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38 *FIT for the alps*

10 *The new glamorous*



December 2015

- 04 luxury market report japan
- 06 luxury market report china
- 08 luxury market report india
- 10 focus luxury products
- 14 focus luxury shopping
- 16 guide independent hotels
- 19 destination australia
- 22 destination macau
- 24 destination japan
- 28 destination china
- 32 destination malaysia
- 35 longhaul italy
- 38 longhaul switzerland
- 43 luxury people filip boyen
- 44 gasp! the audacity of luxury

14 *Smooth operators*



44 *Gasp!*

22 *More novelties from new hotels*



16 *Single and loving it*



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Raini in Venice

As we go to print, international tourist arrivals were up four per cent to 810 million in the first eight months of 2015, compared with the same period in 2014, with Europe as the star of the year.

Going by UNWTO figures, Europe is the world's most visited region with a five per cent increase in arrivals compared with four per cent for Asia-Pacific, the Americas and the Middle East, while Africa looks set to decline five per cent.

I myself had a glorious summer in Switzerland and Italy this year. And if there's one clear message I got from my own holidays in Europe, it is that

Asian travellers are a force to reckon with. Everywhere I went, from the promenade of Riva degli Schiavoni in Venice, to Kleine Scheidegg above Grindelwald in Switzerland, there were swarms of Asian tourists of different nationalities.

But while these are Asians with high disposable incomes, the luxury market is particularly aware of the existence of another stratum – the higher-yielding Asian FIT traveller which is multiplying faster than rabbits. As our reports in this issue show, luxury operators and suppliers are pulling all the stops to meet the new aspirations of these travellers, who are not content anymore with places full of other tourists. They seek instead the privilege of exclusive places and experiences.

This is human nature. Nothing has changed. And the world of luxury travel is all the better because of it.

On that note, have a swanky 2016.

Raini Hamdi, Senior Editor

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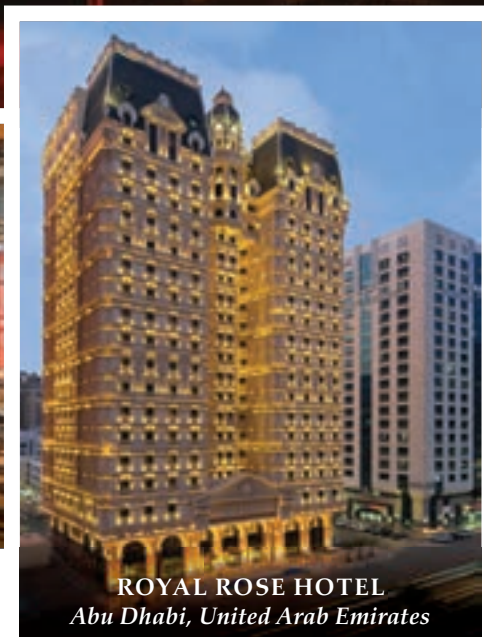
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# Ultra sophisticated travellers

Japanese high flyers have not shrunk in numbers – or in their expectations of the best service money can buy, reports **Julian Ryall**



**They fly** first class, stay at hotels with a minimum of five stars and dine at the swishest restaurants. Japanese travellers at the luxury end of the market do expect to have their every whim catered to – so much so that for some, the destination is less important than the experience.

“At the very top end, they do not really care about the destination, just as long as they get the service they are paying for,” said Tomofusa Sato, assistant manager-planning and purchasing division, JTB World Vacations.

“They are happy to pay any price, but it must come with guaranteed service, and they come to us to arrange a package like that because it can be difficult to arrange that sort of programme by themselves,” Sato told *TTG Asia Luxury*.

The Caribbean is currently ap-

“

**At the very top end, they do not really care about the destination, just as long as they get the service they are paying for.**

Tomofusa Sato, assistant manager, planning and purchasing division, JTB World Vacations

pealing, as is Cancun in Mexico and Peru as a once-in-a-lifetime journey to see Machu Picchu and the Nazca Lines, said Sato.

But wealthy travellers often turn their noses up at destinations in North America that cannot be reached by a direct flight from Japan. The problem, he pointed out, is that they do not like to take internal flights that do not have first class. For destinations such as Las Vegas, that can prove to be a deal-breaker.

As with all Japanese travel companies, the high-flyers only account for a small percentage of their overall business, but that figure has remained constant and firm in recent years, despite Japan’s well-publicised economic problems of late.

The financial worries that keep other Japanese firms awake at night do not apply to this sector of the

market, the majority of whom are wealthy business owners or professionals such as doctors or lawyers. Retired couples also account for a sizable percentage of the market, with time on their hands, the mortgage paid off and the children flown the nest.

They are also getting a lot more adventurous in the destinations that they are choosing – at least those who do care about where they go as much as the service they enjoy.

“These are people who have already been to Paris and London, so they want to go somewhere new and distant, as long as they know the service, the accommodation and the food are going to be top quality,” said Kazuo Yoshinari, manager of the Tokyo office for NOE Corp.

Places like Argentina and Patagonia are beginning to ap-



**Above** Japanese travellers are willing to part with serious money for quality

## The Japanese high-end traveller...

- ❖ having been to Paris and London, wants somewhere new and distant
- ❖ wants good service and exclusivity
- ❖ in general flies only first class, which rules out some exotic destinations

pear on wealthy travellers' radar, he said, even though there are no direct flights to those destinations from Japan to South America. Instead, they opt to fly first class to a major US city, then take another first class flight onwards.

Yoshinari has also noticed an increase in interest in the Basque region of northern Spain among big-spending Japanese, as well as in the cultural attractions of Eastern European nations such as Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland.

All Nippon Airways (ANA) operates a Diamond Service and Platinum Service for frequent flyers that include an array of perks, including regularly receiving tour brochures of the most far-flung – and expensive – destinations.

"Our passengers really like to go to exotic destinations, like Tanzania, the Galapagos Islands and the Amazon," said Shoji Komoda, head

of international tour planning and operations department for ANA Sales Co. "Also, we are seeing small, chartered cruises becoming quite famous among our clients, with groups of around 10 people going together.

"Our consumers pay on average 1.2 million yen (US\$9,787) per person for a trip that will last around nine days," he said.

"Good service and exclusivity are very important," Komoda said. "These customers need high added value and something that makes the holiday and the service different to anything that is being offered by other travel agents."

But Makoto Iida, regional manager for Cox & Kings Japan, said local companies providing high-end outbound holidays might find it more difficult to secure accommodation in the best hotels because of the average length of a Japanese

tourist's vacation.

"They just don't stay for long enough, in comparison with wealthy travellers from Europe, for example, so the top hotels are going to want to take business from people who are going to stay at least 10 days or two weeks," he said.

Cox & Kings is busy with Japanese wanting to visit Dubai, where the attraction is often exclusive hotels that have six or more stars which know how to lavish extravagance on their guests.

"A lot of Japanese people still think about Hawaii when they picture luxury," he said. "Singapore is also trying very hard to capture more of the high-end market. And Hong Kong and Macau have their (appeal) for a certain part of our high-spending clientele."



## Once bitten, forever travel

A weaker economy may tighten the Chinese purse strings for Prada, but not for the

Poles. By **Mimi Hudoyo**

**Despite slower** economic growth in China, the general consensus is travel remains the biggest discretionary income expenditure for mainland consumers.

And the wealthier ones are just becoming more flamboyant by the day, hankering for new experiences and scoffing at run-of-the-mill destinations.

The North and South Poles, for example, were “hot” destinations for Chinese upmarket travellers

last year, according to *The Chinese Luxury Traveller 2015* report conducted by Hurun and ILTM Asia.

Thirty-two per cent of 291 Chinese super travellers surveyed said they went to the Poles last year.

Super travellers were those who spent US\$30,000 and above on travel last year. They comprised 65 per cent of all China outbound travellers, according to Hurun and ILTM Asia.

The average spending per person

of China outbound travellers last year was US\$22,580. Per family, it's US\$58,000, an increase of 5.5 per cent over 2013.

Their length of travel days also rose to 20 last year, from 18 in 2013.

Florian Piper, senior international sales manager of Oceanwide Expeditions, did see a slowdown in bookings this year compared to last year, which he said could be due to the softer economic situation in China; however, the China luxury travel market remained important to Oceanwide Expeditions, he said.

Piper also confirmed that the Chinese travellers simply had become “very active”.

“In the past, they visited exotic places only for sightseeing and photography. Now these travellers want activities,” he said.

This fits well with Oceanwide Expeditions' offerings. It owns and operates expedition vessels to places full of nature and wildlife. “We take travellers to the remote polar region, where no other means of transportation can reach. If the nature in Antarctica stops us from going farther, we operate via helicopter,

**Above** Chinese super travellers on Oceanwide Expeditions  
**Right** Chinese travellers in Venice



for example. We fly people beyond the ice barrier to see, say, emperor penguins.”

With the ship acting as base camp, activities include guided shore excursions, field camping, ski trekking and diving.

Piper said just to be on the safe side, he would check with Chinese operators if their clients could handle some of the activities, which were quite strenuous.

“They convinced me they were serious, and they were!” he said.

Shaun Rein, founder and managing director of China Market Research Group, echoed similar sentiments of the changing habits of Chinese travellers. Speaking at this year’s ILTM Asia opening forum, Rein said: “They are spending more on experiences and are looking to travel to new and more exotic destinations.

“Destinations like the Antarctica, South Africa and Canada are ‘hot’ as it allows consumers to get back to nature and share those experiences on WeChat.”

He also said Chinese travellers were moving away from buying the same luxury products as everyone else, to brands that reflect their individualism and creativity.

“Over the past five years, the Chinese consumer...rushed to buy Louis Vuitton and other luxury items to show they belonged to the elite group.

“This is changing...Blink is out, experiences are in, especially in international travel,” he said.

Jean-Luc Lai-Lam, regional manager Asia and Australasia of Seychelles Tourism Board, observed:“(Chinese) travellers are more into activities. They want to learn about the destination. They visit different islands to learn about the history and culture. Some bird lovers visit the Bird Island, too,” he said.

However, this does not mean they aren’t interested in shopping anymore.

## The Chinese upmarket traveller...

- ❖ is no longer passive
- ❖ seeks experiences and new locations
- ❖ buys luxury products that reflect their individualism

But even that has changed. Jace Tyrell, deputy chief executive of London’s Bond Street which represents more than 600 businesses in Oxford, Regent and Bond Street, said: “Our Chinese guests are looking for more than just shopping – they are looking for an experience.”

This was a reason why Bond Street has launched Bond Street by Appointment – travel itineraries curated individually according to travellers’ interests (see *Luxury Shopping* section).

According to a study by Global Blue, Bond Street was the centre of interest for Chinese shoppers in London’s West End. China represented 23 per cent of total international spending on the street in 2014, according to Tyrell.

Meanwhile, Forrest Lynn, founder and president of DIADEMA, which claims to be the first China travel company offering high-end tailormade products, described the super travellers today as having two Cs: Cash and Care.

“They do not only have Cash to

buy anything, they also Care about nature and cultures and want to experience them.

“As such, the so-called personalised service is becoming even more personalised for the luxury travel operators.

“As travel consultants catering for these super rich people, therefore, we can no longer view the market from just the cash point of view (selling expensive products). We need to care about the travellers’ needs, specifically care enough to give them unforgettable experiences,” he said.

The increasing demand for special interest tours was the reason behind the opening of Utour last year, according to its general manager Yu Hui.

She said Chinese travellers liked to travel together with friends who have the same interests. Therefore, the company has created modules and special interest itineraries covering self-drive, golf, medical tourism and cultural tours, to suit each group’s personal interests.

“

**They do not only have Cash to buy anything, they also Care about nature and cultures and want to experience them.**

Forrest Lynn, founder and president, DIADEMA

Raimi Hamdi



# Growing in all sense of the word



The Indian luxury travel market continues to expand, its consumers showing maturity with their travel pickings. By **Mimi Hudoyo**

“

**In the past, travellers would follow the suggestions of travel consultants. Their choice of accommodation would be limited to well-known brands like Hyatt or Hilton.**

Mohit Saigal, general manager, Travel With Us, New Delhi

**Not only is the Indian** luxury market growing significantly in numbers, it is also maturing.

More travellers are going to travel consultants with a specific idea of where they want to go and what they want to do. This is in no small measure thanks to information technology.

Travel planners *TTG Asia Luxury* spoke to at this year's ILTM Asia said while family travel was strong, it was the wedding and honeymoon market that was their darling.

They also saw the growth of single travellers, especially those taking adventure trips.

Mohit Saigal, general manager of Travel With Us (TWU), New Delhi, said: "In the past, travellers would follow the suggestions of travel consultants. Their choice of accommodation would be limited to the well-known brands like Hyatt or Hilton.

"Today this has changed. People are more educated, have money to spend and are well-informed.

"People are ready to do a multi-million dollar wedding and can spend between 20 and 25 days on a honeymoon, compared with five to 10 days in the past."

For such trips, the spending is a whopping US\$20,000 to US\$25,000 per trip.

Amit Chawla, director of OH Travel Experiences, New Delhi, said: "We find more young couples going away for honeymoons, exploring new destinations.

"Not only do we see a pick-up in demand to places like Australia and New Zealand, we have received enquiries on South America, Chile and Peru."

He added: "I would not say these are (hot) destinations at the moment but people are starting to be aware of them, thanks to information technology. The young couples are

tech-savvy. They go online, look at destinations and get information, then they tell us where they want to go."

Chawla said travellers sometimes were so determined about their choices they would not buy the travel consultant's suggested places.

"They tell us everything they want and just ask us to create the itinerary and prepare everything. They are ready to pay the price without bargaining," he said.

Amit Pradhan, senior manager special product of Ottila International Mumbai, said: "The honeymooners are exploring islands. They do not mind spending money on their honeymoon.

"I had a client going to Australia for a 25-night cruise, including in the Pacific area," he said

Other popular destinations include Alaska, the Seychelles, Fiji, Bali and Koh Samui.



**Above** Indian luxury travellers in Switzerland

The Seychelles in particular has seen growth since Air Seychelles started flying between Mumbai and Mahe last year.

Jean-Luc Lai-Lam, regional manager Asia & Australasia for Seychelles Tourism Board, said: "We have started penetrating the market and opened an office in India a couple of years ago.

"Air Seychelles opened direct (thrice-weekly) flights between Mumbai and Mahe in December 2014, and the pick-up in arrivals has been significant."

