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editor's note

Renovations of grand old dames always elicit a mixed response at first. Remember when Raffles Hotel in Singapore re-opened in 1991 after a two-year expansion that saw significant changes? It had its fair share of criticisms: Lost its soul. Too bland. Too white, some had said.

Over time however the naysayers were silenced and Raffles Hotel Singapore became 'normal' and accepted again.

People feel a sense of attachment to icons of their day, much like the comfort one attaches to a favourite armchair. They may accept that change is needed, but do not usually know what that change should be. I'm one of them.

When I walked into the new Grand Deluxe Harbour View Suite at The Peninsula, Hong Kong, my first impression was, 'I could well be in a Mandarin Oriental guestroom'. But it didn't take long for me to feel at home in it and – here's the thing – the room was more intuitive than it ever could be, thanks to the smartest use of modern technology I've seen (see *luxury renovations*, page 20). After my stay, I went back to look at photos of the suite when I stayed there a couple of years ago. I could not help laughing at how old and dated it looked.

We should learn to hold back our tongue in criticising changes, so that icons of yesteryears could also be the beloved treasures of the next generation.

Raini Hamdi, Senior Editor



Raini in the lobby of The Peninsula, Hong Kong

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By Porush Singh, senior vice president Core Products, Global Products & Solutions Asia/Pacific, MasterCard

Six myths about affluent Asians

When you hear someone described as ‘affluent’ or ‘extremely wealthy’, it is easy to conjure up images of excessive lifestyles centered on material goods – yachts, chilled champagne and fast cars.

This stereotype, however, is not true of the majority of affluent people across the Asia-Pacific (APAC) region, our research shows.

It’s important to note that APAC affluence is rapidly changing in terms of physical, social and cultural mobility. By 2030, more than 55 per cent of the population in Asia will be urban. There are 278 million Asians on Facebook and this number is growing. This expanding world shows up culturally too: of all luxury goods bought globally in 2013, 47 per cent were by Chinese consumers.

But these aspects aren’t the only changing factors; the sheer size of this group, too, is expanding. Based on estimated growth rates, this consumer group is earmarked to be among the fastest growing markets globally in the coming years. In fact, the APAC, Middle East and Africa region is well-placed to be the wealthiest region in the world by as early as this year.

But that does not mean there will be more people running around living ostentatious lifestyles. Here are the top six myths about APAC’s affluent people:

Recognising hard work A common myth is that money is made and spent easily among affluent

Asians. But our research shows this is hardly the case. They have largely earned their money through old-fashioned hard work, dedication and perseverance. Companies would be wise to recognise their achievements and engage these consumers with compelling experiences, instead of singular products.

MasterCard, for example, curates experiences with a global outlook in mind – cross-border travel, priority bookings at the world’s most sought-after restaurants and luxury golfing packages.

Maximising the moment For them, it’s not just about money or material goods. This group now values authentic experiences and journeys as opposed to purchasing and owning physical luxury items. For example, 32 per cent of Singaporeans and Japanese consider travel to be their top passion. China’s affluent consumers follow at 31 per cent.

Valuing quality Pretentious partying is an ill-conceived assumption of what the Asian well-to-do value. The individuals living ostentatious lifestyles are the stereotype; in reality, they are the minority. APAC’s affluent people are consumers who seek quality and value, including authentic prestige, when it comes to luxury goods and services.

Searching for stability It is assumed that success drives the dogged pursuit of wealth. Yet, our research shows that this group is questioning and redefining what it means to be ‘successful’ and ‘wealthy’. For those falling into

the 40 years or older category, in particular, wealth is transforming from just a bottomline figure to a more whole approach. This group has a desire to look at core pillars of happiness – family, health, material wealth and spiritual wealth – from a holistic level.

And this holistic approach makes sense, given the fact that APAC’s affluent consumers are, on average, 37 years of age and tend to be married with one young child.

Enhancing existing relationships

It is often assumed that this group is focused on playing the game and ‘getting ahead’. Again, this is not always true. Today’s affluent people in APAC are less concerned about business opportunities, and more about bonding with their family through experiences that drive personal growth and happiness. Simply put, fulfillment increasingly matters.

For example, South Korea’s affluent folks see success as a vehicle for more choices and time to invest in relationships and in themselves.

