halong Bay is one of the world's natural wonders with more than 3,000 islands of fantastic shapes sculpted by time, wind and waves.

Cruising between the limestone karst cliffs which appear like fairytale castles, complete with rocky spires and hidden caves, is a mystical experience.

## Desert Gate goes for premium market

Desert Gate is now providing full-service premium experiences in the UAE with a new distinguished office in Dubai.

It offers tailor-made excursions and programmes for upscale leisure FITs and groups. The tone is set from a pre-arrival questionnaire to gauge individual guest preferences, to welcome concierges at the airport on arrival through to farewell.

Samir Tabbah, CEO, Desert Gate, who is at the helm of the transformation, said: "We pride ourselves on viewing UAE as our home, partners as our family and travellers as our guests. The UAE has so much to offer and see; we study our guests to provide them with the most suitable programme of activities, moving away from the generic, overdone routine."

The main markets of the UK, Germany and the CIS will continue being served but the DMC will further promote UAE in Eastern Europe, the Americas, and the Far East.

The group has also introduced EventLab, a full-service event management company mainly servicing government and corporate entities.





## Colonial elegance on the beach in Bintan

Relive the romance of colonial elegance with The Sanchaya, a new beachfront estate located in Bintan which will officially open on January 1, 2015.

The Sanchaya is located on the prime northern coast of Bintan Island and is part of the Lagoi Bay development which will add private residences and hotels, commercial spaces, a golf course and an international airport, in addition to the existing domestic airport on the island.

It promises an extraordinary experience with highly personalised service (training by the British Butler Institute) and accommodation that reflects the rich culture, history and art of South-east Asia.

A taste of Thailand, for example, is reflected in the Lawan Village's seven villas built around a beautiful man-made lagoon. Eight one-bedroom seaview villas reflect influences from Brunei, Indonesia, Cambodia and Vietnam, while four two-bedroom seaview villas reflect influences from Malaysia, the Philippines, Laos and Myanmar.

There is a total of 21 villas and nine suites featuring king-sized beds and walk-in closets, Ploch bed and bathlinen, Bang & Olufsen TV and sound systems, iPad minis and Wi-Fi.

Murli Rao, the estate manager, said: "Just 45 minutes from Singapore (by ferry), this charming retreat envelopes you in the intimacy of a private home while bestowing all the refinements of a world-class hotel."

The Sanchaya's restaurants include an all-day dining and a poolside grill serving Bangkok street cuisine in a beach setting. It also houses a special wine and cheese tasting room which has a curated wine list and a resident sommelier on hand.

The estate even features an exquisitely manicured croquet lawn for the traditional colonial game.



## Beloved Crème Simon relaunched in Asia

A Singapore-based private equity fund, Hera Capital, and private investors have relaunched Crème Simon, the iconic French heritage skincare brand founded in 1860.

Beautiful packaging aside, the group stays true to the original tenets of the product while customising the product to climates/seasons. Crème Simon was founded by a gifted apothecary, Joseph Simon, who created the first stable beauty cream in 1860, "Coincidentally, Crème Simon was also the first whitening cream – at a time when fair French women of decorum rule the courts – which is why we decided to focus on the Asian market. And Singapore has proven to be the perfect launchpad," said Felicia Soh, managing director of Crème Simon.

"Crème Simon has such an amazing legacy as the number one French skincare brand before WWII, and it is important that we remain true to its 150-year-old French brand heritage. This is why we continue to use the same active floral composition trusted by generations of women since 1860, but now optimised in different textures for the different climates and seasons. All R&D, formulations and even packaging continue to be uncompromisingly made in France today," she added.

Crème Simon is currently expanding to Hong Kong, Macau and South Korea, and will be available at Sephora Indonesia and Australia in December.

The new collection consists of the iconic Crème Universelle, the Daily Defense UV Protector SPF 50 and the Brightening Detox range featuring four cleansers, three moisturisers and three treatments.

### Web watch

## The Residence by Cenizaro's new online experience

The Residence by Cenizaro is offering guests a new online experience to explore the group's four luxury hotels with a highly visual, freshly redesigned website, [www.cenizaro.com/theresidence](http://www.cenizaro.com/theresidence). The site has an updated, chic look and feel, and comes as the Singapore-based Cenizaro Hotels & Resorts continues the evolution of its multi-brand portfolio.

The Residence by Cenizaro pages are dominated by stunning imagery, drawing both tablet and mobile users to engage with the richer, in-depth content that highlights every aspect of the group's four hotels: The Residence Tunis, The Residence Mauritius, The Residence Zanzibar and The Residence Maldives. The group's social media channels are also fully integrated, as is an easy-to-use booking engine that allows guests to view real-time room availability, convert pricing into their local currency and save the reservation history and guest profile to save time with future bookings.

The group is opening four hotels: two in Tunisia: a desert resort in Douz, the gateway to Sahara, and a historical gem in the UNESCO World Heritage protected Medina of Tunis; a second Maldives resort and a new resort in Bintan, Indonesia.



## Lindblad targets Asians with new itineraries

Lindblad Expeditions-National Geographic has launched itself in Singapore and Hong Kong and has also announced six new itineraries that cater to guests looking for shorter stints of expedition travel aboard the 102-guest *National Geographic Orion*.

Guests can choose from a range of voyages that offer undersea exploration and islands with a wealth of history and cultures that maintain close ties to their ancestral traditions. Each expedition also sails with a National Geographic photographer and a Lindblad-National Geographic certified photo instructor to assist guests with their photography skills – whether using an iPhone or SLR camera.

One of the six itineraries is a 13-day *Bali to Palau: Exotic Indonesia*, an expedition to find Komodo dragons and rare birdlife, explore a village's water buffalo races and snorkel and dive Raja Ampat in the Coral Triangle – a region with more than 500 species of coral and 2,000 species of fish. It departs September 19, 2015 and is priced from A\$15,700 (US\$13,713) per person double occupancy in category one cabin.

Another itinerary is *Palau to Solomon Islands: Along the Pacific Equator*, a 16-day programme that takes guests to the heart of Micronesia to discover wild, remote islands and cultures.

Here they will snorkel or dive among manta rays, reefs and famous shipwrecks on an expedition that offers both relaxation, island exploration, as well as insights on iconic WWII fortifications.

This itinerary departs October 1, 2015, and priced from A\$19,320 per person.

## Uniworld to sail in India

Uniworld Boutique River Cruises will debut its India's Golden Triangle & the Sacred Ganges sailing from New Delhi to Kolkata in January 2016.

The 12-night itinerary includes seven nights on board a new all-suite *Ganges Voyager II*. For the five-night land portion of the itinerary in the Golden Triangle, one of India's most historic and culturally-rich areas, luxurious accommodation will be provided at The Oberoi in New Delhi, Agra and Jaipur.

The *Ganges Voyager II* has a maximum capacity of 56 guests. The ship features a Maharaja Suite, (36.8m<sup>2</sup>), two Viceroy Suites (33.1m<sup>2</sup>), two Heritage Suites (25.8m<sup>2</sup>) and 20 Standard Suites (24m<sup>2</sup>) with roomy bathrooms, French balconies, sitting areas and flat-screen TVs. Public areas include the Governor's Lounge with onboard entertainment and cultural events, observation deck with 360-degree views, spa and fitness centre, and East India Restaurant with menus featuring both Indian-inspired cuisine and Western favourites.

"To experience a 5,000-year-old civilisation first-hand and explore its spiritual heartland, all while staying at some of the world's most spectacular hotels and sailing onboard our new all-suite ship, is truly a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for our well-travelled guests," said Guy Young, president of Uniworld.

The itinerary will include fully hosted excursions to five UNESCO World Heritage Sites – Delhi's Red Fort and Humayun's Tomb, Agra's Taj Mahal and Agra Fort, and Jaipur's Jantar Mantar.

Uniworld will offer an optional extension to Varanasi, revered as the holiest spot on India's holiest river, as well as one of the world's oldest continuously inhabited cities.

Bookings have opened.

## Mandarin Oriental nabs Lucy Liu



Hollywood actress Lucy Liu is the latest celebrity to be featured in Mandarin Oriental Hotel Group (MOHG)'s multi-million dollar *He's a Fan/She's a Fan* global brand awareness campaign in print and digital media.

The group makes a donation to each celebrity's individual choice of charity.

Liu's favourite charities, to which MOHG is making a donation, are Unicef, which she has worked with for 10 years, and Ignite, a BAM arts programme for children.

Well-known portrait photographer Mary McCartney photographs each celebrity in a location of their choice which, for them, best represents a feeling of well-being.

Liu chose to be photographed in New York, where she was born, one of her favourite cities.

Thus far, MOHG has featured 27 celebrities in the campaign, including Morgan Freeman, Michelle Yeoh and IM Pei.



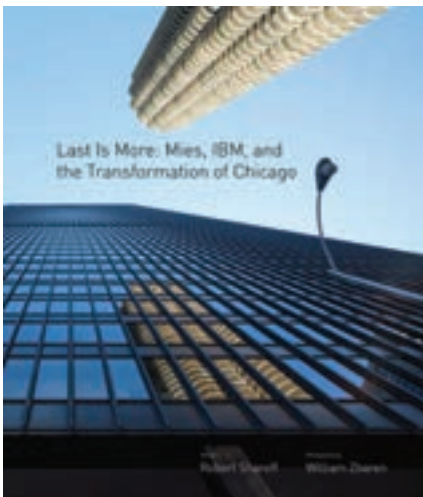
## Swim amid snowfalls

The ultimate Chedi in the world, The Chedi Andermatt, is debuting its temperature-controlled outdoor pool – bordered by pine trees and snowfall – on December 15.

Here are some of its vital statistics:

- Length/width/depth: 11m x 4.7m x 1.5m
- Made of natural stone 'Nero Impala' granite
- Water temperature is 32°C
- The outdoor pool is accessible from the indoor pool or through a watergate
- During the night the pool is covered through a heat-insulating jalousie

## Father of the modern skyscraper



A new book celebrating the historic significance of Mies van der Rohe, father of the modern skyscraper, has been published.

The collectible edition by Robert Sharoff and William Zbaren of the American City Project tells the story of Miesian Architecture and offers insights into one of the most important buildings in the history of modern architecture: 330 North Wabash, the former IBM Tower, and the last project executed by Mies, also home to The Langham, Chicago.

The hotel occupies the first 13 floors of this 52-storey skyscraper.

The book title, *Last is More*, is

a play on words, referencing Mies' oft-repeated "less is more" aphorism that has come to define modern, minimalist design.

"Mies spent the last three decades of his life living and working in Chicago and his style eventually came to define the city in much the same way Baron Haussmann's does Paris and Bernini's does Rome," said author Robert Sharoff. "In many ways, the modern steel and glass city was created in Chicago."

Said KS Lo, chairman of Langham Hospitality Group: "We were inspired to build The Langham, Chicago because of the opportunity it afforded us to work within a Mies van der Rohe building.