In his visit to India in August, James Michel, President of Republic of Seychelles, reportedly told the press that there was a record 125 per cent growth in Indian arrivals to Seychelles between January and July, compared with the same period of last year.

Lai-Lam said the Seychelles' representative office in India had even received a couple of enquiries

for weddings in Seychelles.

The high-end Indian travellers like to travel in style, according to Ottila's Pradhan. They stay in upper upscale properties, fly business or first class, and are chauffeur-driven in limousines.

"They like to arrive in style, stay in style and depart in style. Some travellers even take an airport transfer in a helicopter," Pradhan said.

He also observed that these travellers now do not want to be rushed. They can spend an entire day of doing something outside their hotel, then spending the next day staying

in, relaxing by the pool or having spa treatments.

But Lai-Lam said they don't just spend their time enjoying hotel facilities but have a real interest in culture and history and take tours that allow them to learn deeper about the destination.

The travellers are also getting more adventurous.

Chawla said Indian FIT travellers, honeymooners included, were more into doing things like self-drive in Australia and New Zealand, or safari tours in South Africa and Kenya.

He also noted they were more willing to try new experiences, including consuming local cuisines in the destination.

Meanwhile, Ottila is seeing the emergence of more single travellers nowadays.

"Such travellers usually take an adventure tour, either to Australia, New Zealand or interior Europe doing activities like cycling or hiking," Pradhan said.

The tour companies interviewed are expecting a growth of between 15 per cent and 20 per cent for this year and for the upward trend to continue in the coming years.

Saigal said: "I do believe that the Indian outbound luxury market will grow exponentially in the coming years."

Pradhan agreed, saying: "The sources are no longer coming just from the big cities but from the second-tier and even the third-tier ones.

"The people have the cash to travel. They are just waiting to be tapped."

## The Indian upmarket traveller...

- ✦ knows exactly where he wants to go and what he wants to do
- ✦ is splurging more if on a honeymoon
- ✦ is more adventurous with places and activities



**Clockwise from above** Danang helicopter tours; *The Strand Cruise* poolside; beachfront yoga at The Nam Hai

# *The new glamorous*

From booking ski champions to accompany guests, to launching a cruise ship just so the service would match the hotel's, luxury operators add new shine to their product offerings, report **Mimi Hudoyo** and **Raini Hamdi**



*Old definition of luxury: grand hotels, first class airline travel, limousine rides*

*New definition of luxury: all of the above, but with out-of-this-world experiences*



**W**hat is luxury travel? If the question was asked five years ago, travellers, suppliers and researchers would invariably have said it meant staying in grand and five-star hotels, flying first class and taking limousine rides.

Today's luxury travellers demand more. Having butler service and speedy Wi-Fi in the suite have become the standard for a luxury hotel. Travellers are looking for out-of-the-ordinary experiences, according to luxury travel buyers interviewed at this year's ILTM Asia.

Data from Reed Travel Exhibition itself shows that in 2011 when the ILTM kicked off in Asia, the top five buyer categories were private travel arrangers, outbound tour operators, incentive travel organisers, business travel agencies and group travel organisers.

This year, extraordinary experience, business travel, destination wedding, adventure travel and retail travel agencies were the top five buyer categories.

However, in terms of products buyers were looking for, little had changed. Alison Gilmore, senior exhibition director ILTM portfolio of Reed Travel Exhibition, said: "You might have thought that with the priority now on delivering out-of-the-ordinary experiences that extreme adventures would have made to the top

# focus luxury products

10. But it actually stayed in the same position as four years ago – at number 15.

“Products such as luxury hotels, boutique resorts, beach resorts, private villas and cruises remained top of the list. What does it tell us? It is not what you do, but the way you do it,” Gilmore said.

Suppliers are racing to be the ‘new glamorous’.

Ani Villas, which has new properties in Sri Lanka and Thailand, for example, has come up with the concept of an exclusive all-inclusive service.

Anthony Dupont, director of sales of Ani Villas, said: “In Thailand, for example, we have a 10-villa property. If you bring 12 people and only six rooms are needed, we’ll give you the rooms for the price for six and we won’t sell the other four rooms to other people.”

The price includes food, drinks, alcoholic beverages, a spa treatment, children’s programme and telephone calls.

“So it is like staying at your own hotel; you have your own general manager; you decide the food you want to eat,” he said.

The Thai property targets families, weddings, special interest groups (for example, yoga) and small board meetings. In Asia, its target markets are Hong Kong, Singapore and China.

Over in Yangon, The Strand Hotel is launching its own river cruiser, *The Strand Cruise*, which will set sail on January 4, so that guests will have a seamless service experience on board and on ground in the hotel.

The vessel boasts 27 cabin suites and all the features passengers would expect of a Strand product. Jerome Seban, general manager of *The Strand Cruise*, said: “Having operated The Strand Hotel in Yangon for the past decade, we know there has been a steady growth in demand from luxury travellers to explore the ancient monuments of Myanmar by using the Ayeyarwady’s waterways. This demand presents us with a opportunity to reinvent the legendary style and unique personality of The Strand Hotel within a contemporary river cruise experience.”

Another ‘moving hotel’ is the new Belmond Grand Hibernian, the first luxury sleeper train in Ireland. The train accommodates up to 40 guests in elegant, private en-suite cabins and adds to Belmond’s product offerings in exotic destinations.

“We target a very specific customer profile, people who are self-assured and well-travelled,” said Ralph Aruzza, chief sales and marketing officer of Belmond.

“Travel for them is deeply personal...they are looking for a sense of uniqueness, a surprise and an opportunity to create very special memories.”

Guests staying at the Belmond Copacabana Palace located in Brazil’s Iguazu National Park, for instance,





**Above** Belmond train  
**Left** Away From It All



have exclusive access to Christ the Redeemer atop the Corcovado Mountain at dawn before it opens to the public.

Another operator, Away From It All, taps active, experimental travellers seeking outdoor experiences, but these are no ordinary programmes. Its Away with the Champs product, for instance, has former world-class athletes such as Marina Kiehl (Olympic gold medallist, Calgary 1988), Mike Kluge (1990 Mountain Bike World Cup Winner) and Jan Ullrich (1997 Tour de France winner and 2000 Sydney Olympic gold medallist) go on trips with clients.

“If travellers want to tap (a champ’s) professional knowledge to improve their skills in skiing, for example, the champ is more than happy to share his knowledge, but the main idea is to have a champion on the trip as travel companion and friend,” said CEO Tilman Held.

German and Swiss travellers are the main market for the company, which was founded in Germany

four years ago, but Held felt it was time to tap the Asian market and attended ILTM Asia for the first time this year.

Over in Vietnam, five luxury products, The Reverie Saigon, The Nam Hai, La Residence Hotel & Spa, Sofitel Legend Metropole Hanoi and a Paradise Peak cruise vessel, have come together under Quintessential Collection to create extraordinary experiences for guests. It recently hatched a US\$20,000 package that included two nights in each of the collection’s five luxury products – working out to a princely US\$2,000 per night per person. But, transfers were in Bentleys and Rolls-Royces, while exclusives included portraits of the client painted by a distinguished Vietnamese artist; quiet time spent with scholar Phan Thuan An at his house, where a royal dinner also awaited; a private dinner cruise along the Saigon River; and an afternoon with City Treasure Hunt’s Rosemary Cook, a highly informed expat who provides day-long tours that incorporate furniture, home decor, antiques and fashion.

“Anyone can visit Hue, but to understand it and know it on any sort of meaningful level, you have to talk to the right people,” said Phan Trong Minh, La Residence’s general manager. “Mr An is a fountain of knowledge, and the cooking techniques his wife uses are generations-old.”

Said Quintessential Collection Vietnam’s managing director, Jim Sullivan: “Increasingly, (there is) a cohort of travellers to Vietnam that wants to travel in a Rolls Royce or a Bentley, that has the resources to indulge Vietnam’s most refined opportunities, and that wants to interact with some of the country’s most compelling personalities.

“The days of Good Morning, Vietnam are over. There is now a range of really capable five-star properties in Vietnam, and then there is yet another level – the quintessential stratum that comprises properties that are not only the best properties in their destination but among the best in the world.”



**The main idea (for Away with the Champs) is to have a champion (world-class athlete) on the trip as a travel companion and friend.**

Tilman Held,  
CEO, Away From It All

focus luxury shopping



# *Smooth operators*

From dining with celebrity chefs, to rubbing shoulders with designers and celebrated artisans, shopping isn't just about buying luxury goods anymore, reports [Mimi Hudoyo](#)





Shop till you drop is so yesterday. As wealthy Asian travellers become more affluent, a shopping stop on a tour programme can no longer cut it. In fact, shopping has quickly moved from being the pleasurable act of idle browsing or buying coveted goods, to being to a full experience that is deeper than instant gratification which buying the latest watch or bag satisfies.

Upmarket department stores and designer outlets in Europe are going the extra mile to offer eyebrow-lifting programmes that make shopping just one part of an overall delightful outing for Asian travellers.

Take Bond Street by Appointment, for instance, a new, exclusive service launched this year for the Chinese market.

Instead of just having visitors browse London's Bond Street, home to more than 130 luxury retailers, elegant boutiques, exclusive brands and designer fashion, Bond Street by Appointment tailors programmes, be it three hours or three weeks, for the ultimate luxury shopping experience around Bond Street and Mayfair, explained Jace Tyrrell, deputy chief executive of Bond Street.

Programmes can include VIP services at boutiques, galleries and restaurants in and around Bond Street and Mayfair; private shopping including out-of-hours access; trunk shows and exclusive previews; hands-free shopping with hotel drop-offs; tax-free shopping; and fast-track service.

Beyond the shopping experience, programmes can also include the Royal Warrant and British brands tour; spa and beauty treatments; etiquette experiences and behind-the-scene insights into Bond Street and Mayfair.

In reaching out to rich customers, Bond Street works with independent tour operators, luxury advisors and hotels in London.

Bond Street by Appointment targets the upmarket travellers who have been to the top-tier cities in Europe and visited London a couple of times – “those who want something unique”, said Tyrrell.

“The programmes are individually created (to match) the customer's requirements,” he added.

Future plans include promoting Bond Street by Appointment to the luxury travel markets of Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand, he said.

With access to iconic flagship stores, international boutiques and world-renowned art houses, the service is suitable for international connoisseurs and fashionistas searching for the elite and memorable ‘Mayfair moment’, Tyrrell said.

“There are many independent businesses in the lanes and arcades in Mayfair and travellers can visit their studios and see the (artisans) working on jewellery and furniture, for example.

“As well, some of the well-known international

brands have special London-only products. We would inform clients of this and take them there,” he said.

Over in Spain, new at El Corte Inglés' flagship store in Madrid, a complex that encompasses several buildings and carries the most comprehensive collection of designers of any large store in Spain, is a two-floor culinary paradise, where at least three great chefs are represented: David Muñoz with his restaurant StreetXo, Roberto Ruiz with Cascabel and Jordi Roca with Rocambolesc.

Not only does the Serrano Gourmet Space combine the latest gastronomic trends and products, it offers the best views of Madrid's Golden Mile.

Interviewed during this year's ILTM Asia in Shanghai in June, Javier Fernandez Andrino, international marketing & tourism director of El Corte Inglés, said: “When people travel to Europe, their first motivation is leisure, second is shopping and third is food.”

Among the Asian customers are Singaporeans, Chinese, Thais, Filipinos and Koreans.

“Here, you can combine amazing shopping with a gourmet experience at the same time,” he said

Opened early this year, Andrino said the new concept had been well accepted among customers.

Meanwhile, McArthurGlen Group, which owns and operates 20 Designer Outlets in eight cities in Europe and one in Canada, is working with tourism boards, tour operators and MICE organisers to promote shopping.

Anthony Rippingale, head of tourism of McArthurGlen, said: “We want to make sure that travellers know we exist and they come and shop with us.”

To reach out to the market, McArthurGlen Group does its own consumer research, and forms partnerships with tourism boards including NTOs in the Netherlands, Italy and Germany, and industry partners.

For example, noticing that a lot of Indonesians, Malaysians and Singaporeans are going to Eastern Europe nowadays, McArthurGlen works with their planners to entice them to its outlet just outside Vienna. Recently, it held a champagne reception for a group of about 100 Indonesians there. The travellers were given discount cards to entice them further to shop at the outlet.

Last year, McArthurGlen opened an office in Kuala Lumpur, with a satellite team in Jakarta and Singapore.

“It is important to have people in the market to handle the business,” Rippingale said.

The group also works with planners of congresses and incentive travel to arrange meet-and-greet services and special hospitality arrangements at its outlets.

“We want to add value to the destination and to ensure that we are working with the industry to support them and in turn be integrated into their programmes. We do marketing support and help them with itinerary development”, said Rippingale.

“

**When people travel to Europe, their first motivation is leisure, second is shopping and third is food.**

Javier Fernandez Andrino, international marketing & tourism director, El Corte Inglés

**Top** Tiffany, Bond Street **Below** McArthurGlen's Castel Romano Designer Outlet, near Rome

# Single and loving it

With changing customer behaviour and as more hotel chains encroach on their territory, established independent players revamp their game to stay ahead



Anthony Ross at Royal Plaza on Scotts, Singapore, a Lifestyle collection of Preferred

## *Preferred* revamps entire portfolio

### **Anthony Ross**

Executive vice president  
Asia-Pacific,  
Middle East & Africa  
Preferred Hotels & Resorts

**Background** In the biggest change since the Ueberroth family bought the company 10 years ago, the then Preferred Hotel Group retired its established brands Summit Hotels & Resorts and Sterling Hotels & Resorts in March and moved all 650

member hotels to just one master brand, Preferred Hotels & Resorts (PHR), under five collections: Legend, LVX, Lifestyle, Connect and Preferred Residences.

**What drove the change?** Lindsey (Ueberroth, PHR president & CEO) in particular felt that the way people were buying travel was changing, thus (we had to assess) the importance of social media, OTAs, the direct relationship between hotels and consumers, between representation companies like us and consumers, etc. As a former hotelier myself, I can say Preferred is a

strong B2B brand but in the current times it needs to be a stronger B2C brand. Plus when you have to nurture three brands, Preferred, Summit, Sterling, it has some kind of a diluting effect. So we've consolidated everything around Preferred Hotels & Resorts and the five collections.

The upside for the hotels is our direct-to-consumer website, and a new emphasis on social media. Bookings in Asia-Pacific have doubled since the relaunch.