Striving for balance As APAC’s affluent consumers age, the war between work and life ends – moving up and getting ahead becomes less of a priority for those aged 40 or older. In its place sits a heightened focus on family, an effort to reduce risk-taking, a rebalancing of priorities and a greater sense of satisfaction with what they have now.

Despite different backgrounds, affluent Asians all have one thing in common: increasingly, wealth is not just about the material things, but how life is lived and enjoyed.

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Above Eiffel Tower. Wealthy Chinese surveyed said they would be spending more on travel

Travel is most coveted luxury

Move aside Chanel bag or Rolex watch. Travel is the most coveted item for rich Chinese

Travel is now the top luxury item for well-heeled Chinese consumers, according to the *2015 China Luxury Forecast* by Ruder Finn and IPSOS Group, which surveyed 1,933 consumers across 14 major cities in China and Hong Kong. Respondents reported an average annual household income of RMB774,876 (US\$125,212) and HK\$983,300 (US\$126,750) respectively.

Despite the slowdown observed by many luxury brands in China, most mainland consumers said they would spend the same or more on luxury in the coming year. Consumers in Hong Kong were more conservative: 52-62 per cent reported they would spend the same on luxury in the coming year while 18-38 per cent planned to spend more.

"In mainland China, we are seeing that demand for luxury remains

strong – particularly in first-tier cities – and we predict that the market momentum will remain relatively unchanged," said Simon Tye, executive director of IPSOS.

"Hong Kong luxury consumers continue to pursue innovative products and design...There is continued strong demand for unique and customised products that retain the heritage of the brand."

According to the annual report, 50 per cent of luxury shoppers in China and 38 per cent in Hong Kong are looking to spend more on travel for themselves and their families. Travel beats other luxury product categories; wealthy Chinese travellers are still drawn to shopping abroad, with duty-free shopping becoming a leading distribution channel for luxury goods. Fifty-three per cent of mainland

consumers shopped at duty-free stores in the past year. The majority of Chinese consumers are dissatisfied with luxury retail services in mainland China. Hence, when shopping overseas, they expect high service standards, a better understanding of their needs and a broader product selection.

"Despite the impact of the anti-corruption campaign on the luxury industry in China, consumer maturity has grown since last year, with shoppers looking to spend more on rewarding experiences than products," said Anne Geronimi, vice president, lifestyle & luxury practice, Ruder Finn Shanghai.

"The challenge today for luxury brands is maintaining the brand loyalty established in China, as consumers travel and purchase high-end goods overseas."

Shoppers in both mainland China (57 per cent) and Hong Kong (54 per cent) also expressed greater confidence in buying luxury online over the past year, but the majority of Chinese online shoppers (81 per cent in Hong Kong and 78 per cent in mainland China) still prefer to visit physical stores before buying.

Social media is a well-established channel of communication in Greater China, particularly in the mainland, where over 90 per cent of Tier 1 consumers affirmed its relevance to everyday life. Across Greater China, news about products, promotions and discounts generated the most discussion on social media. "E-commerce is both the next big opportunity and challenge for luxury brands. To fully tap the potential of the luxury online market, brands need to consider either creating their own platforms or riding on existing ones. The solution lies in striking the right balance between online product offering, customer experience and customer service, both online and offline," said Gao Ming, senior vice president and general manager of Ruder Finn Shanghai.

“

In mainland China, we are seeing that demand for luxury remains strong – particularly in first-tier cities.

Simon Tye,
executive director,
IPSOS

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Valuing experiences over possessions

There are more rich Australians and they are seeking experiences abroad and at home, where luxury products have gained acceptance, reports **Natasha Dragun**

An increase in high net worth individuals (HNWI) population, an improved range of upscale offerings and the emergence of Gen Y as a key consumer have strengthened the luxury market in Australia.

Reports by research firm Wealth-X show that Australia's luxury market is now worth more than A\$1.1 billion (US\$856 million), and that the country is home to the ninth highest concentration of HNWI in the world.

A new study by Tourism Australia found that the top items desired by the affluent and wealthy are quality time with family (63 per cent), travel (60 per cent) and dining out (49 per cent). Travel remains the number one discretionary spending, with personalisation and unique local dining experiences among the most sought-after features.