"The publication of this book, chronicling the life and achievement of Mies, especially as it pertains to this building and to the Chicago architectural landscape is a momentous occasion for our company. We are thrilled to be included in *Last is More*, a book that is sure to become a collector's item for architecture buffs around the world."

Published in hard cover by The Images Publishing Group, *Last is More* will be available at select book stores around the world, including several in Chicago; at Flavours of Langham, the retail shop located at The Langham, Chicago; on Amazon.com; and as a digital book via Google Play.

## Amazing submarine adventures launched

Creative luxury planner John Sutherland has launched Amazing Submarine Adventures which explores historic, wartime sunken wrecks.

Littered on the sea-bed are aircraft, tanks, cars, personal items and, of course, ships. "The war in the Pacific and Far East was fought by ships at sea and by armies that were carried to war aboard ships. Across the entire theatre, from Pearl Harbour to Burma, Japan to the Coral Sea and as far south as New Zealand, evidence of these bitterly fought battles lies undisturbed on the ocean floor," said Sutherland.

"Using airborne drones, unmanned underwater vehicles and incredible deep sea midget submarines, all equipped with the world's most advanced imaging technologies, we will search, discover, film and record mighty ships, aircraft and the machinery of war."

Dives have been available since October in various locations including Java Sea (Battle of the Java Sea), Sunda Straits, Singapore, Australia, New Zealand, Truk Lagoon and Bikini Atoll.

See WWII mighty warships such as the *HMS Repulse*, *HMS Prince of Wales* and *USS Saratoga*. In Truk Lagoon in Micronesia, clients will have the opportunity to explore the best war-time sunken wreck site in the world.

Dive opportunities are exclusive and limited in these waters from October for a period of 12 months.

Contact: [john@johnbsutherland.com](mailto:john@johnbsutherland.com); [www.johnbsutherland.com](http://www.johnbsutherland.com)



Ewan Rowell



## Cheval Blanc resort – let’s drink to that

By Feizal Samath

The excitement in the Maldives, often dubbed the birthplace of innovative tourism, currently focuses on the luxury Cheval Blanc Randheli resort on Noonu Atoll, which opened its 45 villas in November 2013 and is opening its Owner’s Villa with four bedrooms spread over 1,000m<sup>2</sup> on a dedicated island this winter.

“This is a superb resort; absolute luxury,” said Abdulla Ghiyas, president, Maldives Association of Travel Agents & Tour Operators.

From the moment a guest lands at the Ibrahim Nasir International Airport and is ferried in the resort’s exclusive designer nine-seat Twin Otter De Havilland with Cheval Blanc’s signature taupe and yellow shading, to be greeted by a Majordome assigned to every villa to look after the guests’ every desire, visitors bask in luxury, bliss and a sense of tranquility.

Nothing comes cheap here with the resort’s loft style villas, designed by famed architect Jean-Michel Gathy, starting at US\$1,300 per night double occupancy on B&B basis excluding taxes and service charges.

While there is a perception in the Maldives that this a Louis Vuitton resort, a resort spokesperson said: “Cheval Blanc Randheli is operated by LVMH Hotel Management, a standalone brand within the LVMH Group and is not particularly influenced or designed by a specific fashion brand.”

The exclusivity of the resort and the top clientele it attracts are measured by the fact that when it opened last December, top European watchmaker Hublot – on the occasion – unveiled a special diver’s watch, a limited edition which is only available at the resort’s concert store. Made of titanium, with luminescent indexes in the Maison’s signature yellow shading, this watch could withstand the pressure exerted at the extreme depth of 4,000m.

The Cheval Blanc Randheli has enjoyed a healthy start in its first year of operation and consolidated its positioning among the targeted trade and end-consumer audiences, according to resort officials. Its best-selling units are the 15 Island Villas which are ideal for families with young children. The resort attracts a mix of predominantly East and Western Europeans, Middle Easterners and East Asian visitors, as well as those from Australia, the US and some South American countries.

## Got gold?

Vending machines are no longer dispensing just food and drinks, but are spewing out real gold bars too.

Launched recently Marina Bay Sands Hotel Singapore and Resorts World Sentosa, and billed as Asia’s first, these two Smart Gold ATMs are custom-built to dispense a variety of pure gold items. These range from 1g to 10g pure gold bars and silver ingots to customised gold coins.

Kong Kok Chee, CEO & director of Asia Gold ATM, said: “The ATMs utilise a modern concept of gold retailing by providing maximum customer interactivity and understanding consumer requirements, purchasing patterns and e-greeting services.

“The cost of the ingots starts from S\$110 (US\$85) and prices fluctuate on a daily basis.”

According to Kong, Asia accounted for more than 63 per cent of total world gold consumption of gold jewellery, bars, collectibles, coins and souvenirs last year.

Singapore is highly recognised as a travel destination for affluent travellers, and an increasingly important hub for the gold trade industry, hence the choice to first launch the Smart Gold ATMs in Singapore, according to Asia Gold ATM, which intends to launch two or three more machines “in the near future” in other parts of Asia. – **Paige Lee Pei Qi**



Asia Gold ATM

## Sister publication TTGmice wins again



For the second year consecutively, *TTGmice*, sister publication of *TTG Asia Luxury*, has been awarded a PATA Gold Award for Travel Journalism-Industry Business Article.

The article, *Team on Board*, ran as a cover story in the November 2013 of the publication.

With mega cruise ships spouting facilities unimaginable before – from rock-climbing walls and

sports courts to ice-skating rinks and zip lines – teambuilding on board has become a new phenomenon. In the main article, Raini Hamdi dived into why teambuilding occurs more effortless at sea, how the hassle-free and all-inclusive nature of cruising makes it attractive for more Asian meeting planners to hold their events on board and how cruise companies, for which the meetings market is an important component to fill up huge capacities, are doing just about everything to fish for the business.

The article also carried sidebars looking at the pros and cons of teambuilding at sea and corporates’ opinions about it, filed by Mimi Hudoyo, S Puvaneswary, Paige Lee Pei Qi, Rosa Ocampo, Prudence Lui and Shekhar Niyogi.

*TTGmice*’s cover story on green meetings also won a PATA Gold Award last year. This latest win brings to four the number of gold awards the magazine has amassed to-date.

# *Unchained melody*

Luxury hotel representation companies continue to grow their portfolio as many property owners across the world remain adamant about staying unchained and independent. Hear from individual properties why and how they pick the right club for them. By **Raini Hamdi**, **Xinyi Liang-Pholsena** and **S Puvaneswary**



# guide luxury hotel representation



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## HOTEL

One Farrer Hotel & Spa,  
Singapore

## REPRESENTATION

Preferred Hotel Group

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Opened recently, One Farrer Hotel & Spa positions itself as a five-star, trend-setting urban resort poised to reinvent Singapore's hospitality landscape with a gamut of "intuitive" facilities and state-of-the-art features.

Part of a mixed-use development called Connexion which also houses a private hospital and medical centre, the owning company, The Farrer Park Company, believes that being an independent hotel gives One Farrer Hotel & Spa full autonomy to tailor its offerings and establish a unique hospitality, wellness and F&B experience to its guests and the Singapore marketplace.

The hotel has 250 rooms within a "hotels within a hotel" concept, comprising three distinct styles of accommodation – Urban Hotel, Loft Apartments and Skyline Hotel & Sky Villas.

For representation, it has picked Preferred Hotel Group (PHG).

"Preferred gives One Farrer a global platform and the endorsement of a renowned brand to promote and sell our unique product offering, allowing the hotel to compete strongly with other hotels locally and internationally. PHG provides connectivity to online and travel agency reservations systems, and on the consumer front, its point-based loyalty programme iPrefer. It also has a network of 36 global sales offices and has access to 16 frequent flyer programmes. Most importantly, each member hotel is required to meet or exceed the Preferred Standard of Excellence, which is anonymously reviewed yearly ensuring a stamp of genuine luxury. One Farrer Hotel & Spa is proud to be among the best independent hotels around the world under PHG," said Richard Helfer, director, The Farrer Park Company, and chairman, One Farrer.

"PHG's Integrated Quality Assurance measurement programme, which allows member hotels to aggregate and analyse reviews and comments from 45 consumer review and social media sites, is also a valuable platform for helping the hotel to understand residents' experiences. This will be a significant tool that aids the hotel's efforts in continuously improving its standards," he added.





**HOTEL**  
Indigo Pearl,  
Phuket, Thailand

**REPRESENTATION**  
Design Hotels

Owned by Wichit Na-Ranong, the resort, with 177 suites and villas, prefers to be independent so it can realise its vision and ideals based on the pillars of cultural heritage, creativity, design and architecture and a close connection to north Phuket, which has a rich history, national parks and quality beaches.

For representation, it needed a company that understands this positioning and its unique product. Thus, it settled on Design Hotels.

Explained general manager Christopher Oakes: "Indigo Pearl is not a typical resort; it is very art- and design-focused with a deep connection to the destination... So it is not mass market, but attracts a more refined guest profile. Design Hotels demonstrates a strong understanding of our ideals and, with its ability

to open up new regional markets to us and increase business across direct and retail channels, we believe it is a good fit."

He added: "We are pleased with our work with Design Hotels and its marketing and sales platform to-date and have seen an increase in web traffic to our own website. We have also expanded our own visibility and profile by meeting new travel (consultants) at events, exchanges and sales missions organised by Design Hotels. We continue to look for strong niche opportunities that reach out to independent travellers who are passionate about the arts – those interested in art, design, fashion, film, writers and creativity in general are well suited to Indigo Pearl. Those with an inquisitive and adventurous mind who can discover true Thai culture, hospitality and cuisine. It is these sectors that we are always on the lookout for, and this is why traditional travel (consultants) play a very important role for us and we try to seek them out and work with them for mutual benefit. It is through our network of sales representation on the ground and working closely with our communications representation in key markets, complementing the work of Design Hotels, that forge the business opportunities that we are looking for."

# guide luxury hotel representation



## HOTEL

Aleenta Phuket - Phang Nga  
Resort and Spa, Thailand

## REPRESENTATION

Small Luxury Hotels

Aleenta Phuket - Phang Nga features the luxury of space coupled with personalised services and professional staff. The concept of “all suites, all private” is delivered in 44 luxury rooms (another 44 are in development) with the smallest room being 80m<sup>2</sup>.

The property is owned and managed by Akaryn Hospitality Management Services (AHMS) - The Collection under the leadership of Anchalika Kijkanakorn, founder and managing director of AHMS, who said she picked Small Luxury Hotels (SLH) to represent the hotel as it shares the same ethos as AHMS. “We choose to set ourselves apart by committing to excellence through

expertise, experience and efficiency, making sure that we deliver on all results, from the promises we make at the resort to the returns we ensure our partners.”

Anchalika is also chairman of the board of SLH, the first female and Asian representative to be elected to this position.