**Should your travel agency partners be worried then?** No, it's a big world and there is enough business for everyone. As I said, we've always been a good B2B with TMCs and agencies, particularly the Virtuoso's and the Signature's (of the industry). There is always going to be a role for travel agencies, particularly the TMCs and consultants who can craft itineraries. If anything, it is the OTAs for whom we're going to give a run for the money.

**Take me through the collections briefly. While Preferred Residences is clear-cut, what's the difference between Legend and LVX (luxury), and between Lifestyle and Connect?** Legend is ultra luxury, smaller, more personalised, has significant architecture (ie, less to do with age, though its name implies that) and is in a great location. Typically it commands one of the top two RevPARs in the city. LVX comprises the more traditional luxury hotels, is larger, is in the top 10 in terms of RevPAR and has a more mixed market – MICE, corporate, leisure – because it is larger.

Lifestyle is also luxury but it's more about the style of service and decor. Connect is a casual collection – clean, neat and good but not over-the-top service.

**How is the change deeper than just redistributing 650 members into five collections?** We've completely redone our mystery shopping audits. We used to have some 750 points – if the bed was bad, the hotel didn't get a point; same if the doorman didn't have his badge on. But clearly the bed is more important than the doorman not wearing a night badge. So we're now more heavily weighted on factors like service, sleep experience, cleanliness, etc, and on the overall feel of the hotel.

The audit is also far more contemporary now. For example, who says a restaurant today must have tablecloths? Some restaurants today look cool and have high average checks without them.

Aside from the revamped audits, we have other criteria in terms of the hotel's market positioning, awards they've won, etc. So it's broader than just the fulfilment of standards, although standards are important.

**How do you feel about chains going into your turf?**

They try to get into our space but they are still going to tell the hotels to do this or that. Whereas we understand and love independent hotels; we let them keep their own brand and personality. We provide a platform for them to compete for business in a reasonable cost structure compared with the chains.

– Raini Hamdi



**There is always going to be a role for travel agencies, particularly the TMCs and consultants who can craft itineraries. If anything, it is the OTAs for whom we're going to give a run for the money.**

Anthony Ross, executive vice president,  
Asia-Pacific, Middle East & Africa  
Preferred Hotels & Resorts

## SLH keeps sharp at turn of age

### Victor Wong

Area & development  
director Asia-Pacific  
Small Luxury Hotels  
(SLH) of the World

**SLH celebrates its 25th anniversary this year. How is it keeping up with the times?** We will be rolling out a number of initiatives targeting our hotel members, travel agency partners and travellers from the end of this year.

Seeing how travellers are changing the way they consume advertisements and search for travel products, we will be enhancing our marketing programmes for our hotel members, such as through the use of new media channels for marketing communications.

We will also be supporting our member hotels in their efforts to offer unique experiences and to be market price leaders.

What won't change is our focus on maintaining and attracting hotel members that serve travellers who are keen on small-sized luxury properties. The definition of small varies – here in Asia, in key cities, a small room count can go up to 200. In secondary cities, it will be around 50 keys and not stretching beyond 80. In fact, the average room count of all our member hotels is 49.

We will also be enhancing our travel agency website and for partners who are not used to commissions and bookings only via GDS, we are looking at ways to enhance the reservation channels and entice them to book.

For travellers, we will be improving the benefits of The Club, our loyalty programme.

**What drive these initiatives?** Travelers today like options and the

affluent ones like to know that programmes can be customised for them. The number of discerning travellers is growing, fuelled by extensive travel experience, exhaustion from cookie-cutter hotel options and, most importantly, access to social media.

As a result, these travellers are changing the way they book, rooms they choose and rates they are willing to pay. Fifteen years ago, luxury is reflected by extravagant hardware like grand chandeliers, enormous lobbies and gold-plated taps. Today, luxury means having choice and that is why we want to help our member hotels create unique experiences for their guests and, for ourselves, to offer a diverse portfolio of properties worldwide.

The quality of experience at various touchpoints has also become far more important now. To ensure these touchpoints deliver the highest standards of interaction and experience, we are improving our mystery inspector programme and expanding our global pool of mystery inspectors.

**How do you feel about hotel chains going into your turf?** That simply

means that the business of hotel affiliation/representation that we are in is the right business model. That's why global hotel chains are jumping in. The market is large enough for more hotel affiliation players.

Although more global hotel chains are representing independent boutique properties, these properties are still operated with the chain's DNA and SOP. I'm not sure how that will play out over time, whether independent boutique properties belonging to global hotel chains will be able to retain their individuality. – Karen Yue

Macalister Mansion, Penang, Malaysia, a Design Hotel



## Design steps up engagement

### Serdar Kutucu

Vice president  
brand, marketing &  
communications  
Design Hotels

**What are you doing differently?** We recently launched the Design Hotels Brand Lab at our Berlin headquarters. Home to our in-house creative team – a rarity among hospitality brands – the Brand Lab is a seedbed for innovative and experimental ideas to be shaped and shared.

The space also operates as a base for member hotels and hospitality partners to meet and engage in creative discourse with influencers and innovators from the worlds of art, design and commerce. Since 2007, Design Hotels has been creating platforms for cross-industry gatherings.

We have increased both online and offline engagement with the community through events at our own Brand Lab as well as

with partners. We also launched Design Hotels Pro, a new booking and information platform specially designed for travel professionals. The sales exchange event formats were also revamped in order to create a more engaging and educational setting. In total, we have 29 exchanges in 25 cities worldwide.

### How does Design Hotels Pro

**benefit consultants?** The launch of the portal is meant to help travel professionals gain direct access to rates and benefits, and reduce their waiting time to receive a proposal, making the entire experience more seamless and convenient. Membership comes with numerous benefits including travel industry rates of up to 50 per cent off, commission paid in local currencies, and added value extras such as welcome drinks and discounted spa treatments for travel agencies and their clients. All travel professionals with a valid travel agency ID are eligible to register. – **Raini Hamdi**

## Worldhotels dreams, dares, does

### Roland Jegge

Executive vice  
president Asia-Pacific  
Worldhotels

**Background** In 2014, Worldhotels embarked on a new journey, Dream, Dare, Do, which it charted with the help of IFH and its 'Reverse Thinking' approach. In summary, the strategy is designed to put the dreams and experiences of its

guests and hotels at the core of everything it does as an organisation.

**Why the new direction?** The hospitality industry has moved from a standardised to an experiential model. Millennials, who now comprise a significant percentage of our customers, have different expectations on booking and travel experiences. Technology allows for new booking possibilities and needs.

**What's being done this year about it?** This year, we are taking the approach to the next phase. We are not only evaluating what the Worldhotels story means to our clients, but are also helping our hotels to define and create their own stories.

We have relaunched our worldhotels.com brand website this year, which visualises our Dream, Dare, Do approach and allows our customers to book our hotels based on their story and the experiences they provide. This will help us increase guest loyalty. Speaking of loyalty, we have also introduced two exciting new features to Worldhotels' loyalty programme Peakpoints this year. They are: Peakpoints Bag Tag, which allows guests to track their luggage back in case it's lost during travel, and Peakpoints TravelSure, which provides travellers with emergency support during their travels, be it with transport in case of illness or translation services.

**How do these changes benefit agencies?** Our experiential approach meets the demand for more authentic and extraordinary travel experiences – and will equip agencies with the information they need to create one-of-a-kind travel experiences for their clients. Our added services, the Bag Tag and TravelSure, give travel agencies additional tools to sell a trip or a vacation – if they have a client who is apprehensive about travelling to a new destination, they can ease their worries with TravelSure's emergency services.

Selling hotel rooms is mostly about details – anything extra you can offer a client might just close the deal. – **Raini Hamdi**

# As gorgeous as Grange



Adelaide Hills Wine

**Above** Adelaide Hills wine region

For travel connoisseurs, Adelaide hints of Australia's finest wine, Grange, must-visit restaurants such as Appellation at The Louise in Barossa Valley and destination resorts such as Southern Ocean Lodge on Kangaroo Island. But its luxury offering is still largely unknown to Asians. By **Paige Lee Pei Qi**

**S**outh Australia Tourism Commission (SATC) is planting the seeds of a brand campaign to be launched in South-east Asia early next year aimed at showing that Adelaide is "just as exciting" as the other major cities in Australia.

Dana Urmonas, regional director, South-east Asia and India at SATC, declined to provide details of the campaign as it is still in the planning stage, but revealed that the overall budget allocated for Malaysia and Singapore alone this financial year is about A\$1 million (US\$700,000). The two markets, along with China and India, are its top Asian sources.

The wine capital of Australia is the only city in the country that is within an hour's drive to seven

wine regions and 200 cellar doors.

Highlighting that Adelaide provides 74 per cent of the country's wine exports, SATC's chief executive, Rodney Harrex, said: "This is where all the premium wines come from and we have a lot of experiential offerings for the higher-end tourists especially.

"We are the most well-equipped destination to provide the luxury clientele with an authentic wining and dining experience, which is our unique proposition."

For example, a mere 20-minute drive takes clients right on the doorstep of the wine region Adelaide Hills, Harrex pointed out. "Unlike other cities, it is so convenient for visitors to get out of our city centre and be transported into a whole new world within minutes."

Pointing to Australia's widely ac-

# destination australia



**Above** Remarkable rocks on Kangaroo Island

claimed wildlife sanctuary in Kangaroo Island as another tourism pull, Harrex said it is the best place in Australia to see native animals in the wild in a coastal setting.

A range of accommodations on the island, which is a 30-minute flight from Adelaide, includes villas that will appeal to the luxury clientele.

But despite the multitude of offerings that can satisfy upmarket clients, Harrex acknowledged: "There is a need for us to raise awareness about our destination because while there is so much we can offer, no one knows about it."

"There has also been a lot of changes in the city over the past few years, including the addition of new hotels, restaurants and bars that inject a lot of energy into the city," he added, emphasizing that Adelaide is not a "sleepy city".

General manager of Country Holidays Singapore, Jess Yap, agreed Adelaide can appeal to rich Asians. She said: "It has a host of small lodges whose exclusivity can

especially attract the luxury segment."

However, Yap added: "More high-end consumers networking events should be held to promote Adelaide since these luxury products would not appeal to mass consumers via the traditional channels."

Vivien Yeo, travel editor at Quotient TravelPlanner, agreed and suggested: "Regular product updates and familiarisation trips, as well as content marketing partnerships specific to the luxury segment, will also be beneficial."

Explaining why Quotient has not seen any notable increase in interest towards Adelaide, she said: "In general, Adelaide falls behind cities such as Sydney and Melbourne in attracting the tourist dollar.

"Travellers may not be attracted to Adelaide or necessarily know it has much to offer, and it does not help that Adelaide does not boast iconic attractions such as the Sydney Harbour Bridge or Sydney Opera House."



**Unlike other cities, it is so convenient for visitors to get out of our city centre and be transported into a whole new world within minutes.**

Rodney Harrex, chief executive,  
South Australia Tourism Commission





## Five luxé products

### Swim with dolphins

Join Temptation Sailing's Dolphin Swim from Glenelg, which offers the unique experience of viewing and swimming with wild bottle-nose dolphins in their natural habitat. Come face to face literally with these magnificent and playful mammals in this 3.5-hour coastal cruise which includes a wet suit, mask and snorkel. Temptation Sailing also offers a "dolphin sighting guarantee" so that if – on the rare chance visitors do not see

any – they are provided with either a refund or at least, a chance to come back again for free.

### Chocoholics, rejoice

A chocolate lover's dream-come-true, Haigh's Chocolates is touted as one of the best chocolates in Australia. Discover the heritage behind Haigh's, Australia's oldest chocolate manufacturer, where chocolate is handmade in Haigh's Chocolates Visitor Centre. The half-hour tour of the chocolate factory shows how the bitter cocoa bean is transformed into a sweet delicacy. Visitors will of course get to sample and buy these mouthwatering delights.

### Largest wine tasting room in Australia

In keeping with Adelaide's position

as Australia's wine capital, the National Wine Centre's 'Wined Bar' boasts Australia's largest tasting room experience with visitors able to sample 120 different wines thanks to the installation of Enomatic wine preservation and dispensing machines. The 'Wined Bar' is part of the centre's Cellar Door where visitors can choose, pour and taste every wine from Penfolds' famous Grange to boutique wine labels.

### Sofitel Adelaide to open in 2018

Adelaide will welcome a new Accor hotel in 2018 with the opening of Sofitel Adelaide on Currie Street in the city's CBD. The hotel is part of a 32-storey mixed-use tower, which is slated to become the tallest residential development in South Australia. The five-star property will offer 250 rooms and suites over 24 floors. Suited to both leisure and business travellers, facilities include a restaurant, four bars, ballroom, swimming pool and health and fitness centre.

### Luxury amid the ocean

Southern Ocean Lodge is one of Australia's finest luxury lodges, promising an unparalleled experience on Kangaroo Island in South Australia. Perched atop a secluded cliff on a rugged stretch of coast, the lodge commands peerless views of the wild Southern Ocean and pristine Kangaroo Island wilderness. Its 21 luxury suites feature bespoke furnishings, lavish sleeping areas, and glass-walled ensuite and outdoor terrace for spectacular views of the ocean and wilderness.



**Top** Sofitel Adelaide  
**Left** Southern Ocean Lodge's Osprey Pavilion Lounge

# More novelties from new hotels



Above Sheraton Macao Hotel, Cotai Central

New luxury products continue to rise in Macau, adding many 'firsts' to a strip already bursting with novelties.

By **Prudence Lui**

**D**espite a recent slump in visitor numbers to Macau, in part due to China's effort to cut lavish spending, the SAR is still enjoying product expansion, indicative of the confidence investors have in its long-term future.

Sheraton Macao Hotel, Cotai Central recently unveiled 80 new luxuriously oversized suites, further adding to its already vast selection of suite categories and boosting the total number to more than 350. This addition creates a "hotel within a hotel" in the now 4,001-room property.

Outfitted in warm brown and red tones, the latest range of suites comprises one Terrace Suite (242m<sup>2</sup>) and 79 Executive Deluxe Suites (over 140m<sup>2</sup>) and they are located on the hotel's uppermost levels – floors 40 and 41 in the Sky Tower, and floors 38, 39 and 40 in the Earth Tower – offering spectacular views of the Cotai Strip.