Industry experts do not believe that a flagging economy and the Australian dollar's continuing slide as having a major impact on the luxury travel market.

"While the economy and a fluctuating dollar have probably influenced Australians' travel plans to some extent in recent years, this ef-

fect doesn't seem to have been felt as strongly in the luxury travel sector," said Sujata Raman, managing director, Abercrombie & Kent (A&K).

"Certainly A&K's sales have remained strong across the last few years and we are currently experiencing double-digit growth year-on-year, which all points to a fairly healthy landscape at this end of the market.

"Itineraries focused on food and wine are also becoming increasingly popular. We have certainly responded to the growing demand by introducing a number of relevant itineraries here and abroad," said Raman.

She added: "One of things we are really noticing is that travellers are increasingly looking for experiential travel – whether it's the Eagle Festival in Mongolia or an Arctic journey to the Northwest Passage.

"Moreover, travellers are becoming more willing to sacrifice a little bit on things like luxury accommodation in order to get the experience – sometimes the destination is almost secondary!"

Anna Guillan, regional director, sales and marketing Australia &



tomas1111/123RF.COM

New Zealand for Kerzner International, agreed that experiences were driving luxury holiday choices.

She elaborated: "Discerning travellers are seeking authentic destinations that offer a sense of place, distinctive style and local culture with genuine hospitality. It is less about the hard-

“

(The fluctuating Australian dollar doesn't seem to have been felt as strongly in the luxury travel sector.)

Sujata Raman, managing director, Abercrombie & Kent





Left Eagle Festival, Mongolia Above One&Only Hayman Island, Whitsundays

The Australian upmarket traveller...

- ❖ spends the most on travel, with personalisation and unique local dining experiences among the most sought-after features
- ❖ is showing an increasing readiness to sacrifice comfort for authentic experiences
- ❖ seeks out luxury domestic accommodation like Southern Ocean Lodge on Kangaroo Island, Tasmania’s Sapphire Freycinet and One&Only Hayman Island

ware and more about the experience.”

This growing desire for discriminating experiences is borne out by figures from Virtuoso, which revealed that 38 per cent of Millennials and 34 per cent of Gen X in Australia are opting for private or escorted tour experiences.

At the same time, Virtuoso CEO Matthew Upchurch also observes a shift towards luxury accommodation on the domestic front, such as Southern Ocean Lodge on Kangaroo Island, Tasmania’s Sapphire Freycinet and One&Only Hayman Island.

“Australian luxury products have come a long way and we’re seeing an increase in short breaks – two to three days – at these places,” commented Upchurch in a recent

Virtuoso report, while noting that luxury expeditions and cruising still make up the core market.

Kerzner’s Guillan added: “The Australian market remains buoyant for both domestic and international travel. Multi-generational, short mini-breaks, longer immersive holidays and special interest travel are still strong and there is no immediate sense that this is slowing.

“We are seeing strong Australian visitation into both One&Only Hayman Island and Emirates One&Only Wolgan Valley here in Australia, as well as continued Australian growth into One&Only The Palm and One&Only Royal Mirage in Dubai with all of the increased airlift with the partnership between Emirates and Qantas.”

Hamilton Island’s CEO, Glenn Bourke, said: “Last financial year, domestic tourism increased by 5.1 per cent. We can expect a further boost in 2015 partly as a result in the fall of the Australian dollar and the change in local HNWI’s holidaying preferences as they look to holiday in luxury closer to home.”

Said Rudolf van Dijk, general manager, Four Seasons Hotel Sydney: “The industry should feel buoyed by the current hotel occupancy, almost at record levels, which can largely be attributed to not only the quality of products available but also a marked increase in domestic and international travel – and there is no indication this trend will abate any time soon.”



Above Cuzco, Peru **Right, below** Salvador de Bahia, Brazil – exotic destinations exert a strong pull for rich Indonesians

Mind stronger than rupiah

The middle class may be deterred to travel by a weakened rupiah. Not the upper class. By **Mimi Hudoyo**

A weaker rupiah against the greenback appears the least of concerns for Indonesia's elite group of travellers, whose desire to venture abroad to far-flung destinations remains strong.