“SLH gives our collection of hotels the type of support that larger chain hotels enjoy. SLH has regional sales and PR teams worldwide, including key emerging markets like China, India and Russia as well as all traditional markets, which assists smaller boutique hotels extend their umbrella of distribution,” she said.

“On the technical side of distribution SLH provides state-of-the-art Internet booking engine, seamless packaging opportunities, full GDS connectivity with systems support from a dedicated account manager.”

She also hails SLH’s audit of all hotels each year to ensure each member achieves the high boutique standards and the SLH Club, which she said has over one million members who book SLH hotels at least twice per year.

“We find SLH guests are our ‘perfect’ guests – we generate the highest ADR and incremental spend in operations and spa from these guests,” she said.







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#### **HOTEL**

The Majestic Hotel Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

#### **REPRESENTATION**

The Leading Hotels of the World

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The Majestic Hotel Kuala Lumpur, with 300 rooms and suites, positions itself as a five-star luxury property. The iconic Hotel Majestic building dates back to 1932, is documented as a heritage site and is one of the most iconic landmarks in Kuala Lumpur.

The property is owned and managed by YTL Hotels, the hospitality arm of one of Malaysia's most dynamic conglomerates, YTL Corporation.

Being independently managed "allows us to design special and differentiated experiences for our guests", said director of sales and marketing, Anna Olsson. "The philosophy of always being best in class...is core to all aspects of the company's activities, with both service and operational excellence being our key drivers," said Olsson.

The Majestic Hotel Kuala Lumpur is the only hotel

in Kuala Lumpur that is part of The Leading Hotels of the World (LHW). "This affiliation verifies that the hotel meets a demanding set of quality standards, which serves as the benchmark for the luxury hospitality industry, putting us in the company of some of the best hotels in the world such as The Ritz London, The Pierre in New York City and Hotel Le Bristol in Paris. The meticulous criteria by which the company judges and accepts its members are occasionally reviewed and revised to adapt to the changing landscape and guest expectations," said Olsson.

"Leading always prizes the individuality and authenticity of each of its member hotels. This set of standards is designed to assist us to best showcase those qualities, and to attract and retain a loyal clientele in these highly competitive times. It has given us a truly global reach in terms of distribution through the global distribution system and also with many international sales offices around the globe, which work as an extended arm to our property sales team.

"Leading also works closely with many of the niche retail travel agencies and has a good following from their clients. The area which Leading does not cover is wholesale agencies. This is an area where we need to establish contact directly and one that could be improved on further by Leading."

# Eye on premium d



**Above** Queenstown city: Ski in the morning, golf in the afternoon – options are that diverse

A big aim of New Zealand's Tourism 2025 blueprint is to grow value more than number of tourists. **Mimi Hudoyo** looks at the drive for premium dollars

**T**apping the well-heeled market is part of New Zealand's grand strategy, Tourism 2025, the key angle of which 'growing value more than number' says it all.

Kevin Bowler, chief executive of Tourism New Zealand, said: "We have just started focusing our tourism marketing on the premium sector.

"New Zealand has the premium products, from luxury lodges, helicopter rides and luxury cruises

to flying in a celebrity chef for a private function, but all this has neither been packaged seriously before nor promoted to the right target audience.

"We need to explain to the market what we have to offer. We have for example luxury lodges, with rates ranging from NZ\$1,000 (US\$781.25) to NZ\$2,500 per night per couple, serving wonderful food and wine. They are quite small, usually private and quiet, discreet and a long way away from towns or people."

# ollars



Vichaya Kiatling-Angsulee/123RF.COM

This kind of product, according to Bowler, may not always appeal to Asian upmarket visitors but will go down well with those who are looking for a retreat or honeymoon, or with older travellers with the financial means.

Rob Andrews, director of marketing, Queenstown Golf Travel, added: “The good thing about New Zealand is that you can do so many things in one place. In Queenstown, for example, you can do walking, golfing, jet-boating, flying, hot-air ballooning – the options are endless. You can ski in the morning and golf in the afternoon. There are not many places in the world where you can ski and golf on the same day.”

Maggie Sando, marketing and trade sales executive officer of Destination Great Lake Taupo, said: “The premium offerings in Great Lake Taupo include a helicopter tour, golfing and other outdoor activities. We also have something for arts and craft enthusiasts, with high-end lodges to stay in.”

Among golf courses in Lake Taupo are Wairakei Golf + Sanctuary, which has undergone a NZ\$2 million Ecological Restoration Project in a bid to be a beautiful environment for plants, birdlife and recreation. It includes the award-winning Kinloch Club golf course designed by Jack Nicklaus and the Chateau Tongariro Golf Course, the highest course in New Zealand. Located right in front of the main hotel building, this is an easy-walk nine-hole course, with the jaw-dropping backdrop of three towering active volcanoes, the Tongariro

UNESCO World Heritage Park and the grand Chateau Tongariro itself.

For arts and craft enthusiasts, Lava Glass, Glass Blowing Studio, Gallery and Cafe is the latest tourist attraction in Taupo, New Zealand.

To develop the high-end market, Tourism New Zealand has set up a Global Premium Travel Market team in Auckland with managers on site in the US, the UK and Asia, Bowler said.

Explaining the strategy for Asia, Mischa Mannix-Opie, Tourism New Zealand’s regional manager South & South-east Asia, said: “(The premium manager) is not only focusing on working with travel agencies that are selling to wealthy travellers, but with non-traditional parties such as the platinum clientele of banks, customers of airlines’ top loyalty programmes and other upmarket communities such as golf club members.”

In Asia the main target markets are Japan, Singapore and South Korea. Similar approaches are also being taken in the US and UK.

Bowler said Tourism New Zealand would also participate in Pure Life Experience in Marrakech and ILTM in Cannes.

New Zealand tourism stakeholders meanwhile are tweaking their product offerings to meet the expectations of rich Asian travellers.

Speaking about an effort to grab the premium, special interest market from China, Tourism New Zealand general manager Asia David Craig said: “We have golf courses which rank among the world’s top 100, located in stunning loca-



**New Zealand has the premium products, from luxury lodges, helicopter rides and luxury cruises to flying in a celebrity chef for a private function, but all this has neither been packaged seriously before nor promoted to the right target audience.**

Kevin Bowler, chief executive, Tourism New Zealand





Alovsius Patrimonio/123RF.COM

tions. We think that those who are serious about golfing can play in a range of places, with experiences such as golf with food and wine in between.

“However, it is not as simple as just telling the Chinese about our golfing facilities, as they have special requirements. For example, with the Chinese (and most Asians), golfing is a prestige; they need caddy service and they play and take time to enjoy the scenery. For us here, everyone can play golf, so it is normal to play quite fast and without caddy service.

“So, we need to make the club ready for this market so that it has the right experience in the local context.”

Trevor Lee, managing director of TravConsult, said: “The common mistake the industry makes is that it looks at products from its eyes and not from the visitor’s eyes.”

TravConsult has developed a series of experiences for Auckland Airport that matches the best of New Zealand products to the cultural needs of the different Asian markets – starting with Japan and China. Lee said Asians are inspired by Western destinations. For them, countries like Switzerland, Canada and New Zealand are exotic, and suppliers tend to emphasise the differences between their products and that in their home country. While this can be compelling, it can also be “frightening” to those who

are first-time visitors.

Lilly Choi-Lee, general manager of TravConsult, added: “(Differences) in food, language, etc, can stop them from going. So, instead of looking at it from the perspective of New Zealand eyes, we need to see it from the customers’ perspective – what they want, what will blow their minds – and offer them a New Zealand experience with touches of familiarity to connect their hearts and minds.”

Giving an example, she said the Japanese like marathons and the sport is also gaining popularity among the Chinese. The Auckland Marathon therefore is a good way to attract these markets.

In another example, she said summer in Japan is extremely hot and sticky, so New Zealand North Island can promote itself to the Japanese as an escape during summer, the way Sapporo in Japan has done so and managed to siphon off the domestic market in summer.

Following the survey on the needs of Japan and China markets, Auckland Airport will do similar surveys on India, South Korea and Indonesia. Through a digital platform, New Zealand suppliers will be able to learn about each market and create itineraries specific to each set of travellers. These products are then made available to the outbound operators in the market in their local language.

**Above**

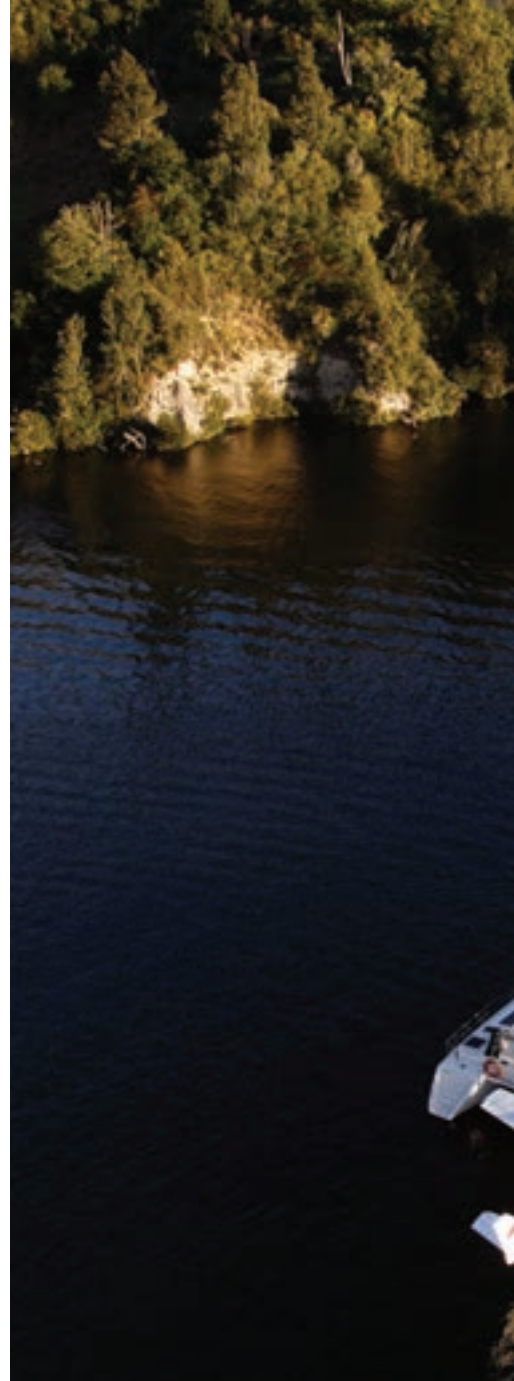
Auckland Marathon: the garb infuses this participant with superpower to sprint to the finish line!

**Right**

Pure Cruise

**Below**

The unique Tasman glacier and glacier lake, Mount Cook National Park





Nattachai Sesaud/123RF.COM

## Five luxe products

### Evening tour of Hobbiton Movie Set

The Hobbiton Movie Set in Matakana, about two hours' drive from Auckland, has launched evening dinner tours.