The hotel's spokesperson Jennifer Welker said: "These suites are designed to appeal to many types of travellers seeking an ultimate getaway. From business travellers and groups to couples and families. They will certainly attract MICE travellers who may wish to hold evening



cocktail parties. We are the first and only hotel in Macau to offer a spacious Terrace Suite which is ideal for cocktail parties with its outdoor space and views overlooking the Cotai Strip and beyond to the Macau Tower where they can also take in the fireworks.”

Another Starwood Hotels & Resorts brand, St Regis Macao, Cotai Central, is opening this month, targeting luxury leisure travellers and MICE groups of up to 400 delegates. General manager of sales and marketing for both the St Regis Macao and Sheraton Grand Macao, Daniella Tonetto, expects to draw the well-heeled from Hong Kong, Japan, Korea and Taiwan but will also explore new markets such as India and South-east Asia.

“New St Regis openings in Mumbai and Kuala Lumpur will certainly increase the brand recognition for these regions. Apart from showcasing architecture and designs, what make The St Regis Macao special is the signature experiences guests have come to expect. Our St Regis Butler Service for all guests marks a first for any hotel in Macau. Providing 24-hour anticipatory service, it customises a guest’s stay according to their specific needs, tastes and preferences. The e-Butler service enables guests to access this convenience while on the go and gives back to guests the most sought-after of all luxuries – time,” Tonetto said.

Meanwhile, the second resort in Macau by Steve Wynn, the US\$4.1 billion, 1,700-key Wynn Palace is scheduled to be unveiled in Cotai on June 25. This 28-storey, floral-themed hotel contains 1,700 rooms, a performance lake, meeting spaces, a casino, a spa, retail offerings and F&B outlets.

Guests will be transported into a world of entertainment via a breathtaking ride in themed, air-conditioned SkyCabs that traverse a stunning 3.2ha Performance Lake into the heart of the resort.



**We are the first and only hotel in Macau to offer a spacious Terrace Suite which is ideal for cocktail parties with its outdoor space and views overlooking the Cotai Strip...**

Jennifer Welker, spokesperson, Sheraton Macao Hotel



Above Studio City Macao Below Premier Plus shuttle by Turbojet



**Studio City opens**

Officially inaugurated on October 27, the Hollywood-themed Studio City boasts a 5,000-seat multi-purpose entertainment centre designed to host live concerts, theatre shows and sporting events and a myriad of entertainment experiences including The House of Magic and a Warner Bros. Batman-themed 4-D flight simulation Batman Dark Flight. Guests can also ride in Asia’s highest figure-eight Ferris wheel called Golden Reel which straddles the resort’s two-tower hotel at a height of some 130m.

**Most agreeable way to Macau**

Get a hassle-free ferry journey to and from Macau with TurboJet’s Premier Plus service. Patrons in Premier Grand Class and Premier VIP Cabin enjoy free land transfer between Macau Outer Harbour Ferry Terminal and any destination in Macau, with free

porter service within the terminal. Advance booking is required.

**Famous Teochew restaurant enters**

Pak Loh Chiu Chow Restaurant has entered Macau by opening a branch in Galaxy Macau. With more than 40 years expertise in serving fine Teochew cuisine, the restaurant adopts a modern design yet is rich in authentic Teochew themes such as the predominant use of red and gold colours. Led by executive chef Chan Wa Yin who has decades of experience in Teochew cuisine, the outlet offers a wide variety of classic Teochew dishes.

**More wings at Wing Lei**

Michelin-star Wing Lei at Wynn Macau has refreshed its design. An iconic crystal dragon – over 90,000 Swarovski crystals and individual blown glass elements – catches the eye, as a beautiful moon gate and a heroic-scale cloisonné horse at the entrance from within the hotel.





# Away from the madding crowd

Luxury planners could suggest 'glamping' to clients as the new way to experience Japan, as more glam camps sprout up in the woods, reports

**Julian Ryall**

**H**ead for Japan's woods one of these nights and you'll be in for a big surprise – because a nation that loves camping nearly as much as it loves luxury has embraced 'glamping'.

At least a dozen sites that are a combination of glamour and camping have recently appeared in Japan – of varying degrees of 'glamour' and 'luxury', it must be admitted – but the enthusiasm for what is still a novel concept is so strong that one of the country's most prestigious hotel brands has decided that it needs a glamping property.

"I wouldn't say that glamping is

common in Japan at the moment, but it is certainly being talked about. More venues are appearing and it certainly appears that the trend is developing," said Fumi Miyauchi, director-global marketing, Hoshino Resorts.

A by-word for luxury accommodation, Hoshino Resorts opened its Hoshinoya Fuji resort on October 30, with 40 luxurious guest cabins looking out over Lake Kawaguchi-ko and the iconic Mount Fuji. Ranging from 44sqm to 53sqm in size, the cabins are clustered around a camp fire on the Cloud Terrace.

A grove of red pines surrounds its restaurant, while the site also



has a library cafe. Early morning yoga sessions are conducted in the surrounding forest. It is also fully equipped to host corporate meetings.

The resort operates throughout the year.

“We have already had a lot of interest from travel agencies and the media in Japan, but also from other parts of Asia,” Miyauchi told *TTG Asia Luxury*.

The project appears to have particularly struck a chord with fans of the outdoor life – but as with all mod-cons – in Taiwan, Singapore and South Korea.

“A lot of people are interested because they know about Mount

Fuji, but they want to see it and experience it for themselves,” Miyauchi said.

The call of the wild is also taking foreign visitors to Tochigi Camp & Cabins, in Tochigi Prefecture north of Tokyo.

“Only a small percentage of our visitors are from overseas and we have had guests from the US, China and South Korea, but they are telling us that they want to see more of Japan outside of the big cities and they want to see more of the nature for which Japan is quite famous,” said owner Toshiro Ikegami.

“We are getting to the point now that we are completely full during

“

**I wouldn't say that glamping is common in Japan at the moment, but it is certainly being talked about. More venues are appearing and it certainly appears that the trend is developing.**

Fumi Miyauchi,  
director of global marketing,  
Hoshino Resorts



**Above** Hoshinoya Fuji – not quite camping hardship

the peak parts of the year and weekends and we really need more space to extend the park," he said.

For Ikegami, the biggest problem when dealing with foreign visitors is the language barrier. He speaks English, but struggles when it comes to communicating with Chinese and Korean guests.

Visitors to the Sweetgrass site, in the mountains of Gunma Prefecture north of Tokyo, get to stay in comfortably appointed treehouses, native American-style teepees and log cabins – with the roaring wood stoves one of the most abiding memories for city-dwellers, according to reservations manager Ayaka Maruyama.

"I think that most people live and work in the big cities and they just want to get away from that, even if it is only for a short time, and be closer to nature," she said. "When people come here, they really enjoy being able to cook outdoors; they love sitting in front of the stoves in the winter and they like walking in the forests around us."

A small percentage of Sweetgrass' visitors is from abroad – again, China, South Korea and nations in South-east Asia comprise the bulk of foreign campers – but while Maruyama said the key to the business is to keep repeat visitors coming back, she admitted that will prove more difficult with overseas guests.

In contrast to the mountain glamping sites, Hatsushima Island Resort is playing to its strengths by erecting spacious tents and South Seas-style bungalows overlooking the waters of Sagami Bay, off Shizuoka, south-west of Tokyo.

"People come to us because they can camp, but they can also go fishing, boating and other activities in the waters around the island," said general manager Katsuhito Yamashita.

"I don't think that's a combination of things that is easy to do in a place such as China or South Korea," he said.

“

**I think that most people live and work in the big cities and they just want to get away from that, even if it is only for a short time, and be closer to nature.**

Ayaka Maruyama, reservations manager, Sweetgrass



## Five luxe products

### Luxe combo

The Mandarin Oriental, Tokyo, has launched a new package that unites a stay at the luxury hotel with a private boat cruise on Tokyo Bay. The one-hour trip aboard what is described as the water-borne equivalent of a limousine takes up to 12 passengers through Tokyo's historical and cultural centre, and some of the city's most intriguing – and often overlooked – districts.

The sleek silver cruiser has a sky roof that rolls back, while the cabin is luxurious throughout. The package also includes accommodation

in one of the hotel's top suites, free access to the Heat and Water area at The Spa and a selection of traditional delicacies from the Nihonbashi district of Tokyo.

### Love this bus!

Isetan Mitsukoshi Travel has reconfigured a bus that was originally designed to transport 45 people and fitted it out with all the top mod-cons for just 10 people to travel in comfort and luxury. The interior has been modelled on business class in aircraft, with full reclining leather seats and all the other perks that make returning to economy class so difficult.

The bus departs from Tokyo for destinations across the country, taking the hassle out of getting on and off trains with luggage or inconvenient transfers. Two-day trips cost around ¥150,000 (US\$1,220) and rise to



Y330,000 for three-day excursions, with accommodation in high-end hotels, outings and meals. Destinations include famous festivals in different parts of the country, and some of the best places in Japan to see cherry blossoms in the spring and the autumn foliage later in the year.

### **Westin Rusutsu opens**

Japan's fabulous skiing opportunities are no longer a secret and the slopes here now attract powder fans from all over the world. Starwood Hotels & Resorts is this month opening its second ski resort in Japan, Westin Rusutsu Resort.

With 210 rooms, including suites that accommodate families of up to seven, facilities include a workout studio, hot spring, sauna, outdoor baths and tennis courts. Rusutsu is one of Hokkaido's most popular year-round destinations, although it is particularly renowned for its

proximity to ski routes and facilities on a number of mountains. The resort is less than 90 minutes' drive by car from Sapporo's Chitose International Airport.

### **First-of-its kind Celebrity voyage**

Luxury liner operators Celebrity Cruises launched a new tour in Japan in October, a first-of-its-kind, seven-night voyage that takes in some of the most scenic spots in Japan and South Korea.

The 91,000-ton *Celebrity Millennium* sets out from the port of Kobe before stopping in Kochi and crossing the Sea of Japan to Busan for an evening stopover. The return leg takes in the splendour of Japan's autumn scenery in Akita, and delivers an unforgettable view of Mount Fuji in Shizuoka.

The liner accommodates 2,158 passengers on 12 decks and has no fewer than 11 restaurants. There's

**Left**  
Ski slopes of Rusutsu, where Westin is opening this month

**Right**  
Combine a stay at Mandarin Oriental, Tokyo with a luxurious Nihonbashi boat cruise

also a gym to burn off all that free eating and drinking, a relaxation spa, a therapy pool and a 1,300-seat theatre.

### **World's oldest hotel**

It may not be brand new, but a stay at the Keiunkan Inn, in the village of Hayakawa in Yamaguchi Prefecture, gives your clients a one-up on other visitors to Japan.

The inn was established in 705 AD and has been recognised by the *Guinness Book of Records* as the oldest hotel in the world. Previous visitors have included feudal lords, shoguns and numerous emperors of Japan. Apart from being extremely old, the hotel is famous for its onsen natural spring baths, with the shower and bath in each room fed directly by the underground hot spring. One of the outdoor baths is open 24 hours a day.

# Room revolution



**Above** Ancient tower on city wall in Xi'an at dusk

The emergence of international luxury hotels in ancient city Xi'an has made the destination more appealing among wealthy travellers, writes **Karen Yue**

**A** glamorous air has descended upon Xi'an in Shaanxi Province, adding new glitter to a destination that has for decades been enveloped in the mystery and romance of an ancient Chinese kingdom since the 1974 discovery of the terracotta army that forms part of the mausoleum of China's first emperor.

While Xi'an continues to draw history buffs, the growing presence of international luxury hotels has helped to attract travellers with deep pockets.

Li Shuyan, MICE and general

manager of China International Travel Service (CITS) Head Office Northwest, based in Xi'an, recalled: "I've seen the changing face of Xi'an in the last 15 years. Back then, foreign tourists who came to see the terracotta army stayed in the city centre where most of the hotels were. They had to wake up very early to make the long journey to Lintong where the terracotta pits are. Their main concerns were to find a clean bed and food that would not give them diarrhoea.

"Ever since international hotel chains like Shangri-La, Accor and Starwood entered the market with their five-star products, the demo-



chuyun/123RF.COM



**Ever since international hotel chains... entered the market with their five-star products, the demographic of travellers has changed. Xi'an not only received more foreign tourists, it also welcomed wealthier ones.**

Li Shuyan, MICE and general manager, CITS Head Office Northwest based in Xi'an

graphic of travellers has changed. Xi'an not only received more foreign tourists, it also welcomed wealthier ones."

Today, numerous prominent hotels dot the city's map, some in the commercial centre and others close to key tourist landmarks.

Agreeing that Xi'an is "increasingly on the radar of the luxury traveller", Hajar Ali, founder of luxury travel company Urbane Nomads, said: "There is a correlation between the opening of luxury hotels and a destination becoming popular with the well-heeled. Xi'an has its history going for it but with the opening of new luxury hotels, it has become an easier choice for high-end travellers."

Tourism players noted that the city's luxury market is dominated by corporate travellers and special interest leisure groups.

Steven Wang, director of sales and marketing for The Westin Xian revealed that 85 per cent of the hotel's guest were corporate and the rest, leisure.

"Business travellers and meeting delegates have bigger budgets," reasoned Wang, adding that his leisure clientele comprises mostly individual travellers and small groups on tailored programmes that focus on history, food or nature.

Li opined that Xi'an's booming industries, fuelled by Chinese president Xi Jinping's commitment to developing cities on the Silk Road trading belt for international commerce, was helping to lure wealthy businessmen to the destination. These travellers would extend their trips for pleasure, requesting for special activities, such as a session with a local archaeology professor who could explain the history behind art pieces and historical finds.

Ideas for unique experiences are limited only by the DMC's expertise and local networks.

Julia Shi, general manager of Diethelm Travel (China), said her

company specialised in "extraordinary programmes" that were different from those in the market.

The company can take visitors into areas that are off-limits to the common man, such as the reconstruction site within the Mausoleum of the First Qin Emperor, where archeologists fix broken terracotta statues, or special vaults in the Shaanxi History Museum and Xi'an Museum. It also offers unique activities such as an archeological digging experience at The Yangling Mausoleum of the Han Dynasty, a visit to Fei Yuan Private Museum which carries a large collection of porcelain, stone carvings and rubbings of stone tablets done by famous Chinese calligraphers, Red Army Tours to the home town of president Xi and a visit to a traditional Chinese medicine hospital, among others.

Shi added that more attractions – well preserved ancient cities with stunning scenery – were available in the outskirts of Xi'an but the lack of good hotels and restaurants discouraged travel consultants from selling them.