Lukas Djoesianto, card business head of Bank Danamon Indonesia, said travel and entertainment comprised more than 90 per cent of the total spending – both within the

country and aboard – of its Platinum Card holders. The international spending of the bank's premium clients last year reached higher levels than 2013, shared Lukas, a sign that the economic situation and the political uncertainty surrounding the election period last year did not have much impact on this market segment.

Bank Danamon Indonesia's data

also shows that its Platinum Card members are interested in art and actively participate in art auctions overseas.

Similarly, Bank Negara Indonesia (BNI), which uses travel to boost its premium segment spending, has seen fast growth in the use of its premium credit cards Titanium, Platinum, Signature and Infinity. BNI entered the premium business only three years ago, but premium card members now form 30 per cent of its credit card holders and contribute almost 50 per cent of transaction volume, according to Okki Rushartomo, assistant vice president group head card premium & loyalty group of BNI. "Out of these transactions, around 55 per cent is spent on travel and lifestyle," Okki said.

While the rupiah depreciation – which at press time slid to Rp13,000 against the US dollar, the lowest since 1998 – resulted in fewer trips

for middle-class travellers, the high-end market remained unaffected, said Okki. Travel is part of wealthy Indonesians' annual plans and some of them have US dollar savings, so a weaker rupiah does not impinge on their travel budget.

Okki added: "The luxury market spending pattern does not change much. They can be more selective, looking for the best offers, but these offers are still premium.

Agreeing, Agustinus Pake Seko, director of Bayu Buana Travel Services, said: "The Indonesian luxury market is still strong. We have created unique luxury products such as Iceland tours to entice this segment."

Since their budgets are hardly affected, it is unsurprising that affluent travellers in Indonesia have their sights set on exotic longhaul destinations such as Iceland, Brazil and Peru. Monica Cordova, general manager of Ecuador of Condor Travel, is witnessing growing interest for Latin America among Indonesians. She received her first upmarket travellers from Indonesia two years ago for a trip to Brazil, Peru and Ecuador.

"For Indonesians, South America is a long way to travel to. It is understandable that only a small segment will visit this part of the world, but we feel there is a market," said Cordova.

In Europe, Switzerland Tourism, seeing the emergence of FITs, is planning to tap this market with special interest products.

Speaking to *TTG Asia Luxury* during a Switzerland Tourism roadshow to Jakarta earlier this year, Daniel Derzic, deputy head of mission, Embassy of Switzerland in Indonesia, said: "Although FIT is still the smallest category (of all the market segments), Switzerland Tourism wants to focus more on this group in the future, tapping special interest groups (such as) honeymooners, art and luxury lovers, and the education market."

Confident that Europe will remain a preferred destination for

The Indonesian upmarket traveller...

- ❖ loves new and exotic destinations
- ❖ is willing to splurge on branded products and art
- ❖ shows a growing interest in luxury cruising

longhaul travellers from Indonesia, Ivan Breiter, director, South-east Asia of Switzerland Tourism, expects that Indonesian outbound spending, currently at an average of US\$4,000 per visit, will triple and the market size for longhaul travel will double.

Already, Indonesians are among Asia's big spenders in Switzerland with a daily expenditure of CHF320 (US\$328), trailing just behind China (CHF350) but ahead of India (CHF300), Switzerland Tourism data reveals.

Solo travel also looks set to become a stronger trend among upmarket travellers. Tatang Darmawan, sales manager of Hi Seas European Destination Management, observed: "We have got FITs travelling alone to destinations like Spain for 10 days, with a private car and a guide with tours tailored just for them. They stay at top-notch hotels and have dinners at Michelin-starred restaurants. The number of such travellers is small, but their spending is huge."

Indonesians have started to look

at new destinations like the UAE too. Deloni Setiawan, Indonesia sales representative of Innovate Tourism Dubai, said: "Dubai is a high-end, stopover destination for travellers, but we have started to get small groups visiting Dubai as a mono destination."

Most recently, Deloni arranged a five-day tour for 17 riders of Harley Davidson Club from Bandung. "They requested us to provide the bikes and they rode from Dubai to Abu Dhabi, with Al Ain as the highlight of their visit. Apart from that, we arranged for their tours and dinners, which were specially set up for the group," he said.