The Hobbit holes have been fully wired, enabling tours to extend into the evening. The Hobbit holes and other iconic landmarks including the mill, the bridge, The Party Tree and The Green Dragon Inn are lit and aglow at night.

The experience will begin at dusk with a guided tour through The Shire. The journey concludes at The Green Dragon Inn with ample time to relax in front of open fires and a free drink from the exclusive Hobbit Southfarthing range.

Guests then move to the Green Dragon dining room and are treated to a banquet fit for a Hobbit. They rejoin their guide after dinner and make their way back through the paths of The Shire, with their gift of an authentic lantern in hand.

### The Big Beer Tour of Auckland

The Big Foody Food Tour, a company that shows off New Zealand and Auckland through the taste buds, has launched the Big Beer Tour of Auckland, which takes travellers on a walking tour of some of the most historic pubs in the city. The 2.5-hour tour includes craft beer tasting, a visit to a local brewery and an insight into the history of the city.

### Sail and soak

Explore the sparkling waters of Lake Rotoiti, Rotorua and discover

its sandy coves and lake-edge hot springs through a cruise on board luxury yacht *Tiua*, operated by Pure Cruise. The skipper and host will tell stories of the lake, its history and the local indigenous Maori people. Your clients can soak in the Manupirua lakeside hot pools, which is only accessible by boat.

On board, they can relax in the spacious saloon and covered cockpit and deck areas. Facilities include a galley, licensed bar and three guest bathrooms. *Tiua* can accommodate two to 50 people and is available for private charters.

### Circle the volcano, fly fish in the river

Te Puia has partnered Volcanic Air and Multi Day Adventures on an exclusive tour for high-end guests comprising a helicopter flight to a volcanic island, fly fishing in Waikato River and a cultural dining experience.

Volcanic Air flies your clients for a few hours and brings them to Te Puia for a lunch or dinner that combines an exclusive cultural experience.

They are also taken to the Te Puia weaving school and on a tour of the valley, escorted by a guide who shares personal insights and the history of the area.

### Glorious glacier

Tasman Glacier is one of few accessible glacial lakes containing icebergs in the world.

This trip, operated by The Glacier Explorers, departs from The Hermitage Hotel Aoraki Mount Faber by bus to the Tasman Valley, followed by a 30-minute alpine walk through the moraine and national park. Then, board a custom-built MAC boat and enjoy the ever-changing scenery of the Tasman Glacier from a safe distance. View icebergs of different shapes and sizes with the opportunity to touch and taste 300- to 500-year-old ice crystals.

# Quality time



Counted as one of few European destinations which are adept at attracting Chinese and Asian tourists, the alpine destination is now moving the lever of its Asian market strategy from quantity to quality, **Raini Hamdi** reports



Switzerland Tourism has hatched a plan to attract higher-spending Asian FITs; make Switzerland the stop rather than a stopover on the European trip of Asians; expand demand to lesser-known destinations such as Valais, Ticino or eastern Switzerland; and also spread out the season. Traditionally, the winter season is peak but Asian markets which can travel in summer will help bolster the summer season for Swiss hotels while availing themselves of lower rates than in winter.

Just as Australia has the Great Ocean Road and California the Pacific Coast Highway, Switzerland Tourism is encouraging the travel trade to woo more FITs with deeper and more immersive tours through a 'Grand Tour of Switzerland'.

The whole route covers 1,600km and connects no fewer than 44 highlights in one journey. Fifteen

of the highlights are nature attractions, 10 traditional/historical, eight art, culture and architecture, 11 boutique towns and 12 UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

The aim is to make it even more convenient for travel experts to promote self-drive or train journeys not just for the entire tour but segments of it that fit clients' duration or specific interest. With it, planners can easily flesh out a tailored itinerary for clients, with rental car or Swiss train pass and hotel vouchers included, said Urs Eberhard, Switzerland Tourism's executive vice president markets & meetings.

Eberhard, together with Swiss partners, launched the grand tour, and the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of winter sports, to South-east Asian tour operators in August in Singapore.

"We want to be the go-to destination for individuals seeking immersive experiences without

**Left and above**

The newly-opened Chedi Andermatt draws the rich and famous to a forgotten valley

worrying about safety issues or discomfort. Switzerland is easy to explore as it is well-connected. It may be small, but it has diverse attractions – no two places are alike. Visitors can have a safe, hassle-free and comfortable experience," Eberhard said.

"Our market research also shows that those days when you travel for two weeks and stay put in one place, especially among Europeans, are declining. Exploring and touring are making a comeback. Asian groups, for example, typically have eight days and we want to make sure they understand that they can spend them here, that Switzerland may be small but it has so many highlights and each region has its own attractions," said Eberhard.

The initiative comes at a time when Swiss hotels – still suffering declining or stagnating arrivals from traditional sources – are keen to attract new markets. At the same

# destination switzerland

time, Asia, especially the drivers China and South-east Asia, is hungry for new products and destinations, according to Switzerland Tourism's director global accounts and director Asia-Pacific, Simon Bosshart.

Said Bosshart: "In these still growing and maturing markets, the past strategy of simply being cheaper than the competitor doesn't work anymore, and the travel trade has to be creative and come up with new and deeper products in order to satisfy the customer demand. While our big landmarks such as Jungfrau and Lucerne are still the most demanded spots, lesser-known destinations such as the Valais, Ticino or Eastern Switzerland have shown substantial growth in the recent years."

Swiss hotels in areas that are relatively new to Asians are starting to see the market's appearance and are hoping to get more of these visitors.

Asia is "bubbling", said Pierre Berclaz, general manager of the luxury wellness hotel, Les Sources des Alpes, in Leukerbad (see review on page 41), the largest thermal spa resort destination in Valais boasting no fewer than 65 natural hot springs.

"Leukerbad is synonymous with health, not just wellness, a place where you can have a rejuvenating holiday year-round in all sense of the word," said Berclaz.

Art Furrer, who pioneered tourism in Riederalp and now owns a string of hotels there, has been tapping Hong Kong and Chinese visitors since three years and is now receiving Asians in both summer and winter.

Riederalp is also in Valais but offers different attractions compared to Leukerbad or famous Zermatt. Said Furrer: "Zermatt has the Matterhorn; we have the Aletsch glacier." The 23km long glacier with 27 billion tons of ice is the mightiest glacier in the Alps and is

a UNESCO World Heritage site.

Furrer is glad for his Asian clientele, saying business has changed, with the traditional markets such as France, Italy and Germany being "no longer here" as a result of the strong Swiss franc and other issues.

Over in Arosa, in the canton of Graubunden in eastern Switzerland, the veritable Tschuggen Grand Hotel is also seeing more Asian tourists. The hotel used to operate only in winter but massive investment in the property in the past seven years, which includes a CHF35 million (US\$38 million) spa designed by Mario Botta, a CHF7.5 million private mountain railway for guests and a luxurious renovation of rooms and suites, propels the hotel to woo the summer business since 2008. The hotel is now open from July to April each year.

Said general manager Leo Maissen: "Since the investments, we have brought down the age of our clientele by 17 years to an average of 42 years old. Our clients are also more international now, with 50 per cent being Swiss and the rest from Germany, Benelux, England and Russia. New markets include China and Japan, especially during summer, and Brazil in winter."

He added: "The Chinese visitors come for the spa as Mario Botta has done several work in China."

A new cable car linking Arosa with Lenzerheide, home to Roger Federer's new family chalet complex, triples the slopes for skiers to some 225km and opens more trails for walkers and hikers. "The coming winter is the first season when we'll see the real impact from this. We are confident this will attract new clients to Arosa," said Maissen.

Another resort area in the canton of Graubunden is Flims, which is not too far away Arosa, yet their offering and ambience could not be more different. Products such as the historical Waldhaus Flims Mountain Resort & Spa, located

in the town of Flims-Laax, further accentuates the diversity: the resort is hailed as 'Switzerland's largest hotel park', thanks to its sprawling landscaped gardens (see review on page 42).

As with the other hotels, not only is Waldhaus Flims Mountain Resort & Spa keen to tap the Asian market, its owners are also looking for a new investor, possibly from Asia or the US, "in order to drive the hotel further", according to general manager Daniel Füglistner.

"The hotel is in such a beautiful spot. We have been successful for the last 136 years and we are convinced that we will be successful for the next 136 years," he said.

Waldhaus Flims has undergone renovations but is continually looking to stay relevant in the marketplace. "The owners are willing (to innovate) and are open-minded.

"A lot of guests have a story to tell about the hotel – it can be a proposal, a great moment, it's all done here within the pristine compound and romantic allure," added Füglistner.

And the next story Switzerland Tourism wants to tell is how it is able to capture the hearts of well-heeled Asians and keep them captive in a country which may be small in size but is large in number of attractions and steep in quality.

“

**Since the investments, we have brought down the age of our clientele by 17 years to an average of 42 years old.**

Leo Maissen,  
general manager,  
Tschuggen  
Grand Hotel, Arosa







Four  
luxé  
products

### St Moritz to Zermatt

Enjoy a three-in-one luxurious treat: first-class travel from St Moritz to Zermatt on the legendary *Glacier Express* and stay in style at Carlton Hotel St Moritz and Hotel Mont Cervin Palace in Zermatt.

The *Glacier Express* passes through one of the most beautiful landscapes in Switzerland. The stretch between St Moritz and Thusis is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

This winter, the two hotels are collaborating to offer this deal. Priced from CHF2,763 (US\$2,870)



per person in a suite or junior suite, the special includes two nights' accommodation with breakfast in each hotel and the journey from St Moritz to Zermatt with a three-course meal on-board.

At Hotel Mont Cervin Palace, guests will also enjoy a dine-around evening meal while at the Carlton, they will receive CHF100 credit per person per day to spend

**Top**  
The *Glacier Express* and Carlton Hotel St Moritz

on food and drinks in the hotel's various restaurants. The offer also includes the use of the wellness areas in both hotels, drinks from the minibar, WLAN, transfer to the station in Zermatt, 24-hour chauffeur service in St Moritz and private butler service at the Carlton Hotel St Moritz. It is valid from December 12 to 18, January 12 to 28 and March 1 to April 5.

For bookings contact Carlton Hotel St Moritz, Tel: +41 (81) 836-70 00; [www.carlton-stmoritz.ch](http://www.carlton-stmoritz.ch)

### Winter tourism

Switzerland is celebrating 150 years of winter tourism this winter and where better to enjoy the festivities than in St Moritz, the birthplace of winter tourism.

For gourmands, the St Moritz Gourmet Festival 2015, to be held from January 26 to 30, is a must. The festival is themed 'British Edition' as

# destination switzerland

a form of salute to the arrival of the first British guests in Switzerland. Nine top chefs from Great Britain have been invited, including Angela Hartnett, Great Britain's most popular award-winning chef from the restaurant Murano in London, who will be joining new head chef Gero Porstein at the Carlton Hotel St Moritz.