However, Jean Philippe Jacopin, general manager of Shangri-La Hotel, Xian, warned of the danger of banking entirely on Xi'an's heritage to lure travellers.

He said: "These tourists usually stay for only a few days and they rarely return. Xi'an needs to co-operate with other (attractions) to improve product diversity which will then entice travellers to book longer stays (and return)."

Jacopin suggested that more eco tours, spa experiences and golf games be promoted to enhance travellers' experience, and urged trade players to join forces in destination marketing.

The good news is, fresh attractions are emerging in and around Xi'an. One of Singapore's leading outbound agency, Dynasty Travel, has observed stronger interest in Xi'an over the last five years due



Marco Tomasin/123RF.COM

to the presence of new attractions such as the *Tang Dynasty Song and Dance Performance* at the Shaanxi Song and Dance Theatre in Xi'an, and a growing awareness of natural attractions like Hukou Waterfall and Mt Huashan elsewhere in Shaanxi Province.

The sleepy district of Lintong, about 50 minutes by car from the heart of Xi'an, is also stirring with new tourism developments including the year-old Angsana Xian Lintong and its adjoining Angsana Hot Spring Xi'an Lintong, art museums, a park and an outlet mall for big fashion labels.

Jerry Mong, Angsana Xian Lintong's general manager, believed that his property was the key to advancing Xi'an's luxury appeal.

"We are changing travellers' mindsets by reminding them that Lintong used to be a favourite retreat of Tang Emperor Xuanzong and his consort Yang Guifei. They used to luxuriate in Lintong's hot springs, and we are offering travellers the chance to do the same at our hotel. Travellers do not need to stay in Xi'an's city centre to enjoy the high life. There's a huge poten-

tial for the development of high-end wellness tours to Lintong," said Mong.

Angsana Xian Lintong has been attracting ladies of leisure from other Chinese cities and Taiwan, who would come as a group of friends for spa retreats.

Meanwhile, tourism players are hoping for air access improvement to expedite the destination's tourism growth.

"Xi'an has fewer direct international flights compared with first-tier cities which makes it less convenient for international travellers to visit," said Wang.

While Dynasty Travel has seen a two-fold increase in bookings for Xi'an this year over 2014, a result of new flights by Tigerair (Singapore-Xi'an, launched May 2014) and Xiamen Airlines (Singapore-Hangzhou-Xi'an, launched March 2015), its spokesperson Alicia Seah noted that they were for package tours. "New links on low-cost carriers have little impact on luxury demand. High-end travellers prefer flying by full-service carriers even if it requires a transit in another city," she said.

#### Above

The terracotta army in Lintong, Xi'an, continues to be a main draw for tourists

## Five luxe products

### Luxurious baths

The new Angsana Hot Spring Xi'an Lintong, which sits next to Angsana Xi'an Lintong hotel, is a sprawling facility at the foot of Lishan Mountain. It features a two-storey Hot Spring Complex and 25 outdoor pools in serene surroundings, some of which offer waters infused with herbs like lavender and eucalyptus.

Visitors who desire privacy can hire a cabana which comes with a spacious living room and a landscaped outdoor hot spring pool. Superior Cabanas, good for two people, go for RMB888 (US\$140) nett for 180 minutes, while Delxue Cabanas, which are perfect for four to six people, cost RMB1,688 nett for the same duration. The experience





can be enhanced with a signature Cabana Delight treatment package, priced at RMB2,070 nett.

A highlight at the indoor complex is the Spring Forest By Angsana, a hydrothermal facility with 14 features including an aromatic steam chamber with lemongrass scent, a tropical rain shower, hot and cold plunge pools and a brine cavern.

### French legend arrives in Xi'an

Sofitel's ultra-luxe Legend Collection arrived in China with the 2014 opening of the Sofitel Legend People's Grand Hotel Xian, located within the historical city walls and part of the massive Renmin Square complex.

Occupying a grand building that had opened in 1953 as the state guesthouse, the hotel marries French and Sino-Russian architectural features with local design. All 71 rooms and suites feature lofty ceilings and generous proportions, while quality French amenities like

Hermès toiletries and French-designed floral arrangements round off the luxurious experience.

Additional features include butler service, an extensive garden setting, private health club, swimming pool and spa, an Italian restaurant, an exclusive top-floor Louis XIII Bar and a private museum.

The hotel is conveniently linked to the convention centre and Grand Theatre and is a short walk to the Forest of Steles and the lively Muslim Quarters.

### Literary finds

Literary works by famed Chinese novelist and chairman of the Writers' Association of Shaanxi Province, Jia Pingwa, and memorabilia celebrating his life will be put on display at the new Jia Pingwa Culture and Arts Museum in Lintong.

The first story houses exhibits that tell Jia's life story and literary pursuits, while the second floor displays a collection of treasured pottery and *xun*, a traditional glazed pottery wind instrument.

Visitors can try their hands at making a *xun*.

### Get a tour designer

Shangri-La Hotel, Xian has a dedicated tour manager on site who helps guests customise travel programmes ahead of arrival.

Penny Wang, who has been with the hotel since its pre-opening days in 2007, is said to have been instrumental in helping the hotel secure loyal, repeat guests. She specialises in tailored tours for families with young children or elderly people.

### Shopping paradise

Sean Outlets, an outlet shopping strip in Lintong, Xi'an, opened 40 per cent of its facilities on November 7. Its branded tenants include international brands like Givenchy, Giorgio Armani, Gap and Nike as well as cafes and restaurants including Starbucks.

When completed, Sean Outlets will offer more than 230 shops.

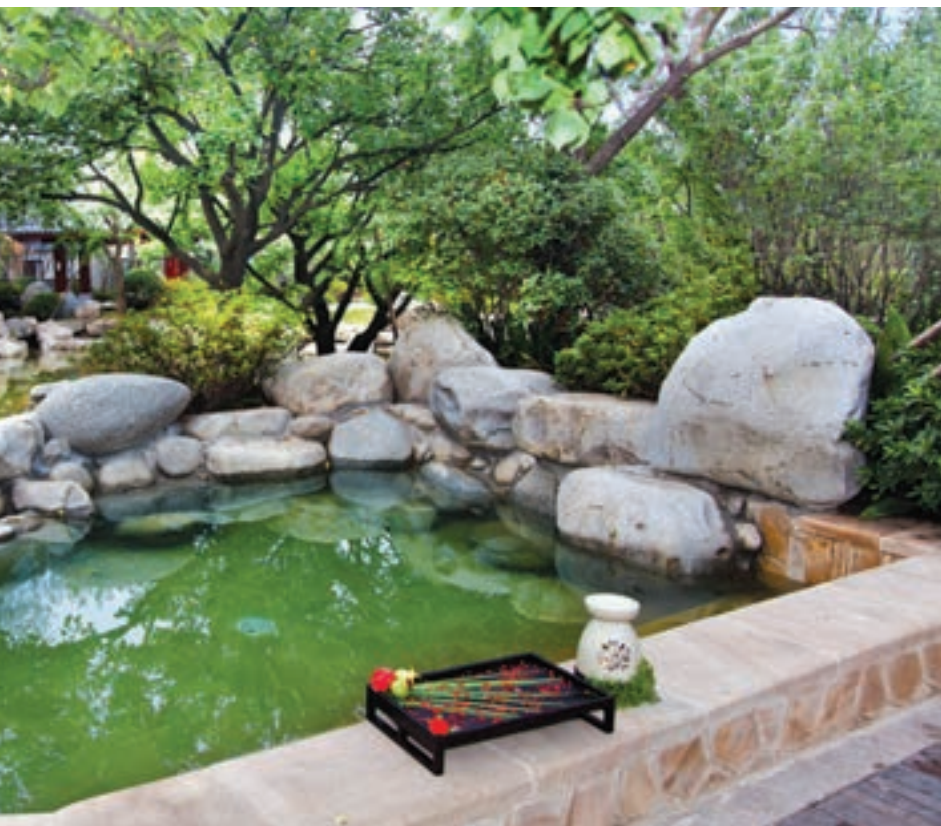
It is within walking distance of Angsana Xi'an Lintong hotel.

#### Below left

Angsana Hot Spring Xi'an Lintong

#### Right

Penny Wang, tour manager of Shangri-La Hotel, Xian



# Red carpet treat



Above Suria KLCC

Mindful of tough competition for the luxury market, Malaysia's inbound players are harvesting the destination's USPs to win more clients, reports

**S Puvaneswary**

**M**alaysia's inbound operators are competing hard to attract well-heeled travellers who – they are just too well aware – have plenty of destinations to choose from.

Those like Ally Bhoonee, executive director of World Avenues which specialises in the Middle East market, said Malaysia competes with the likes of Dubai and Qatar, rich Arab destinations which are creating more attractions and marketing themselves aggressively to upmarket clients.

Differentiation therefore is key,

he said, pointing out that World Avenues zooms in on Malaysia's nature attributes as the USP.

"Malaysia is known as an eco-tourism destination, with the world's oldest rainforest. It is also known for its islands, and for sports tourism as we have the Formula 1 PETRONAS Malaysia Grand Prix and the Shell Malaysia Motorcycle Grand Prix," he said. "We cannot compete with the likes of Dubai (in terms of the biggest or largest this and that). Thus, we have to take this approach."

Another luxury operator, Asian Overland Services Tours and Travel, tries to deliver the best VIP

# ment

Noppasin Wongchum/123RF.com



treatment. This can be fine dining in a private club, helicopter rides to enthrall guests with a bird's eye of the city, or hiring a specialist to accompany clients on shopping sprees. The specialist has an intimate knowledge of the best offerings in the city, and is able to recommend confidently to guests what they should buy and where to get it. He or she will also be a personal shopper if required.

AOS uses the exclusive Malaysian Petroleum Club restaurant, for example, to impress rich clients. Said managing director, Yap Sook Ling: "Dulang Suites restaurant is very impressive, and has great

views of the city.

"Periodically some luxury hotels in the city will also bring in Michelin-star cooks for a short-term and this gives our clients the opportunity to (enjoy the gastronomic experience)."

Luxury Tours Malaysia meanwhile banks on cultural experiences to differentiate Malaysia from competitors. Senior manager, Arokia Das, believes real cultural insights are what moneyed people want.

The operator therefore organises private batik printing or local cooking classes, for instance. "In the past, we have also organised programmes where we bring in local aboriginal people to teach guests how to shoot from blowpipes and make a fire without using matches," Das said.

"If the group size is more than four people, we can take them to a traditional village to see how the locals live, and the tour ends with a meal in the village."

Make no mistake: the setting may be a humble *kampung*, but the meal is an elaborate affair. Traditional dishes are catered for by a hotel and expensive cutlery is used. "We don't expect our guests to eat with their fingers as we do," said Das.

To attract more luxury travellers, Arokia said he works with out-bound travel agents from various markets overseas that are specialising in the luxury segment.

"We've seen a three to six per cent year-on-year growth from the Indian subcontinent. We are also seeing an increasing number from Eastern Europe (Poland, Hungary and Slovenia)."

He said there is heightened awareness about Malaysia's luxury offerings due to Tourism Malaysia's promotions overseas.

World Avenues' Bhoonee added that new hotels such as St Regis Kuala Lumpur, opening in early 2016, and W Kuala Lumpur (2017) will complement the offerings of existing hotels catering to this segment, aside from adding prestige to

the destination.

"Many Middle East luxury tourists spend about three days in Kuala Lumpur, with shopping as their main activity. Thus, we place them in luxury hotels such as the Mandarin Oriental, Westin and Majestic Hotel, then drive them to Pavilion Kuala Lumpur and Suria KLCC for shopping," he said.

"We also take them on private tours using luxury vehicles to eco-tourism sites on the outskirts of the city such as Batu Caves, Templer Park and Forest Research Institute of Malaysia.

"As well, as their average length of stay is two weeks, we combine Kuala Lumpur with The Banjaran Hotsprings Retreat or destinations such as Penang and Langkawi."

AOS' Yap, who works with luxury agent partners from China to tap exclusive clients, said waiving the visa requirements for luxury travellers from China will help grow the market further.

"It is not so much the cost (of obtaining a visa) but the hassle of getting one," she pointed out.

Since October 1, the visa requirement has been waived only for Chinese groups with a minimum size of 20 people who use tour operators that are registered with Malaysia's Tourism and Culture Ministry.

“

**We cannot compete with the likes of Dubai (in terms of the biggest or largest this and that). Thus, we have to take this approach (of differentiating the offering).**

Ally Bhoonee,  
executive director,  
World Avenues





## Five luxe products

### **Park the jet or throw an event at SkyPark**

SkyPark Regional Aviation Centre, a new, separate facility across Subang SkyPark Terminal, provides hangars for private jets and handles aircraft arrival and departure, refuelling and aircraft maintenance, among services.

It is also designed to cater for exclusive private events, aviation or non-aviation related. Global Kitchen, a subsidiary of Saujana Hotel, is the official F&B partner of SkyPark and offers inflight and on-site catering services.

### **VisitKL from the air**

VisitKL, Kuala Lumpur City Hall tourism unit, has introduced helicopter tours targeted at high-

end tourists who want aerial views of the Malaysian capital and its surroundings.

The rides take off from the Lake Titiwangsa Kuala Lumpur heliport. Customers may choose from 15-, 30- or 60-minute helicopter rides.

The hour-long ride covers places outside Kuala Lumpur such as Subang, Bukit Jalil and Putrajaya.

For bookings, email: rlan@hophonolidays.com

### **St Regis Kuala Lumpur to open April 1**

The St Regis Kuala Lumpur will open on April 1, 2016 with 200 rooms and suites. Located at KL Sentral Precinct, it is minutes away from the National Museum, Botanical Gardens Kuala Lumpur and the shopping paradise of Bukit Bintang Road. There are seven meeting spaces, the largest being 1,500sqm.

### **Nobu with a view**

Located on Level 56 of Tower 3 Petronas in the iconic KLCC development, Nobu Kuala Lumpur

offers innovative Japanese cuisine which is complemented by stunning views of the PETRONAS Twin Towers and Kuala Lumpur's skyline.

Spanning 1,115sqm Nobu Kuala Lumpur's main dining area and sushi bar can accommodate up to 200 guests. The restaurant also houses two bars, a lounge and private dining rooms.

### **An Outlet for some serious retail therapy**

Mitsui Outlet Park KLIA Sepang offers a factory outlet shopping mall concept and is conveniently located near Kuala Lumpur International Airport.

Your clients need not worry about having to lug their luggage around while shopping. Facilities to make them shop and spend at ease include a free baggage storage service. A flight check-in centre also allows travellers to obtain their boarding pass, while a flight information display system allows them to check flight information without leaving the outlet.

**Left** Nobu Kuala Lumpur  
**Right** Mitsui Outlet Park KLIA Sepang

# Dynamic Dolomites

Once-aspirational destinations have quickly become banal for sophisticated FITs from Asia, which are growing in numbers. Recommend Italy's Dolomites and see their faces light up, says **Raini Hamdi**

**What could be** more explosive than the everlasting allure of Venice with the bizarre ruggedness of the Dolomites combined? The Dolomites. A name befittingly close to 'dynamite' and 'dynamic' – every bit this unique mountain range in the northern Italian Alps is.

Venice has feminine, wily charms, while the Dolomites exudes masculine, single-focus power. A contrast that is so perfect and compelling – think 'His' & 'Hers', Ying & Yang, Snow & Ice.

Venice and the Dolomites are only a 2.5 hours drive away from each other. While the former is known to every well-clad Asian tourist, the same cannot be said of the Dolomites. Currently, it is fair to say only the discerning

Asians would have the Dolomites on their radar – like the couple from Singapore and Hong Kong who recently booked out the entire Queen of the Alps hotel, Rosa Alpina Hotel & Spa (see page 37) for their wedding. They could have chosen Florence or Rome, but no, they chose the village of San Cassiano. Where??? At 1,537m above sea level in the tourist district of Alta Badia. The village has only 750 inhabitants. What a way to get away from pesky journalists and inquisitive aunties alike.

But having been there myself recently, I believe the real reason must lie in the sense of exclusivity. To experience the Dolomites in sheer luxury, one needs a hotel like Rosa Alpina Hotel & Spa, a Relais

**No wonder Le Corbusier, a pre-eminent architect of the 1900s, described them as the "most beautiful architectonic work in the world".**

**Below**  
Tre Cime in Lavarredo, the most famous mountains in the Dolomites

& Chateaux member which cocoons you the way an exquisite glove warms your cold hands beautifully. It is a convenient location from which to drive to the various must-see trails. It is a destination in itself – those in the know go there just to eat at its two-Michelin-star St Hubertus Restaurant, helmed by executive chef Norbert Niederkofler. Its team, led by resident manager Stefania Belle while I was there, showers you with care and love the way only families do. The contrast with the rugged elements of its surroundings is a spell.

I've wandered around in the Death Valley, US, and hiked the Swiss Alps, but nothing prepared me for the uniqueness of the Dolomites. Unlike triangle mounds most mountains are, I gasped upon seeing the Dolomites, which are exquisite pinnacles, spires, cathedral-like towers, dramatic vertical limestone walls, various other remarkable sculptural forms – with colours from pink hues to fiery reds. No wonder the Dolomites, comprising 18 peaks rising to above 3,000m covering 141,903ha, are a UNESCO World Heritage Site. No wonder Le Corbusier, a pre-eminent architect of the 1900s, described them as the "most beautiful architectonic work in the world".

Combined with Venice and its lagoon, planners can offer Asian luxury travellers two UNESCO sites at one go.

Italy has done well this year. According to results from the latest European Cities Marketing-MKG report, the city of Milan experienced the strongest RevPAR in Europe in the first three quarters of 2015, over the same period last year, thanks to Expo Milan which was held from May 1 to October 31, while the city of romance, Venice, too, was ahead of last year. Venice experienced an average daily rate rise of over 19 per cent, leading to a RevPAR increase of 17.3 per cent.

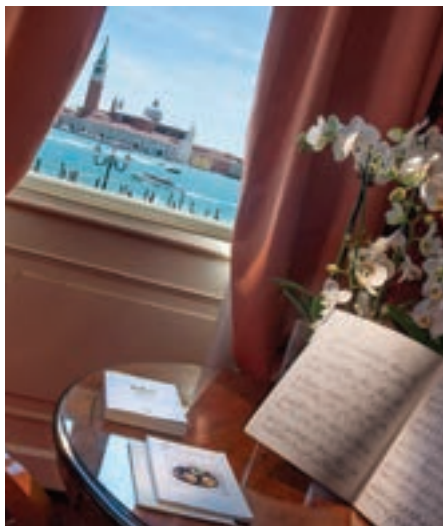
Arrivederci!



tomasi111/123RF.com



# Hotel Londra Palace



**Above** Superb location with views of Venice lagoon

*By Raini Hamdi*

**LOCATION**

Superb location right on the promenade of Riva degli Schiavoni and steps away from St Mark’s Square. The freedom this affords to explore Venice by foot, water taxi or public boat is priceless.

**Name** Hotel Londra Palace  
**No. of rooms and suites** 53  
**Address** Riva Degli Schiavoni 4171, 30122, Venice, Italy  
**Contact** Tel: (39) 041 5200-533; Email: info@londrapalace.com; Website: www.londrapalace.com; a Relais & Chateaux hotel

**AMBIENCE**

Its size and scale are not what its name suggests, ie, a palace, but there is a classy air about it, no doubt due to its pedigree in Ven-

ice as a heritage hotel, which has seen the likes of Tchaikovsky and Borges staying at the establishment. It has an aura of classic elegance and the romance of old-school hospitality that is missing these days.

**ROOM**

Each of its 53 rooms is different. I just love mine (room 508), which is right at the rooftop with superb views of a busy Venice lagoon and

the island of San Giorgio Maggiore.

My room is long and spacious, with separate living/ dining and bedroom areas. The bathroom even has a bathtub and a separate shower, which is a luxury for a hotel built more than 150 years ago.

But the best feature of my room is the bed linen: 100 per cent top quality linen on a king-sized bed, starched every so lightly it is a joy to jump onto after a day of a lot of walking. This hotel is king when it comes to providing luxuries; there’s free speedy Wi-Fi, LCD TV with satellite and Sky channels and authentic Biedermeier furniture.

True to old-school hospitality, a bottle of Prosecco and a tray of friandise cakes, pralines and fruits are personally served – at the right timing after I’ve just finished unpacking.

**FACILITIES**

The hotel’s Do Leoni Restaurant and the LondraBar, both of which have outdoor verandas, are the places to see and be seen. I look forward

to breakfast on the restaurant’s veranda, to watch the promenade come to life with stalls, buskers and an endless stream of tourists from all over the world. Oh my god, it’s as if the whole of Guangdong has descended upon Venice! I love cruise ships, but I’m not sure, given Venice’s fragile state of being, that this kind of volume is good for it. But that’s another story.

I love being in the restaurant’s or the bar’s sheltered outdoor terrace when everyone else is rushing for the sights; it reminds me that because of the hotel’s location, I can do everything at my own time and pace. From the envious glances I get from tourists whose eyes are invariably drawn to the inviting restaurant or LondraBar, I know they wish it too.

In the evenings, Do Leoni Restaurant is a must for gourmands. Venice has no shortage of restaurants, but most of them are too commercialised for me. My dinner at Do Leoni Restaurant, however, puts back my faith in Venice as a place where you can have genuinely good Italian if you know where to go. I’m served by David, whose genteel service is what one imagines guests in grand hotels of yesteryears had enjoyed. The menu created by executive chef Loris Indri is beautifully modern. I love my scampi tails tempura on avocado tartar, sea bass with leek cream sauce and, oh my, the soufflé is worth the wait.

**SERVICE**

As mentioned, think ‘old school’ professionalism and attention to details.

**VERDICT**

Every bit a palace in location, service and a king at pampering guests with quality everything.

# Rosa Alpina Hotel & Spa



**Above** The hotel exterior in winter

*By Raini Hamdi*

## LOCATION

In the serene, picturesque village of San Cassiano in Badia, north-east Italy. An easy 2.5-hour drive from Venice and I'm in the heart of the Dolomites.

## AMBIENCE

This hotel feels like home. Cozy corners, a fireplace, the warm hues of wooden flooring and golden candelabras, fresh roses everywhere, jars of cookies and sweets for

the taking and, my first encounter with the real reason why this hotel feels like home: Resident manager Stefania Belle comes flying down the stairs to welcome me; insists that I have a bit of early lunch on her as my room isn't ready. It's the first encounter of the hotel's family-like hospitality which will provide me with many happy and relaxed moments over the next few days.

## ROOM

There are 51 individually-designed rooms. My Chalet Loft Suite is far from a humble chalet or loft. Rather, it's alpine chic bar none! And how utterly luxurious it is in space, quality furnishings and amenities, typically a Relais & Chateaux (R&C). I step into the balcony and I don't want to leave it: views of the hotel's private, immaculate garden below and the dense pine forest across, not to mention the fresh air, makes me feel utterly content and recharged.

## FACILITIES

But leave the warm and modern comforts of my suite I must, for the Dolomites beckon. Stefania even takes the trouble of arranging for a private guide, Diego, to come to the hotel and brief me on the must-see's, as I have only five days. At the end of our meeting, I feel I must stay a month, for there is just so much to see and do, and it involves hours of driving and hiking in order to see the stunning sites.

After an active outing each day,

the thought of returning to the plush hotel is comforting. The highlight begins with a drink at the bar, where the soft-spoken bartender, Omar, serves gracefully while the pianist plays and sings. Then dinner, always at the hotel, for it has the best restaurants. People come here just to eat at its two-Michelin-star St Hubertus, helmed by R&C grand chef Norbert Niederkofler. No wonder! Every dish is a work of art, delicious and served always by a line of white-gloved waiters, led by the dashing Valentine.

The Wine & Grill is where I go for comfort Italian food. It had mucked up the early lunch on arrival (my 'Salad Leafs with Lobster and Endives' came without a single salad leaf). But as the menu lists mouth-watering salads, grills and wood-oven baked pizzas, I give it another try and it's heartwarming how they try to make up for that little error. Besides, Antonella who serves me is yet another staff who makes this place so wonderful.

The Wine & Grill also has private rooms that serve meat, cheese and chocolate fondues, perfect when the weather outside is cold.

For more pampering, there's a spa with an indoor pool, jacuzzi, steam bath and Finnish sauna.

## SERVICE/VERDICT

I always think I'm lucky if I find one or two stars among a hotel's team members. Rosa Alpina is astonishing in that it has so many stars. This speaks for small, family-run hotels. The three-generation Pizzinini family can be proud of their achievement. Rosa Alpina is as monumental as the Dolomites – only, size has nothing to do with it.

**Name** Rosa Alpina Hotel & Spa  
**No. of rooms and suites** 51  
**Address** Strada Micura de Ru, 20, 39030 San Cassiano in Badia, Dolomites, Italy  
**Contact** Tel: (39) 0471-849-500; Email: info@rosaalpina.it; Website: www.rosaalpina.it; a Relais & Chateaux hotel



# FIT for the alps

Sophisticated, less daunted by price markups and eager to explore new places and experiences, Asian repeat visitors are trading the touristy trail for quaint little towns, mountain villages and hidden corners of Switzerland, reports **Rosa Ocampo**

**Asian presence** is becoming more visible in St Gallen down to Chur and Davos in the east, from Montreux in the west onto Verbier, Crans Montana and Saas-Fee in the south, from Bern to Interlaken and Emmental.

This comes at a time when the alpine destination has become more expensive with the lifting of the euro/Swiss franc exchange rate early this year.

With clockwork precision, Switzerland Tourism ramped up marketing to Asian FITs including families and repeat travellers as the destination became less affordable to Europeans. Asia's growing importance is obvious during the Switzerland





Travel Mart in Zermatt in September: the region fielded the biggest contingent of 120 buyers, or 25 per cent of the 480 invited buyers from 52 countries.

Although “internationalisation” was how Switzerland Tourism CEO, Jurg Schmid, dubbed the shift in inbound tourism from nearby European countries into longhaul Asian markets, “Asianisation” could well be the catchword, as the continent is expected to comprise 14 per cent of total visitors by 2016, from a mere one per cent two decades ago.

Asia, too, is seeing a clear shift away from groups to FITs. Half of visitors from Hong Kong are FITs;

China’s FIT market is still small but will soon follow Hong Kong’s pattern. Singapore is pretty much an FIT market. Thai FITs are growing while South Korea is shifting to FIT in the past three to five years. The Philippines and Vietnam have small FITs but the potential is there.

Asian FITs liken Switzerland, a premium destination, to an expensive watch – it’s worth the price. Maurus Lauber, CEO, Swiss Travel System, summed it up: “We are perfectly made for individual travellers: clean, safe and easy to travel”.

Ivan Breiter, Switzerland Tourism director for South-east Asia, shared that FITs from South-east Asia stayed longer – not just for one to two nights but for three to four nights. He also noted the shift away from visiting multiple European countries to mono-Switzerland or semi-mono travel, pairing Switzerland with another destination like Paris, Rome or Germany.

And for mature source markets such as Hong Kong, an emerging trend is the quest for a more in-depth outdoor experience such as easy hiking and cycling instead of mere sightseeing and relaxing. For instance, Jenny Ho, operations manager, Sincerity Travel Hong Kong, said it had five hiking groups to Switzerland this year, from just one when it launched the programme three years ago.

But pricing remains an issue, particularly several months ago when a basket of Asian currencies weakened in value, which means Asians needed more money to travel abroad, especially to longhaul Switzerland.

To make Switzerland more affordable for them, Asian tourists are being encouraged to go during off-seasons (March-June and September to mid-November), and to mountains and villages during weekdays when rates are lower than in the weekends.

Rolex watches are high on the

**Although “internationalisation” was how Switzerland Tourism CEO, Jurg Schmid, dubbed the shift in inbound tourism from nearby European countries into longhaul Asian markets, “Asianisation” could well be the catchword.**

shopping list of certain market segments but since prices for them are the same in Lucerne as in Singapore, it is a reason to not travel to Switzerland.

However, Breiter said there is still a cache of collectors who prefer buying in Switzerland which still has the biggest spread of Rolex models and are sure to be real. “There’s an emotional value of buying designer goods in places where they have been made,” he explained.

Another popular price buster is the Swiss Travel Pass, a train ticket that takes travellers through the country’s most scenic regions which can be used on consecutive or non-consecutive days.

Yen Thing, tours consultant of Kuala Lumpur-based Boustead Travel Services, said the pass was popular and good value-for-money as the trains were safe, efficient and well-connected to many places.