Hotels such as Carlton have cooked up creative packages. Carlton's guests, for example, will not only enjoy the English guest chef's award-winning Cucina Italiana, but will have the opportunity to enjoy the welcome cocktail party at the Kempinski Grand Hotel and the legendary kitchen party at the Badrutt's Palace.

They can also follow in the footsteps of the pioneers and try the extraordinary sports that the English discovered in St Moritz years ago such as a ride in a bob taxi on the Olympic bob run, a chance to learn how to play ice stock sport and a Cresta run beginners' course for men.

## Your own private mountain

What can be more luxurious than to have a ski area throughout the day just for you?

Each year, the Tschuggen Grand Hotel in Arosa organises its Private Mountain event, where the Arosa ski area around the Arosler Weisshorn will once again belong exclusively to guests of the five-star hotel.

This year marked the fifth event and here's an idea of how exclusive the event was: Held on November 28, where the Arosa ski area around the *Tschuggen Express*, the hotel's own mountain railway, took guests from the hotel up to the ski slopes around Arosa. A ski butler was at the top station to welcome them. In addition to skiing on freshly prepared ski runs, guests had the chance to compete in the Parmigiani Private Mountain ski race or hurtle down the snow-covered slopes on

snow bikes and sleds.

A Tschuggen cabin served regional specialities at lunchtime accompanied by traditional music. And those looking for the exuberant après ski atmosphere weren't disappointed as the Sternenbar in the middle station and a DJ on hand ensured that everyone was in party mood.

The day was brought to a fitting end with the race dinner followed by an end-of-day party extravaganza under the banner Fire and Ice, which was held for the first time in the 360° restaurant on the summit of the Weisshorn, 2,650m above sea

**Below**  
Top chef Angela Hartnett in St Moritz's Gourmet Festival; the futuristic, private mountain railway, *Tschuggen Express*



level. Contact the hotel for 2015's date, Tel: +41 (81) 378-9999; [www.tschuggen.ch](http://www.tschuggen.ch)

## FIFA Museum in Zurich

Construction of the FIFA World Football Museum in Zurich has started, with the attraction expected to open in early 2016.

Located just opposite Bahnhof Enge, the museum will embody all facets of the football world. An interactive, multimedia World of Experiences, for example, will demonstrate how football touches people's lives and the world every day. FIFA's illustrious history and the FIFA World Cup are other major areas.

The museum is also intended as a vibrant meeting place and discussion forum for all members of the football family, including fans, clubs, associations, friends and suppliers, partners and sponsors. FIFA has appointed Berlin-based TRIAD Projektgesellschaft as the planning office for the design implementation of the museum. Since 1994, the company has been creating award-winning exhibitions and Expo pavilions, exhibition stands and branding that leave an emotional effect.

# Hotel Les Sources des Alpes



**Above** The hotel's thermal pool: a source of bliss and contentment

**LOCATION** In Leukerbad (canton Valais), which is Switzerland's largest spa and wellness destination, where there are no fewer than 30 thermal pools for your clients to soak in. Aside from this wonder-

ful aspect, numerous walking/hiking trails re-energise the body in a different way with their unspoilt vistas and tranquil surroundings. During my hike to Laemmenhutte, then on to Wildstrubel Glacier, I was ever so lucky to

encounter a family of wild Gemsen. And, during my walk into Dala Gorge, I saw the Swiss ski team in training – my eyes nearly popped as they were tested to walk on a rope across the gorge!

**AMBIENCE** The best thermal pool was nowhere else but in the quiet

and peaceful surroundings of my own hotel, Hotel Les Sources des Alpes, I discovered after going to a public thermal which was humongous and packed with people.

Despite its location in the centre of a charming village, the hotel exuded warmth and serenity even from the outside; it looked small and private, but without the associated snobbery exclusivity brings.

This is the only five star in Leukerbad – since 1831 when tourism started in the village – and its heritage lives on. During my stay, I found the root of its greatness wasn't so much a well-maintained hardware but the warm, impeccable, old-school hospitality dished out by general manager Pierre Berclaz, his wife Joëlle and their team.

Together they gave the hotel a charming personality and made me feel I was in a family-run business. Each evening, the GM would make it a point to go to the hotel's

celebrated restaurant, La Malvoisie, and greet guests at each table.

**ROOM** Surrounded by windows, my room beamed with natural light while an electric fireplace in the living room added to the residency feel. There was more space (72m<sup>2</sup>) than I could use and full comfort was accorded, be it Relais & Chateaux (R&C) complete range of amenities, the king bed, plush linens and towels, free Wi-Fi, etc.

**FACILITIES** A dip in the hotel's large outdoor thermal swimming pool, perfectly warm at 37°, with the Gemmi mountain as the backdrop, was my everyday must-do. This was followed by a swim in the heated indoor pool, part of the hotel's spa centre, and a most peaceful nap ever.

Another must for me each evening of my stay was restaurant La Malvoisie, where maître d'hôtel Sebastien Canonge yet again reminded me what this hotel was all about: the nostalgia of old-school hospitality, where real professionalism, care, knowledge and real love for hoteliering live on. The food was delicious, innovative, modern and light, an ingenious twist to classic French. No wonder this hotel is part of R&C's Route du Bonheur.

**SERVICE** With people so passionate about their jobs – never mind the luxurious amenities, fantastic cuisine, great location, etc, of this property – service is the reason why I would love to return.

**VERDICT** Classy service that warms the heart as much as the thermal springs do.

**Name** Hôtel Les Sources des Alpes  
**No. of rooms** 30  
**Address** Tuftstrasse 17, 3954 Leukerbad, Switzerland  
**Contact**  
 Tel: +41 (27) 472 2000  
 www.sourcesdesalpes.ch  
 A member of Relais & Chateaux and part of its Route du Bonheur  
 www.relaischateaux.com



## Waldhaus Flims



**Left** The resort in a park and **above**, Grand Hotel Waldhaus, one of three hotel offerings

*By Raini Hamdi*

**LOCATION** About two hours' drive from Zurich in the mountain arena of Flims-Laax (canton Graubunden, eastern Switzerland). I visited in summer – the walks/hikes were splendid, in particular the hike to Martin's

Hole, a natural 'window' in a rock. I also walked to an observation platform, Il Spir, which brought an unforgettable bird's eye view into the Rhine gorge.

**AMBIENCE** Imagine a five-star room in the park. For clients who just want the luxury of a real good rest, where better to be than at this resort, which boasts the largest hotel park in Switzerland? The surroundings were green, quiet and peaceful

– a place to still the mind, soothe the eyes and lift the spirit.

**ROOM** There are three types of hotel offerings – classic (Grand Hotel Waldhaus), colourful, summerhouse style (Villa Silvana) and elegant chalet style (Chalet Belmont), with a total of 150 rooms in all. I stayed at the Grand Hotel. Though the room was renovated, it was still rather old-fashioned. But it was supremely comfortable; the Wi-Fi speed couldn't be more modern! I love the room's huge terrace that looked out to the sprawling park.

**FACILITIES** There is a building just for restaurants and bars – and what cutting-edge restaurants they were, especially the 14 GautMillau points Grand Restaurant Rotonde and the fine-dining Epoca, both offering breathtaking mountain views.

There are enough facilities to

keep guests captive, including a 3,000m<sup>2</sup> spa, numerous jogging and hiking routes in the park, a golf course, tightrope adventure garden and, most interestingly, a large museum that houses collectibles related to hotel operations, guaranteed to amaze any hotelier.

Facilities for kids are also numerous, making the hotel ideal for families as well. For meetings, the resort can host up to 1,800pax.

**SERVICE** This is the hotel's strongest suit. I love the front office team, Yusuf, Bettina and Vivian among them, whose perfect manners, youthfulness and efficiency were a ray of sunshine each time I left and return to the hotel. They also drove guests to and from restaurants, the cable car station, etc, a service that befits a grand hotel.

**VERDICT** The resort is a complete offering in itself, while the Flims-Laax area offers a lot of attractions.

**Name** Waldhaus Flims Mountain Resort & Spa  
**No. of rooms** 150  
**Address** Via dil Parc, 7018 Flims, Switzerland  
**Contact**  
Tel: +41 (81) 928-4848  
Email: info@waldhaus-flims.ch  
www.waldhaus-flims.ch

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# Making the right moves



**Above and right** Japan flaunts authenticity such as culture and food at a time luxury travellers seek genuine attractions

Japan is set to welcome more wealthy travellers from South-east Asia as the country continues to reinforce its allure as an authentic destination and take steps to remove entry barriers,

**Mimi Hudoyo** reports

**J**apan is a success story of how a country can shed its image as expensive without losing its appeal as a premium destination.

Tourist arrivals from South-east Asia have been growing rapidly in numbers in the last couple of years, a change from before when many perceived Japan as out of reach, and a reflection of how Japan is making all the right moves to widen its market sources.

These moves included easing entry barriers and being friendly to



Rolf Suedeholm/123RF.COM

49.8 per cent growth in arrivals respectively in the first eight months of this year compared with the same period in 2013, according to JNTO director, marketing & promotion department, Kiyonori Ogawa, who is in charge of South-east Asia and India.

Among the travellers were high-end clients. Said Ogawa: "Japan has a unique proposition to offer high-end travellers, which is different from other luxury destinations in the world, and that is the Japanese hospitality and culture.

"We do have modern luxury hotels and restaurants, but most travellers to Japan look for the Japanese experience when they are here. They try Japanese food, buy local products and (absorb the) local culture by, say, participating in a tea ceremony or authentic rural activities such as strawberry-picking or soba-making."

Japan has also strengthened its competitive edge among luxury destinations in the world by mas-saging its authentic offerings. Nowhere is this more evident than in Kyoto, where old merchant houses have been turned into high-end restaurants and galleries, and where tradition can be experienced without losing modern comforts.

Hoshinoya Kyoto, a luxury property by the river in Arashiyama, for example, blends a Japanese Ryokan product with modern facilities and services, including serving the traditional Japanese multi-course kaiseki dinner with an international twist.

It also tries to offer unique experiences outside the hotel, said Fumi Miauchi, director of global marketing department, Hoshino Resorts Group. One such, being offered till December 10, is a World Heritage Helicopter Cruise that gives guests an aerial journey covering 17 UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Kyoto.

In Kanazawa, where 99 per cent of gold leaf in Japan is made, travellers can not only buy various products with gold leaf – food, cosmetics, jewellery, tableware and decorative items – but learn to create products using gold leaf.

The Hoshinoya Kyoto is seeing Singapore visitors and is currently targeting travellers from Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam, especially repeat travellers to Japan. Meanwhile Kanazawa is popular among Taiwanese and Hong Kong travellers, according to Noriko Iwata, executive, promotion section, City of Kanazawa Tourism.

Muslim travellers, factors that bolster Japan's appeal to markets such as Indonesia, where many luxury travellers reside. Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO) opened a Jakarta office earlier this year and, before the new fiscal year in March 2015, Japan will offer visa-free facilities to Indonesian e-passport holders.