She also pointed out that the Swiss Travel Pass was family-oriented and offered generous perks, including free admission to 470 museums and free travel for children 16 years old and below for up to five children per travelling adult. The Adult Saver Fare snips 15 per cent off the original fare while the Swiss Youth Pass shaves 15 per cent off the fare for those under 26 years old.

Considered a good indicator of FIT travel, sale of Swiss Travel Pass is “booming” with India as the number one in sales, according to Swiss Travel System’s Lauber.

Indeed, there is growing demand for Switzerland from Indian FITs including families, honeymoon couples inspired by Bollywood movies shot in the alpine destination, and young students who combine Switzerland with other destinations, according to Sahil Dewan, executive director of Delhi-based Dewan Travels.

“Indians love to spend time in the mountains. They love that they

**Above** Resplendent in winter: Kempinski Grand Hotel des Bains, St Moritz – see page 41

# longhaul switzerland

can take the train without spending too much. We have Switzerland in all our European itineraries and tourists spend at least two nights there," said Dewan.

Keen to host Asian tourists, Swiss industry players are moving to meet the specific needs and requirements of this growing and high-spending source market. For Adrian Mueller, president of Romantik Hotels & Restaurants, one way is to offer a more personalised service to Asian guests and different experiences of the real Switzerland, including the chance to try local cuisines and wines.

"Asians going to Chur are still small, but it's a good start," said Mueller, who owns and operates Romantik Hotel Stern in Chur. Operators in the area were collaborating with Chur Tourism Bureau to work the Asian market, he said.

They are also investing in attractions that appeal to Asian travellers. Kambly SA, maker of the famous Swiss cookie brand that has a 105-year-old, family-owned chocolate factory in the Emmental village of Trubschachen, opened a themed attraction last May. There is a rope-making factory using high-technology steel rope and an interactive pottery factory with traditional potters at work, among others, and visitors can participate in activities from making chocolate cookies to sports in the Emmental valley.

Kambly is a pretty new destination for Asians; it was getting its share of FITs from Singapore, China and Korea, said Jan Cermak, Kambly's head of B2C and e-commerce and market manager for China.

Also targeting Asians is the chocolate production site of Maestrani in Flawil, St Gallen, where tourists get to experience the different processes of making chocolate bars, and taste and shop for their favourite flavours.

Monika Knobel, who is in charge of events at Maestrani's, said Maes-

**Right** Adrian Mueller, president of Romantik Hotels & Restaurants, and staff are eager to welcome Asian guests



trani's Chocolarium or ScoggiLand will rise in April 2017, an enhancement of the current chocolate production site, with factory tours that will include designing your own chocolate bar and offers of chocolate pouring and other related courses.

Many Swiss hotels and restaurants already have Wi-Fi, a big plus for Asian travellers who are mostly Internet and social-media savvy, according to Daniela Toneatti, assistant sales and marketing of HLS Hotels and Spa, which operates Hotel Beatus in Merlingen and Hotel Ermitage in Schonried.

Another way to win Asians is through their stomach. Bettina Zinnert, whose family owns Wengen Classic Hotels, said all rooms in the hotels Silberhorn and Wengener Hof both in the Jungfrau village of Wengen, were equipped with a kettle. Together with their third hotel, Belvedere, the hotels have rice on the menu, Asian soup for breakfast and Asian food on request.

In summer, the hotels have a lot of Asian guests looking for a real Swiss experience in the mountains. "More than 50 per cent of our guests are from Asia," Zinnert said.

Best Western Plus Mirabeu in Lausanne has cup noodles for breakfast – and the chef knows to cook it, with the accompanying fried egg just the way Asians like it. Vegan food is easily available and

some hotels and restaurants ask guests beforehand of food that they don't eat.

With China having replaced France as the fifth biggest inbound market for Switzerland, several industry players including Wengen Classic Hotels are bringing a tinge of home by having Chinese TV channels in all rooms and brochures in Chinese language.

Fabienne Jeanneret, key account manager of Free Republic of Holidays, said the company's resort in Saas Fee has a Chinese-speaking manager based in China. There were more individuals than groups from China, she noted.

Andrea Federer, marketing assistant, St Gallen-Bodensee Tourismus, noted that while Asia was not that big a market, it was increasing. "We want to have more guests from Asia so we have produced a sales manual in Chinese and we did three weeks in Asian sales call this year," Federer said.

He said travellers from Singapore, Thailand, China and Japan were attracted to St Gallen's unique selling point: its proximity to Austria, Germany and Lichtenstein makes it the best starting point for trips to Appenzeller and Lake Constance. Top attractions also include the World Heritage site of the baroque cathedral and the Abbey library, and the internationally-renowned St Gallen embroideries.

“

**We want to have more guests from Asia so we have produced a sales manual in Chinese and we did three weeks in Asian sales call this year.**

Andrea Federer, marketing assistant, St Gallen-Bodensee Tourismus

# Kempinski Grand Hotel des Bains

By Raini Hamdi

## LOCATION

St Moritz, the famous haunt of European jet-setters, thanks to its grand hotels, powdery ski slopes, elite shopping strip, marvellous hiking trails (a favourite of mine is Muottas Muragl, which takes me to Segantini hut at 2,731m) and an abundance of great restaurants to cap a super day out. And the hotel's location just minutes from it all is a feather in its cap.

With the exception of Japanese, Asians have not made it to St Moritz in big numbers yet. I doubt this will be for long, as no sophisticated traveller worth his salt will say he does not know St Moritz.

**AMBIENCE** One of the grand hotels in St Moritz, the Kempinski Grand Hotel des Bains looks like a fairy-tale castle straight out of a glamorous movie set. It is low-rise, sprawling and snow white with

sky-blue windows (see page 38). Captivating right from the start, it is also at once warm and welcoming, not stiff as many of these grand hotels are. This is in no small measure due to the cheerful doormen and

friendly front office staff who skilfully make me feel like a modern-day princess.

## ROOM

To my delight, 'grand' here does not mean dark, brooding, sombre and uptight in order to keep up with decorum and old money tradition. On the contrary, the hotel



Above Lobby – a grand hotel that keeps up with the times

looks airy, bright and modern right from the lobby. There are lots of fresh flowers and it smells divine. An air of relaxed splendour permeates everywhere in the property. Those who wish for it to be more 'Swiss-ly' only have to look out the windows to a beautiful, green surrounding outside. As well, the hotel pays homage to the history of Alpine tourism in the Engadin region creatively through modern and old photos in rooms or public areas. I love my Classic Junior Suite for its clean lines, comfort-above-fad design and rich furnishings. It is far from junior in size! Baggage arrives right after me and in 20 minutes, after I've gone ooh and ah over the views, the super-duper bed, the

large bathroom, the speedy Wi-Fi, etc, the bell rings – welcome champagne is served in my living room.

## FACILITIES

The hotel has four restaurants, a bar, a cigar lounge, six meeting rooms, a 2,000m<sup>2</sup> fitness and spa area, a kids club, a ski school, a sports shop and a casino.

Breakfast is an event in itself and reflects the hotel's spirit of largeness, generosity and top quality.

## SERVICE

Consistently exceptional.

## VERDICT

Now among the top three in my own list of The World's Best Hotels.

**Name** Kempinski Grand Hotel des Bains  
**No. of rooms** 184 rooms, 27 suites and residences  
**Address** Via Mezdi 27, 7500 St Moritz, Switzerland  
**Contact** Tel: (41) 81-838-3838; Email: info.stmoritz@kempinski.com; Website: www.kempinski.com/stmoritz



## 7132 Hotel

By Raini Hamdi

### LOCATION

For Asian FITs longing for a place they don't have to share with thousands of other tourists, it cannot get more remote than this.

The hotel is located 1,250m above sea level in Vals, Graubunden, a village that prides itself on having "1,000 inhabitants, 1,000 sheep, 1,000 guest beds", and is bent on preserving its old ways and values. Vals is famous for the thermal springs centre at this hotel, designed by award-winning Swiss architect Peter Zumthor. The other two things it is famous for are the bottled mineral water, Valser, and the beautiful Valsian quartzite.

### AMBIENCE

Its surroundings are so quiet I can hear a pin drop. On the streets, I hardly see anyone. There is surreal beauty in having the mountains to myself and strolling a village that isn't at all commercialised. People come here to rest and recharge – indeed it is at the thermal springs spa that I see a lot of them, and a few of them on the hiking trails as the mountains to traverse are vast.

### ROOM

I am in a Zumthor room in the main building (Room 712). It's unmistakably Zumthor The Modernist and Minimalist, gleaming with white walls and white linen that contrast with brilliant blue silk curtains, orange-red kilim carpets and black lacquer classic furniture. Even the freshly-made chocolates in the room are unadulterated. And only one painting is allowed – if you can see it (it's 15cm X 15cm).



Above Room at renovated 7132 Hotel designed by Tadao Ando

Aside from 33 Zumthor rooms in the main building, the hotel, which just finished massive renovations, also boasts three new 90m<sup>2</sup> suites designed by Japanese starchitect Kengo Kuma. Each suite booking comes with – listen to this – a helicopter or a limousine at your disposal should you wish to lunch in Geneva, shop in Zurich or whatever takes your fancy.

Another wing, House of Architects, now fields 13 and 18 new rooms respectively designed by Kuma

and another starchitect, Tadao Ando. At 20m<sup>2</sup>, the rooms may be small yet are large in vision.

### FACILITIES

Zumthor was ahead of his time in designing the Zen-like thermal spa in the 70s. A 1,885m<sup>2</sup> building made of 60,000 plates of Valsian quartzite, it is a sight to behold. A special feeling engulfs me when I'm in the outdoor main thermal pool

overlooking the mountains. There are no fewer than five other pools of varying temperatures; sweating stones; treatment rooms and many other facilities one would wish of a spa.

Gastronomy is another of the hotel's USP. Its Silver restaurant is helmed by Sven Wassmer, who previously worked for three-Michelin-star Andreas Caminada. At the end of of the spectrum is the homely Da Papa which, as its name suggests, serves authentic Italian in a cosy, homely setting. Caesar the manager rules this home and he is so personable and generous I can't help going back there again.

### SERVICE

I love that the hotel employs many young people who are friendly, knowledgeable and eager to please.

### VERDICT

A best-kept secret of a world-class, independent hotel in an away-from-it-all location.

**Name** 7132 Hotel  
**No. of rooms** 86  
**Address** 7132 Vals,  
Switzerland

**Contact**  
Tel: (+41) 58-7132-000;  
Email: hotel@7132.com;  
Website: www.7132.com

# Team player

By Karen Yue

## What's your leadership style?

I adopt a consultative approach (and) consistently seek feedback from my staff and listen to them about how we can do things better, more collaboratively and more efficiently. As they feel invested in the brand and its direction and goals, the commitment to achieve and surpass expectations is present from the outset.

## What is the most exciting business decision you are making to bring SLH forward for another 25 years?

We recently unveiled a new look and feel for the brand that creates a dynamic platform for our "Independently minded" hotels and philosophy. This mindset isn't new as we have long been the champions of small and independent (properties), however, it provides us with a contemporary and representative brand positioning. We will also be launching several new initiatives for our guests, member hotels and travel partners over the course of the next year.

## What's your own definition of SLH's new tagline "Independently minded"?

It means that we are consistently different – we have our own voice and use it to provide a voice to these often hidden gems. We are passionate about finding small, luxury, independent, character-filled hotels that actively go above and beyond to set themselves apart. SLH hotel owners are proud of what makes them stand out; they wear their independence as a badge of honour, sometimes even passed down through generations.

## I hear that SLH has a new five-year

## plan. What's in store?

There are five key areas that we will be focusing on: a real focus on our hotels and the unique experience that they offer to SLH guests in existing and new destinations; ensuring consistently high levels of quality across the entire SLH collection through a more robust Quality Assurance programme; rewarding loyal SLH Club members with a new Club to be launched in September 2016; investing in technology such as new mobile apps and an updated Chinese website in addition to Spanish and German language sites; implementing new and updated distribution tools.

## How is the consumption of luxury travel evolving?

(Luxury travel has grown) 48 per cent in the last five years (according to the World Travel Monitor). We have observed a significant rise in independent travellers seeking out

The new CEO of Small Luxury Hotels of the World is a listener and he has adopted a collaborative approach in launching a new five-year plan to take the business forward

unique, local experiences, while the definition of luxury is progressing beyond mere material consumption to an experiential one.

## How can SLH make the most of this evolution?

Seeking out gems that offer genuine, one-of-a-kind experiences has been SLH's guiding principle for the past 25 years, and will continue to guide us as we seek out suitable hotels that resonate with the brand.



## A Starck contrast to traditional hotels

By Paige Lee Pei Qi

Feast your eyes upon the first Philippe Starck-designed hotel in Singapore, The South Beach, which has already been hailed as a visual stunner in the heart of Singapore's city landscape.

The interiors of this 654-room designer luxury hotel are exuberantly decked out by Starck, while its architecture is by Foster + Partners and Aedas. A fitting prelude to the wildly imaginative setting inside is an electronic art installation at the entrance.

A Starck contrast to traditional hotels, the hotel reception area is minimalistic, comprising seven desks each exuding a different culture and vibe. All check-in and check-out processes are done wirelessly using tablets. The lift ride up to the rooms is in itself an experience to behold as loud and psychedelic prints adorn the walls, while lights pulsate from the ceiling.

The South Beach has many cool social spaces that allow guests to connect with friends and business partners, or simply relax alone.

The two sky gardens on level 18 are a gem, offering an eclectic mix of designer couches, armchairs and stools for one to sit on and admire the breathtaking cityscape. Two infinity swimming pools and a gym complete the suite of facilities on this level.

The dining outlets are also attractions, each boasting a unique interior and character. The boldly named ADHD (All Day Hotel Dining) is an elegant space, in contrast to Laugh with its colourful prints and mishmash furniture.

The hotel is part of the South Beach mixed-use development which incorporates heritage sites – three army blocks and the well-known Non-Commissioned Officers (NCO) Club – along with two new tower blocks. The Court Martial Bar, set in one of the army blocks, draws on its court house history and serves concept drinks.

The second 1,200m<sup>2</sup> army block – South Beach Quarter – will be home to four new F&B concepts by lifestyle group Massive Collection. These include Vanity, a cocktail bar; Vatos Urban Tacos, a Korean-Mexican restaurant; The Armoury, a gastropub with a wide range of craft beers and boutique wines; and a nightclub. The grand ballroom, housed in the final army block, is the current talk of town – just dazzling in its design and lighting.



## Luxe City Guides goes B2B with Luxe Concierge

Hong Kong-based publisher Luxe City Guides now offers an enterprise version of its consumer-oriented application.

Named Luxe Concierge, the subscription-based app (US\$49 per month) was officially launched at Luxperience in Sydney last September, and is aimed at travel consultants and hotel concierges.

It offers them a platform where they can conveniently input and share their client's itineraries with clients on their smartphone devices.

Subscription also allows access to Luxe's full range of recommendations in 25 cities worldwide, updated by its editorial team on a monthly basis.

Simon Westcott, CEO of Luxe said: "What we do is help

consultants with lower-value recommendations, which are the restaurants and shops, the fiddly things that good (consultants) always do with a smile on their face for clients. But in their business model, those things have to be packaged up as an administration fee or booking fee.

"What we are giving on the platform is their own app, co-branded with Luxe, without them having to invest in their own proprietary software."

Going forward, Westcott hopes to demonstrate the product to potential luxury travel consultants first-hand.

"With Luxe Concierge officially launched to market, we are now focused on showcasing the product to as many high-end travel consultants, luxury hotel concierges and event planners as we can," Westcott said. – Dannon Har



## Insight's new gold edition aims to shine

By Paige Lee Pei Qi

Insight Vacations has rolled out its new Luxury Gold collection with the promise of whisking clients away in style and elegance to Europe in new itineraries.

Apart from staying at the finest hotels and dining at Michelin-star restaurants, the eight new Luxury Gold European journeys will also see guests going behind the scenes of iconic attractions, and travelling on Wi-Fi equipped luxury motor coaches.

For instance, in the 12-day Italy gold itinerary which showcases the iconic destinations of Rome, Capri, Perugia, Florence, Cinque Terre and Venice, guests will enter the Sistine Chapel for a private tour before it opens to the public.

Then on the island of Capri they will ride an open-top taxi to the five-star luxury boutique Signature Hotel, the Capri Palace and enjoy a lunch at Il Riccio, a Michelin-star restaurant famous for its waterside setting.

John Boulding, global CEO of Insight Vacations, said: "In Europe, guests on every tour will enjoy a Michelin dining experience, an outstanding collection of exceptional hotels, private and unique, out-of-hours visits to famous venues and sight."

"Travellers today live, dine and enjoy great standards back at home – so why would they settle for less when they travel?" he added.



## South-east Asian travellers yen for ryokan experience

By Dannon Har

Tokyo-based The Ryokan Collection is seeing increased stays by South-east Asian clients at its luxury inns based in off-the-beaten locations around Japan.

Heading a roadshow in the region recently, Hiroki Fukunaga, founder and CEO of The Ryokan Collection, said: "This year, we have decided to come to Singapore and Bangkok as we have seen a significant increase in guests from South-east Asia, especially from Singapore and Thailand."

According to Fukunaga, Singapore has chalked up a 55.2 per cent increase in the number of guests staying at its properties during January-July compared to the same period in 2014. Last year, a total of 918 guests from Singapore had stayed at one of its properties.

"Eighty-five per cent of ryokan business comes from domestic customers, with an increasing but limited number of international travellers," added Fukunaga.

With six new members this year, the collection now has a total of 32 independently-owned ryokan-styled hotels under its portfolio, with an average inventory size of 25 rooms.

"Our inventory is very small, so we have to reach very selected customers, those who are looking for something exclusive, experiential," he explained.

A loyalty scheme will be launched by the end of this year to entice more visitors and encourage repeats. Guests can earn a free night's stay upon completion of 10 separate stays at three or more of The Ryokan Collection's properties within a period of two years.

"In our own research, about 10 per cent of our customers already achieve this (benchmark)," Fukunaga said.

"Our main attraction are the meals. The best ryokans are the ones that serve the best food. Those keen on authentic Japanese cuisine will come back again," he said.

## Virtuoso moves into Asia with five member agencies

Virtuoso will launch its luxury travel network in the Asian market with the addition of five member agencies in Singapore and Hong Kong.

The five members are Country Holidays, Jebson Travel Group, Charlotte Travel, Luxe Travel and Quotient Travel Planner.

Michael Londregan, Asia-Pacific managing director of Virtuoso, said: "The Asia market-

place is scheduled to become an increasingly powerful force as the luxury travel market and Virtuoso is very excited to be developing our brand in Asia with these established and highly regarded members."

The expansion into Asia comes off the decision to base the new regional headquarters for Asia-Pacific in Australia, following the brand's

move into Europe and the UK in 2014, according to Londregan.

He added: "The growth of Virtuoso in the Asia-Pacific region proves that demand for service from expert travel advisors and experiential travel that is unique and bespoke is a global reality and Virtuoso is perfectly placed to help agencies and advisors move with the demand."



## Singapore's new Aura

By Raini Hamdi

Creating Singapore's next F&B institution is Aura, located in an institution itself, the country's former City Hall and Supreme Court which has been reincarnated as the National Gallery since November 24.

Aura is a four-in-one dining destination in the commanding building, whose grand, historic architecture, especially when lit at night, will wow your clients even before they even so much as step into the place.

Your decadent customers will feel at home on the rooftop Aura Sky Lounge (Level 6), which resembles a crowded SEVVA in Hong Kong with its all-embracing views. The spectacle before their eyes, of the Padang and Marina Bay skyline, alone makes this a must-go, for it gives a sweeping and uplifting vision of what this tiny country, which has just celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, has achieved.

Advise clients to go just before dusk at around 19.00 to have a drink at the sky lounge and enjoy the changing colours of the skyline before heading for dinner at Aura Restaurant, one level down. Or they could do post-dinner drinks too.

The Aura Restaurant itself is another must. Led by Beppe de Vito, who has also just opened ilLido Bali and Osteria Art Singapore, here's where your clients can enjoy artisanal, homely Italian at affordable prices in a world-class venue. The menu is all of one page, yet there is plentiful as it lists only the choicest, none-too-fancy dishes. It is agonising to forego one dish for another. Examples of dishes: Tagliolini with Scampi and Avruga

Caviar; Grilled Seabream, Pomegranate & Pistachio Salsa. And desserts – who says Italians are masters at only pasta? Thank goodness Aura Restaurant encourages guests to share dishes in a casual family style so typical of the Italians – and Singapore eating-out.

There is also a wine list of over 500 different labels, old world wines and arguably one of the city's best collection of Italian heavyweights.

The whole Sky Lounge can easily seat 300pax in case you have a client who wants to throw a party in Singapore. Aura Restaurant seats 90 pax.

In all, Aura holds three potential areas to fit groups or parties of all sizes and all occasions: Raw Bar (11.30-14.30 daily), which offers a free flow buffet of Mediterranean food for only S\$18++ (US\$13++) per pax; Tea Lounge (14.30-17.00 daily), which offers classic European high tea; and Lounge Bar (17.00 to 01.00 daily), which offers after-work drinks and deluxe bar grub.

Aura Restaurant is opened daily from 12.00-14.30 and from 18.30-22.30. A four-course dinner set menu is priced at S\$68++ per person, just to give an idea of pricing.

Tel: (+65) 6866 1977; email: book@aura.sg; www.facebook.com/aura.nationalgallery

The National Gallery also boasts other F&B outlets, Yàn (Chinese restaurant) and Smoke & Mirrors by Park Hotel Group, National Kitchen by Violet Oon, Odette by The Lo & Behold Group, and SAHA and The Altimate by The Padang FNB.



### Blissful bedroom slippers

We've found the most blissful bedroom slippers – slip these on at Shangri-La Hotel, at The Shard, London. Created by London-based designer, Beatrix Ong, they are a new limited edition only for guests and residents of the hotel.

The slippers marry sustainability, high design and comfort that both brands are renowned for. Made with luxurious silk velvet and non-slip suede soles, and available in two sizes, the backs can be folded down, transforming them into a slip on style. Insoles are made from bamboo and charcoal, natural deodorisers that are also anti-perspiring and ionising.

They complement Acqua Di Parma bathroom products, Chinese Tea Sets and a pillow menu. Free for guests of the hotel's three Signature Suites, they are available in all rooms and suites for purchase at £88 (US\$131) per pair.

Ong, the first creative director for Jimmy Choo, is also launching a new concept collection in collaboration with the Design Museum in London.



# Lounging in style

By Xinyi Liang-Pholsena

Connecting the dots in between flights in an age of lengthy security checks amid increased global travel is what independent airport lounge operator Plaza Premium Group (PPG) has firmly on its radar, as it plans to invest over US\$100 million on its four core businesses and expand to some 200 locations in the next few years.

"A lot of people doing similar business (in airport hospitality) wait for Tarzan to see them, but we go into the jungle to look for Tarzan," said Song Hoi-see, CEO & founder of PPG (below), on the company's expansion strategies and vision to provide a seamless airport experience for travellers.

The Hong Kong-based group is upping the game for its flagship brand, Plaza Premium Lounge, by expanding to Taiwan Taoyuan and Rio de Janeiro-Galeão airports next year – the latter will open in time for the Rio 2016 Olympics – in addition to its existing 130-plus locations across 35 international airports worldwide.

Inside Plaza Premium Lounges, upper-class travellers can have their own personal space in VIP rooms, indulge in a full-body massage, create their own dining experience from gourmet selections or call on a dedicated concierge to whisk them off to their first-class airline seat.

Allways, PPG's newly launched meet-and-greet services, can also be used by corporations to enable their VIP clients breeze through airport formalities, families with elderly parents who are unfamiliar with air travel or even for lovers to surprise their partners with welcome gifts, Song elaborated.

This service is currently available at Toronto Pearson International Airport and New Delhi's Indira Gandhi International Airport, and will soon be introduced to airports in Singapore, Macau, Kuala Lumpur, Muscat and London Heathrow.

Meanwhile, the unveiling of airport transit hotel Aerotel Singapore adds another feather in the cap for PPG as part of its diversification strategy.

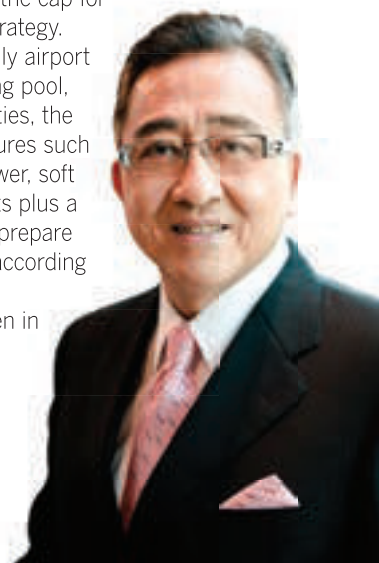
Aside from being the world's only airport hotel to boast an outdoor swimming pool, poolside bar, gym and library facilities, the 70-key Aerotel Singapore also features such amenities as pillow menu, hot shower, soft acoustics, natural skincare products plus a massage service to help travellers prepare and recover from a lengthy flight, according to Song.

Other Aerotels are slated to open in Abu Dhabi and London Heathrow.

As well, a brand-new airport dining concept Flight Club will be unveiled in Kuala Lumpur International Airport this month to enable travellers indulge in a dining experience centred around their personal preferences.



Plaza Premium Lounge in Hong Kong (top) and London (above); Right Song





## Make your own movie at Trisara

By Raini Hamdi

Trisara Phuket has launched Director's Den (D-Den), a fully-equipped studio manned by an in-house team of professional producers and digital artists, to help guests create compelling stories of their holiday in photo, video or even virtual reality formats – a first in the industry.

"Most people do not have the time, expertise and resources to master the art of pro-

ducing top-quality photo, video or VR keepsakes. Plus, most people today do not just want to consume content, they want to create it," said Kittisak Pattamasavee, vice president sales and marketing of Montara Hospitality Group which owns the luxury resort.

So D-Den provides them the solutions. If guests just want someone to identify the most instagrammable spots at Trisara, a buddy

will be assigned to accompany them. If they want to rent equipment instead of using their mobile, there are GoPro cameras for rent.

Clients can then select one of the storyboards which have been prepared for them and, with the help of dedicated producers, direct how they want the story to unfold and in what format – movie, digital or virtual reality (VR). D-Den has also prepared destination footage capturing, say, a sunset or a hermit crab moving in the sand, so they don't have to waste moments shooting those scenes.

"For special moments, such as proposals, VR is so much more engaging than photos or videos. They can almost relive every moment in 360 degree – it's as close as being there when someone watches it," said Kittisak.

Fully launched in November, D-Den charges guests different fees for the services required. In conjunction with its launch, Trisara is offering a stay four nights and the fourth night free, with full perks such as daily breakfast for two, roundtrip private airport transfers, free Wi-Fi, etc. Priced from 97,400 baht (US\$2,722) for an Ocean Pool Room, the offer is available till March 31.

"We have a lot of guests for whom storytelling is important. Our clients from every single market are now younger. Four years ago, their average age typically was 50 years, today it's 42 years. As well, we have developed new markets such as China and Korea, and these markets comprise younger people, mostly honeymooners, so we have to find ways to engage them.

Younger people take selfies, love to share their holiday memories, but often don't have the time or patience to do so in a compelling way," said Kittisak.



From top: Lucky & Ai; The Belle Époque

## Where to get very expensive cocktails

**Place:** Avi, poolside bar of Velaa Private Island, Maldives

Baron Gaston Legrand 1888 and Dom Perignon Cuvee Rose 1982.

Here are a few of our favourites from the new Vintage Cocktail Menu:

### **Lucky & Ai (US\$6,530)**

Homage to the Prohibition era in the US, this cocktail is created with a vintage 1930's Guy Lheraud, Vieil Armagnac and Salon 1988 Champagne.

### **The Belle Époque (US\$4,285)**

A time of peace and prosperity, this era is considered the start of the 'golden age' post World War I and is made with a rare Guy Lheraud, Vieil-Armagnac,

### **(And the modest) A Good Year Cocktail (USD\$1,930)**

1930, known as the year of peace and tranquility, heard *BBC Radio* from London on April 18 reporting that "There is no news" and a good year for all, uses vintage Armagnac – Guy Lheraud, Vieil Armagnac 1930 and topped with Louis Roederer Cristal.

Way to raise the glass to a luxurious new year! Happy 2016 from all of us at *TTG Asia Luxury*.

**ILTM ASIA** SHANGHAI 30<sup>TH</sup> MAY – 2<sup>ND</sup> JUNE 2016

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