The introduction of multiple-entry visas for travellers from the Philippines and Vietnam last year, along with the devaluation of yen, saw a whopping 63.7 per cent and

Kyoto Tourism Council





**Above** Kiyomizudera Temple Gate in Kyoto  
**Above right** Ski in Hokkaido

Meanwhile, new airline services between Japan and Singapore and Thailand are being seen as opportunities to introduce new destinations beyond Tokyo to travellers from the two markets, according to JNTO's Ogawa.

Jetstar's Bangkok-Fukuoka service, launched on June 26, will open up Kyushu to the Thai market, while SilkAir's chartered series between Singapore and Okinawa (operating September to January 2015) and Singapore Airlines' winter season scheduled services between Singapore and Sapporo will introduce Okinawa and Hokkaido to the Singapore market, said Ogawa.

A special approach will be applied to luxury travellers.

Said Yasuhiro Iijima, senior director, inbound tourism branding and promotion, Japan Travel

Agency: "They can have access to places not all travellers can, such as visiting a temple to learn about its history and get a personal meditation lesson; or participate in a tea ceremony and get an in-depth understanding of the culture.

"Asians love to shop. Apart from expanding our duty-free facilities, we are encouraging (specialty and branded) shops to open specially for such customers a couple of hours before or after their regular business hours."

"High-end, repeat travellers tend to spend a lot of money in Japan and experience the country in-depth while they are here, so we need to take a different approach to this market," he added.

South-east Asian buyers whom *TTGAsia luxury* spoke with during the recent Visit Japan Travel Mart (VJTM) in Tokyo agreed, saying

that staying in luxury ryokans, having quality Japanese food and shopping for local products are what the high-end travellers want.

Khamisah Salamat, senior manager product development of Misa Travel Singapore, said: "The trend of FITs from Singapore going to Japan is coming out very strong now.

"A lot of repeaters are looking for new areas. They look at unique accommodations, like luxury ryokans, and some are even taking the ones with a hot spring bath in the room."

She said many travellers are not accustomed to having a bath in a public onsen and are willing to pay extra by staying in a room with a private hot spring bath.

"Singaporeans like to shop for local products. In Hokkaido, for example, I bring them to the local





wholesale fish market instead of the major markets most tourists go to.

“My clients also like to visit local confectionary stores where they usually buy sweets to take home (as souvenirs),” she said.

Kar Wei Kwong, manager product/marketing of Holiday Tours & Travel Malaysia, said ryokan stays, gourmet dining and shopping are the attractions her high-end FIT clients look for.

“They do not only like to enjoy eating good Japanese food while they are here, but buy crabs, oysters, scallops, etc, to bring home,” she said.

Japan’s ski resorts are also gaining popularity among Malaysians families, according to Kwong.

“Japan is comparable to Australia in terms of package price, currency exchange and flight time

of between seven and eight hours,” said Kwong, who added visa-free facilities have helped the agency sell Japan better but she hopes for better accessibility within the country and to rural tourist attractions.

“To give travellers an (authentic) Japanese experience you sometimes need to travel a couple of hours to reach an onsen or a ryokan which is not frequented by tourists yet and sometimes you need to charter transport to reach the place and (land) transport is quite expensive here,” she said.

Steven Ler, senior vice president, head of leisure & concierge travel, MICE, product & marketing of UOB Travel Singapore, expects more comprehensive information on products available in the regional destinations in Japan to attract his repeat clients looking for special and new experiences in Japan.

“

**“Japan has a unique proposition to offer high-end travellers, which is different from other luxury destinations in the world, and that is the Japanese hospitality and culture.”**

Kiyonori Ogawa, director-marketing & promotion, South-east Asia/India, Japan National Tourism Organization



## Four luxe products

### **Pokémon adventure at Pen Tokyo**

The Pokémon Company has specially designed an interactive Pokémon luxury hotel experience for The Peninsula Tokyo.

By booking the *Pokémon Hotel Adventure: The Power of Ten* room package, guests take on the role of deputy investigator, seeking out clues from digital displays in 10 locations within the hotel as they follow the trail of Pokémon characters reported missing.

Donning their souvenir Pikachu hat and equipped with a special Poké Ball, a magnifying glass, a copy of *The Pokémon Times* and a detective's journal and map, players set out to find 10 separate clue locations in order. At each, animated staff members representing the worldwide P Hotels – hotels where Pokémon meets the world and the world meets Pokémon – reveal bits of the story, deepening the mystery as players solve picture puzzles, match and sort shapes and letters, play Flash games and use the magnifying glass to find hidden codes.

The game is available in both Japanese and English and is designed for families and individual travellers from five years old onwards.

### **Cultural experiences**

WAK JAPAN in Kyoto brings travellers on a luxury cultural



Kyoto Tourism Council



experience in and around Michiya, a restored century-old townhouse. One of the programmes includes a market walk and cooking class. The tour starts with a walk through Nishiki food market and exploring the backstreets with interesting stores. Then, visit a former sake brewery and sake tasting before heading to the WAK house to cook Japanese cuisine with ingredients bought at the market. This programme lasts for four hours. Others include lessons on the art of wearing kimonos, Japanese archery and taiko drumming.

### More tax-free shopping

Japan is trying to improve its appeal as a shopping destination with better duty-free policy.

Individuals can now buy consumable products with a total purchase of more than Y5,000 (US\$43)

but less than Y500,000 in one duty-free shop on the same day, not just non-consumable goods worth more than Y10,000, which was previously the case.

While general items like jewellery, handicraft and clothing qualify for a tax-free status when taken out of Japan within six months (counted since the visitor enters the country), consumable goods are eligible for the facility within 30 days of purchase.

There will also be many more duty-free shops opening in Japan and not just in the major cities.

Data provided by Japan Travel Agency shows goods purchased by foreign visitors last year accounted for one-third of total purchases. Japan's top five markets spent large amounts on consumable products like food, drinks and liquors, mostly of local specialties.

### Interact with Japan's woman divers

The Ise-Shima area in Mie Prefecture is famous for seafood harvested by woman divers called *ama*. There are about 2,000 woman divers in Japan, about half of them in the Ise-Shima area.

The Kaitoh-Yumin Club takes small groups of travellers (maximum seven people per group) to watch the *ama* diving for seafood without any diving equipment like oxygen tank. Visit the Amagoya, a special hut for the divers to rest and have snacks. Travellers can join them and listen to their interesting experiences while seafood is grilled right in front of them.

Also, visit the Ishigamisan shrine. People believe that when women pray here, their dreams will come true.

**Clockwise from top left** Pokémon adventure at Peninsula Tokyo; shopping in Omotesando Hills and Nishiki market

# Grand party week



**Above** A *Lady In the Moon* performance during Singapore Grand Prix 2014

Not only do Singapore's roads come roaring alive during F1 as adrenaline-charged cars blaze through the brightly lit streets and no fines are imposed, the whole city becomes extra glamorous.

**Paige Lee Pei Qi** checks out the parties

**T**his year saw more than 250,000 visitors at the Marina Bay Street Circuit over the three-day sold-out Singapore Grand Prix weekend. To F1 enthusiasts, the night street race was of course the highlight; however, world-class entertainment acts – this year included Jennifer Lopez, John Legend and Robbie Williams – helped the city clock in more than S\$150 million (US\$116 million) in tourism receipts, according to figures from the Singapore Tourism

# Weekend

Both images: Singapore Grand Prix via Action Images



Board (STB).

Every year in September, Singapore is high on the list of luxury travellers as the city becomes jam-packed with unique activities stitched creatively by hoteliers, restaurateurs, retailers, etc, all eager to help those who are in a mood to party spend their wallets away.

High-rollers who bought Mandarin Oriental, Singapore's For the Thrill of Speed package, for instance, had the opportunity to experience a 60-minute car ride on a Lamborghini Gallardo Spyder or

a Ferrari F430 F1 Spider along Marina Bay's iconic attractions, said Andreas Kohn, the hotel's director of sales and marketing.

In addition, the hotel hosted an arts exhibition during the race weekend featuring renowned artist Armin Flossdorf, whose interest and close connection to motor-sports led him to painting F1 cars in action.

Not to be outdone, The Ritz-Carlton, Millenia Singapore, also located in the heart of the Marina Bay street circuit, introduced wine-paired dinners by three Michelin-star chef Quique Dacosta of the famed Denia restaurant in Spain, with guests enjoying the culinary extravaganza amid stunning aerial views of the illuminated race circuit.

Each year, Ritz-Carlton also hosts The Podium Lounge, otherwise known as the "ultimate A-list party for the racing community" at

**Above** Classic cars in Zone 4, Singapore Grand Prix 2014

the hotel's grand ballroom.

This year, the VIP guests – some 2,500 of them each night – stood in awe as the automotive masterpiece Lamborghini Huracán LP 610-4 was unveiled. The Podium Lounge also partnered with Vitisasia, Asia's premier wine and gastronomy experience provider, to launch the inaugural 3 Michelin Star Race Dinner Series over the Grand Prix Weekend' this year.

Steve Yallop, executive director, The Podium Lounge, only has one aim: to bring guests "into the realm where breathtaking motorsport and refined luxury meet".

He said: "We work exclusively with luxury brands on creating striking showcases, such as the launch of the new Lamborghini Huracán and the iconic Dom Pérignon island bar this year. We leverage the excitement (F1) brings, the flair, the wealth and of course the visitors to the region."



**Businesses have seen the Grand Prix as a great opportunity to collaborate and innovate, many of which have come forth with new or enhanced offerings that have translated to substantial commercial benefits.**

Jean Ng, director, sports, STB



Meanwhile, another Grand Prix Weekend elite party destination is The Amber Lounge Singapore at the Marina Bay Street Circuit, which offers guests the chance to go straight from paddock to party. It features a non-stop nightlife experience that includes the famed Amber Lounge Fashion Show featuring F1 drivers and celebrities on the runway.

This year, the show saw couture gowns designed exclusively for Amber Lounge by famed Singapore designer Francis Cheong, who took inspiration from Charles James' costume exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Arts.

Highlighting how her clients from countries like Australia, Germany and the UK are leveraging F1 to visit Singapore, East West Planners CEO, Janet Tan-Collis, said: "Apart from the race, these periphery activities, entertainment, food, live concerts and on-going parties are what keep them entertained in the three- to four-day programme."

Added Jean Ng, director, sports, STB: "Complementing the race experience is an all-encompassing season of lifestyle events that include dining, retail and entertainment. With its specially curated experiences, (F1) has significantly contributed to showcasing our destination's vibrant lifestyle options.

"Businesses have seen the Grand Prix as a great opportunity to collaborate and innovate, many of which have come forth with new

or enhanced offerings that have translated to substantial commercial benefits."

Despite "very high" hotel prices during this season, high-end lifestyle travel consultant John B Sutherland said hotel rooms are snapped up very quickly.

According to TripAdvisor's TripIndex Racing, Singapore ranks as the seventh most costly destination to watch an F1 Grand Prix race.

However hotels near the track side and those on the fringe were looking at almost full occupancy during the race weekend this year.

Room rates at the Ritz-Carlton rose about five per cent over last year, and the majority of its premium rooms – which start at S\$1,430 a night – was taken up this year, according to director of sales and marketing, Courtenay Dundy.

Likewise, Mandarin Oriental's Kohn said: "We have always seen healthy and encouraging occupancy figures during this F1 period throughout the years."

Even as the race concludes its seventh instalment this year, enthusiasm for this glamorous event does not look set to diminish any time soon.

In 2012, Singapore inked a second five-year agreement for the race, which indicates that this event will continue to rev up the citystate annually at least until 2017.

Next year's race will be held September 18-20.

## Five luxé products

### Gordon Ramsay debuts at Marina Bay Sands

Renowned British chef Gordon Ramsay has unveiled plans to launch his Bread Street Kitchen concept at The Shoppes at Marina Bay Sands in March. With an industrial warehouse-style design, the new restaurant and bar will be modelled on the Bread Street Kitchen outlet in London and will serve a British-European menu.

Ramsay said: "The further expansion into Asia is an exciting move for us and will see our successful London concepts being transferred and tailored to this new market."



## Gastro-botanica

Occupying the adorable black-and-white bungalow at the Singapore Botanic Gardens, new French restaurant Corner House promises to delight palates with an imaginative “gastro-botanica” menu.

Co-owned by Jason Tan, former Sky On 57’s executive chef, and Wine Culture’s Renny Heng, Corner House prides itself on using seasonal produce and giving prominence to vegetables.

The menu exudes a style that goes in tandem with the restaurant’s setting, and also pays homage to EJH Corner House’s original resident – the late botanist and mycologist Edred John Henry Corner.

Email: [enquiries@cornerhouse.com.sg](mailto:enquiries@cornerhouse.com.sg)

## Villa Samadhi to open

Hospitality group Samadhi is gearing up for the opening of Villa

Samadhi in Singapore at the end of 2014.

Located in Labrador Nature Reserve, Villa Samadhi Singapore is an ultra-boutique resort converted from a restored colonial residence.

It offers 20 “chambers” that look out to views of trees and wildlife. Guests can expect amenities such as private plunge pools, Wi-Fi connectivity, iPod docks and rustic wooden furniture set against blue and white china décor. The resort will feature a library, a bar equipped with a pool table, and the signature Tamarind Hill restaurant.

## Bejewelled cable cars

Enjoy a star-studded night literally from Mount Faber’s bejewelled cable cars. Connecting Mount Faber and Sentosa Island, the LED-illuminated, shimmering metallic black and chrome cabins are encrusted in Swarovski crystals.

The cabins feature crystal panel glass floors by Swarovski, large black leather upholstered chairs with arm rests covered with glittering black crystals by Swarovski elements, and roof illumination via crystal panels also by Swarovski. Offering magnificent 360° views of the Singapore city, harbour, sea and Sentosa island, these star-studded cabins each seats four guests.

## Roberto Cavalli flagship opens at MBS

Known for dressing Hollywood stars such as Beyoncé Knowles, Charlize Theron and Sharon Stone, Italian fashion label Roberto Cavalli has opened its flagship store at The Shoppes at Marina Bay Sands. Spanning 153m<sup>2</sup>, the boutique features the brand’s full range of men’s and women’s ready-to-wear, accessories, bags and shoes, beginning with the Fall/Winter 2014-2015 collection.

**Below**  
French Royale Oyster, Corner House; Roberto Cavalli





# *Rich sources*

As the wellness market keeps growing, spas in Asia are upping the ante to deliver richer pampering that money can buy, making wellness a natural premium sell for luxury buyers, writes **Xinyi Liang-Pholsena**

**Wellness tourism** is now worth US\$438.6 billion within a US\$3.2 trillion global tourism industry, and is projected to outpace the expansion rate of the tourism industry with a 9.1 per cent growth expected between 2013 and 2017, according to Les Roches International School of Hotel Management.

As globalisation opens doors to the different wellness philosophies around the world, and as wellness becomes a necessity rather than luxury, Asia is becoming a hotbed of wellness treatments and premium spas, all of which are out to court ever more discerning customers in a quest for well-being.

While traditional stars like Thailand and Bali have already earned a reputation as established spa destinations, relatively newer countries such as China, India, Vietnam and Cambodia are joining in the game. The Middle Kingdom, in particular, is seeing rapid development in the wellness sector, its culture-inspired treatments gaining popularity both inside and outside the country.



Creative design, innovative ways to deliver services, spa menus that pander to consumer desires and a shift towards wellness and preventive health are various trends that spa entities, old and new alike, are now adopting to magnetise customers.

The new Rimba Jimbaran Bali, for example, consciously moves away from traditional Balinese design and treatment, while retaining the standards and delivery of the spa experience accorded at sister property Ayana Resort and Spa, a 22,000m<sup>2</sup> wellbeing centre. Set within Ayana's 90ha cliff-top gardens, the new six-room Rimba Rooftop Spa commissioned Thailand's leading interior design consultancy, P49 Deesign, to create a modern, luxurious haven of tranquility, maximising the natural environment and magnificent rooftop views across Rimba's gardens, multi-layered pools and out to the ocean.

It also strives to offer treatments that are not available anywhere else in Bali, said Michi Sonoda, the resort's director of spa and retail. One of its unique treatments is the ultra-lavish Spa on the Rocks which uses La Mer products infused with diamond dust and pearl extract.

Another, the Exotiq Bamboo Massage, uses bamboo tools to knead muscles and relieve tension, while its 7 Chakra Dhara rebalances the guest's chakras with

a unique tuning fork ritual after an aromatherapy massage.

Other new entrants are supplementing their spa menus with cutting-edge brands. Ayurah Wellness Centre, part of Aleenta Phuket-Phang Nga's recent 100 million baht (US\$3 million) renovation, will be home to Thailand's only Linda Meredith range of skincare products and therapies, a UK beauty brand that counts such Hollywood celebrities and models as Madonna, Kate Moss and Jude Law among its regulars.

Anchalika Kijkanakorn, founder and managing director of Aleenta Phuket-Phang Nga's Bangkok-based parent company Akaryn Hospitality Management Services (AHMS), said: "To stay ahead of the competition, we tend to look inwards and not outwards. We look at what others are not doing, and what is missing is 'total wellness'. Once we have covered all the standards (i.e. treatments and products), it's all the things that others don't have that make us stand apart."

Anchalika plans to roll out Ayurah Wellness centres – and Linda Meredith products – at other AHMS properties, starting with Aleenta Hua Hin-Pranburi and Akaryn Samui Resort & Spa, followed by the 2015 debut of Akaryn Koh Krabeay Retreat & Spa, a

Creative design (left, Rimba Rooftop Spa) and total wellness (below Aleenta Phuket Resort) are but two of many ways spas are using to enchant clients





private island destination that will feature advanced anti-ageing methodologies.

With the proliferation of new spas, little wonder why established players in the region are pulling out all the stops to retain and expand their market share.

“Spa experiences, including yoga or some kind of fitness-related activity, are an integral part of the luxury hotel experience. It has become an expectation and people are definitely spending on spa services,” said Como Shambhala Group operations director, Monica Barter.

“We constantly look at offering services and healing modalities that are authentic... Asia is rich in traditional methods of healing; bringing them to our spas and keeping the authenticity and efficacy of the treatments are what we do well.”

Veteran player Six Senses Spas, meanwhile, pushes the envelope by leveraging wellness experts and practitioners ranging from Ayurvedic doctors and osteopaths to spiritual healers and aura readers.

Said Anna Bjurstam, vice president of Six Senses Spas: “We have the world’s largest visiting practitioner programme; we are the only group that has consistent yoga teachers and programmes across (our) spa and wellness centres; we are probably the spa (brand) that has the most in-depth experience and expertise in various local healing modalities around the world that we use at a great extent.”

The Farm at San Benito, a retreat specialising in fusing holistic treatments with integrated medical services in the Philippines, draws upon its rich bounty of organic herbs and vegetables grown on-site.

“In those days (90s), a Thai massage was the



**Spa experiences, including yoga or some kind of fitness-related activity, are an integral part of the luxury hotel experience.**

Monica Barter, operations director, Como Shambhala Group

**Above**  
Como Shambhala water garden

epitome of a spa treatment and Thai food was considered health food,” opined Michael Di Lonardo, general manager at The Farm at San Benito. Today, “juicing and organic food” has grown in tandem with the movement to eat more healthily, he said.

“The Farm is focusing on nurturing our gut flora (also known as gut microbiota) through healthy plant-based diet grown in healthy soil, and the addition of fermented foods to the menu,” he said.

“It’s important to begin at the base level to achieve and maintain a healthy body. I also work with our guests for them to take ownership of their own health choices.”

Shangri-La Hotel Bangkok’s Chi, The Spa, the chain’s first signature spa brand launched in July 2004, is staying sharp after a decade in the business by embracing its Thai roots and a strong sense of place, according to the property’s spa manager, Walaiporn Moonsri.

“We are more focused on local products and creating a unique sense of place, for example, two unique scents – jasmine and lemongrass – for Bangkok, whereas we have the Lanna blend for Chiang Mai,” she shared.

Delivering a first-class spa treatment is not merely about offering innovative therapies or catching on to the latest health fads; more importantly, it is about “knowing your market”, especially as more Asian are opting for spa and wellness programmes on vacations, added Walaiporn.

“We’re seeing more mainland Chinese and Asian guests now, so we have created different menus to address different nationalities’ preferences. For example, the Chinese prefer Thai traditional and herbal press treatments; Japanese love heated treatments and facials and healing hot stones; and Westerners prefer relaxing aromatherapy treatments. On the other hand, the Middle East market prefers oil massage, but not treatments like facial or hot stones,” Walaiporn said.

A changing clientele mix also translates to programme adjustments.

“The Chinese prefer shorter treatments of 1.5 hour or so, as they don’t want to spend a whole day at the spa, as opposed to Western clients who would opt for two to 2.5-hour of head-to-toe treatments with a lot of rituals to even half-day treatments. We have hence rolled out shorter treatments like 30 minutes of foot, back and facial massage,” she said.

# Chinese: wealthy and well

By **Gracia Chiang**

A pioneer of outbound medical tourism in China, L'Avion International Travel Service has witnessed changes in how his wealthy clients are booking wellness holidays.

"When we first started in 2006, we were focused on selling anti-ageing tours. However, we have since widened our product offerings to cater to evolving demand, adding body check-ups, health treatments, destress/relaxation holidays and aesthetic surgery, in that order," said vice president, Roberto Qi.

So popular are his services that he has 2,500 members (those who have travelled with his company before), and now counts among his regulars, entrepreneurs, CEOs of MNCs and even politicians. Out of these, about 400 travel annually.

They are not so much fussed about pricing as they are about which destination and facility offer the best-in-class medical expertise, observed Qi. And when it comes to travel preferences, clients demand immersive itineraries and unique hotels.

"For anti-ageing, we take them to Switzerland and Germany; for medical treatments, the US; for check-ups, Japan, Singapore and the US; for youth and beauty, South Korea and Europe; and for spas we work with Healing Hotels of the World and renowned brands like Como Shambhala and Chiva-Som," he revealed.

Trips combine a leisure component, and are usually between seven and 10 days long, costing anywhere from US\$30,000 to US\$400,000.

Backing up this trend, Lausanne-based Swiss Health Centre opera-



tion manager, Yulan Sheng, said the wellness facility sees five to six Chinese clients a month, who mainly come for its anti-ageing cell therapy and health check-ups. Its four-day package costs about 32,000 euros (US\$43,533).

"We think more will be interested as Switzerland is very famous for healthcare, while China doesn't have technology (that's as advanced) yet. We're aiming for about 10 clients a month."

Medical tourism is definitely on the rise, said Hurun Report's chairman and chief researcher, Rupert

Hoogewerf.

According to a study it conducted among Chinese 'super tourists', defined as experienced travellers who have been to 40 countries or more, 47 per cent of 203 respondents went to Europe and the US for medical tourism, with Switzerland most popular, then the US. Within Asia, Japan and Hong Kong are first and second respectively.

Convalescence ranked first as the main purpose, followed by medical check-ups, anti-ageing, cosmetic, medical treatment and childbirth.

**Above**  
Tschuggen  
Bergoase by  
Mario Botta in  
Arosa, Switzer-  
land, which is  
drawing Chinese  
clients



Check-in

## Chi, The Spa at Shangri-La Bangkok



By Xinyi Liang-Pholsena

**LOCATION** Shangri-La Hotel Bangkok was where Shangri-La Hotels & Resorts debuted its Chi, The Spa,

in 2004 and, to mark the 10<sup>th</sup> year milestone, changes have been made to the Bangkok facility, which now has a new reception on the ground floor of the Krungthep Wing, facing the pool and Chao Phraya River. Despite the towering buildings

on the opposite bank and constant barrage of boats plying the river, the spot is a calm enclave, with lush greenery and water features.

**AMBIENCE** Stepping into the reception area, I was immediately charmed by a classic Thai lady with an enigmatic smile (actually a stunning piece of mosaic mural art), which set the tone for the experience to come – soothing, calm and a tad mysterious.

Flowing water and soft music chimed in the background, as a staff led me through the interiors

kitted out in soothing earthy tones of browns, reds and oranges, with ample use of candle-accented mood lighting and warm wood, to my treatment room on the second floor.

**TREATMENT** After filling out a brief health questionnaire and imbibing a cup of warm jasmine tea, I was greeted by my therapist, Tuck, who immediately put me at ease with her friendly smile and gentle demeanour. My treatment would take place in the Nalu suite, an exclusive and spacious room.

After I had changed into spa wear, Tuck began a traditional foot bath, soothing and cleansing my tired feet with warm water and aromatic jasmine oils. It was such a pampering introduction!

We then proceeded to the massage table. I had opted for the Jasmine Retreat package, a combination of Chi Balance, a full-body massage using acupressure techniques, and Chi Facial. This package, according to spa manager Walaiporn Moonsri, is a popular option among ladies.

When Tuck worked her way on my stiff back – the result of many

hours hunched over a laptop – it felt like tight knots unbridling and soft sands falling off my body as her skillful strokes glided across. At one point, the massage became so soothing that I started to ease into slumber land.

The heavenly massage was just the halfway mark of the two-hour session. Next, I indulged in a rejuvenating facial that leveraged pure aromatic herbs and oils to hydrate the skin and enhance its natural radiance. The liberal use of citrus was a delight for me, as I soaked in citrus-induced euphoria under a face mask for the next hour.

Throughout the therapy, it was hard for me to fathom that I was still in the heart of the Thai capital as the “spa within a spa” experience really worked to its best effect. And the entire treatment was wrapped up with a warm cup of spicy ginger tea.

**SERVICE** The staff were warm and welcoming, all with a single devotion to making my visit as enjoyable as possible. Tuck also checked various times throughout the session if her pressure was adequate and whether I felt comfortable, which I found attentive without being overbearing.

**VERDICT** One of the most invigorating two hours I have enjoyed in a frenetic Bangkok for a long, long time. While there is no shortage of massages at cheaper price points in the city, Chi, The Spa clearly takes its energy flow seriously and endeavours to restore inner calm and *qi* to guests. Such hospitable professionalism, discreet service and relaxing ambience combine to make a compelling, therapeutic experience.

**Name** Chi, The Spa at Shangri-La Hotel, Bangkok  
**No. of suites** 11  
**Address** Shangri-La Hotel, Bangkok, 89 Soi Wat Suan Plu, New Road, Bangkok  
**Contact**  
 Tel: (66-2) 236-777 ext. 6072;  
 Email: chi.bangkok@shangri-la.com  
**Opening hours** 10.00–22.00

## The Spa at Trisara, Phuket



Above Trisara, Phuket

By Raini Hamdi

**LOCATION** At Trisara, a hide-away resort on Phuket's northwest coastline, where the best sunsets and clearest waters of the island are found.

**AMBIENCE** Like the whole resort, the spa is enveloped in a tropical forest and exotic gardens. My treatment begins even before reaching the spa, just by walking to it from

my ocean-facing pool villa, along a neat, private pathway lined with a variety of well-tended plants and palm trees on both sides. Trisara means 'the third garden in heaven' in Sanskrit – I do feel I'm in a heavenly garden. For someone who feels at home the most among greenery, this is the ultimate luxury.

The spa reception is a Thai pavilion that boasts a commanding view of more nature, ie, the surrounding forest and the ocean yonder. I like the friendly yet not overly fussy welcome: a refreshing hibiscus drink, a six-point health

questionnaire, a decision regarding the choice of oil for the massage and off I go with my therapist to my treatment suite. This too overlooks the ocean and is air-conditioned at just the right temperature.

**TREATMENT** As I have been working hard and have been under some stress lately, the signature Royal Trisara six-hand 90-minute massage, which the spa brochure described as unique in Thailand, suddenly looks irresistible even to a none too hedonistic creature like me. It will be performed by three spa therapists, who will deploy a strategic combination of traditional Thai, Swedish and acupressure techniques on my whole body. My partner, who is a spa-skeptic, laughs, saying there is not enough body (I'm all of 45kg) for six hands to work on. I roll my eyes at him, climb onto the spa bed and get ready for the treatment.

I close my eyes and start to concentrate on where the hands are. I feel two firm hands massaging the top of my back and – are those two or four hands working on my legs? I just have to lift my head to find out and, indeed, there are two therapists

working a leg each, yet, amazingly, their synchronisation and the consistency of their massage (the same firm pressure, the same points being pressed, etc) make it seem as though there are just two additional hands around.

What an incredible feeling, even more wonderful when the therapists start applying Thai herbal hot compresses on my body and start rolling and pressing these compresses in all the right spots. I can actually feel my stress melting away. After this comes the combination of Thai and Swedish massage using the tangerine aromatherapy oil that I picked. The whole process is repeated on the frontal side. When all is done, I feel warm organic coconut oil being poured on my forehead then gently massaged into my scalp and neck.

I acknowledged to myself there and then that this is the best spa treatment I ever had. Prior to this, the reigning queen for me was the hot stone massage at Chi, The Shangri-La Bangkok, which I had when the facility opened 10 years ago. Whoever concocted this six-hand treatment is a genius and has brought something different to the spa menu. The cost, 12,900 baht (US\$394), for 90 minutes of this sheer luxury, is for me well worth the time and money.

**SERVICE** As in the rest of the resort, the staff are extremely courteous. They all seem to follow one mantra: Pamper thy guest. Extra kudos for my three Thai therapists for their skills and real care, because I believe it is only with heart that one can get a spa treatment that wows.

**VERDICT** Simply sensational – the best spa treatment I ever had.

**Name** Trisara Spa  
**No. of treatment suites** 6  
**Address** 60/1 Moo.6, Srisoonthorn Road, Cherngtalay, Thalang, Phuket 83110, Thailand  
**Contact**  
Tel: (66-76) 310-100  
Email: sales@trisara.com  
www.trisara.com  
**Opening hours** 10.00–20.00

# COMO man

By Raini Hamdi

**People associate COMO Hotels & Resorts with its founder Christina Ong – ‘the preeminent style icon of Singapore’, ‘Queen of Bond Street’, etc. What are the advantages and disadvantages of a personality-led brand?**

We are very fortunate to have a fantastic, intelligent and knowledgeable lady who runs all this – Mrs Ong – who really is the pillar behind COMO. She is very hands-on. She’s not just ‘personality’ but substance. She knows design and interior. She never wants to be a cookie-cutter and everything must fit in with the environment and the locality. I thought I’m very detailed; she is even more so. I sleep like a baby, it seems she does not sleep at all (laughs).

**How do you complement her?**

By being quiet and listening, and finding the right time to discuss things. I’ve known the Ongs since 1983 when I was general manager of the Four Seasons in Montreal which Mr Ong (Beng Seng) owned.

As COO, I focus on the operation (of COMO properties) and we have been growing. We’ve just added three new hotels: Metropolitan in Miami, Point Yamu in Phuket and Maalifushi in the Maldives. Right now, we’re fine-tuning the new properties to ensure we get them absolutely right.

At the same time, we always spend millions to keep our product in shape and to constantly evolve with new trends. For example, we are looking at enhancements to the public areas at the Metropolitan in Bangkok.

**Do you see COMO growing by**

**leaps and bounds?**

When people ask, What is the way forward, what is the future plan?, I’m always reminded of Isadore Sharp (Four Seasons & Resorts’ founder and chairman) whom I also worked for (before COMO). He would say, I don’t have a future plan – when something comes up and it fits, we go get it. Here, at COMO, it is even more so.

**How do you cope with an ‘I don’t know’ answer when your GMs want to know about the future?**

They learn that’s the way it is, that we have periods when nothing is popping up, then suddenly we have two or three – like the three new properties we have – all coming together at the same time.

**I guess it takes a certain kind of people to work at COMO?**

Yes, I’d say, hardworking, passionate, versatile and creative people.

When I came into COMO, it was from Four Seasons, which was a

very structured company. I also had to learn to adapt to Asia – the labour laws, the different cultures, etc – and to working closely with Mrs Ong – understanding her style, thinking and philosophy. I’m comfortable now and – (laughs) she hasn’t fired me yet!

His sweet, gentle, humble and conservative demeanour belies the nerve to work with the fashionable Christina Ong as COO of her COMO Hotels & Resorts. Kuno Fasel takes us inside the luxury hotel group



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