Cruise Centre Indonesia cruise consultant Johnny Judianto also sees a hike in demand for upmarket cruises. A growing number of wealthy passengers is booking suites on board big ships, as well as smaller luxury ships offered by the likes of Crystal Cruises, Regent Seven Seas Cruises and Silversea Cruises, although the growth rate is not as high that of the lower market categories, he noted.



Spectral/123RF.COM

Less carefree about spending

The Thai luxury outbound market is hitting a bump following the economic impact of last year's political coup, reports **Greg Lowe**

Wealthy Thais are still cautious about spending during their overseas travel, as Thailand's sluggish economy and last year's political crisis have affected consumer sentiments and crimped the luxury outbound travel market.

The number of people purchasing luxury travel options is currently in decline, a trend which Yupha Moonsarn, director of VirgoVirgin, said tracks broader spending patterns in Thailand.

"Outbound luxury departure continues its negative growth in terms of the number of trips," she said.

"One key factor is that clients' luxury expenditure is lower than before and Bangkok residents have to focus on rebuilding and rehabilitating their lives (in the wake of the economic impact of last year's anti-government protests) rather than take vacations outside the country."

Falling incomes in the SME sector, weaker international trade and growing insecurity relating to military rule in Thailand have also

dragged on luxury travel spending.

"Another change in demand is the trend for people to take shorter holidays, with Asia remaining the priority destinations, though some clients still prefer faraway destinations in Europe for longer trips," said Yupha.

Those who are still travelling abroad are opting for exotic, spiritual destinations within Asia, a trend that has enabled VirgoVirgin to grow its business with Himalayan countries such as India, Nepal and Bhutan.

Travel to Bhutan also rose sharply from last June through August thanks to the Bhutan-Thailand Friendship Offer, under which Bhutan waived the US\$200 minimum daily package spending requirement for Thais and locally-based expatriates to celebrate 25 years of diplomatic relations between the two countries.

While the current political and economic climate is affecting the luxury outbound travel business, some trade players said the bigger



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issue is a lack of demand from wealthy Thais, many of whom appear unwilling to spend big dollars when travelling overseas. This is a stark contrast to their behaviour locally, where they prefer to stay at five-star hotels and luxury resorts.

Lacklustre demand and a propensity to travel overseas on mass-market package tours is also

“

The problem we hit was our insistence on quality, while the market was, and still is, purely price-driven.

Willem Niemeijer,
CEO,
Khiri Travel Group





Above Siam Paragon, Bangkok. Thai luxury travellers splurge at home – but not abroad

dissuading other companies from venturing into the Thai luxury outbound segment, observed Khiri Travel Group CEO, Willem Niemeijer, who set up outbound arm Khiri Voyages in 2009 but later withdrew.

“We targeted niche destinations, such as Kenya and Croatia, as well as focused on cultural tours to Buddhist countries including Sri Lanka and Bhutan,” he said.

“The problem we hit was our insistence on quality, while the market was, and still is, purely price-driven. Offering the same, plus more, at a lower price was the only way to get ahead. We, at the time, overestimated the demand for quality as we knew bargain-hunting Thai travellers almost always get shoddy quality and poor travel experience. So we thought it best to withdraw and wait for the market to mature.”

Niemeijer remains confident demand that luxury outbound travel from Thailand will grow, but in order to achieve this, he believes Thais need to break with their

The Thai upmarket traveller...

- ❖ is not in a lavish mood
- ❖ is more likely to take shorter trips within Asia than to longhaul destinations
- ❖ splurges on luxury accommodation locally but unwilling to spend real dollars when travelling overseas

cultural apprehension to complain and let operators know when service standards are below par.

That said, other players have no apprehension about breaking into the Thai luxury outbound market. Exsus recently opened an office in Bangkok, partly to focus on this niche market, according to its local brand ambassador Alexandre Lorent.

“Exsus is an established, successful British brand hoping to bring outbound luxury travel to the Asian market.

“Exsus knows luxury travel inside out and we also know Thailand, so we are excited about the potential,” said Lorent.

And while demand for luxury outbound travel appears limited at the moment, a more stable economic and political environment and changing demographic developments should see the trade expand in the longer term, said VirgoVirgin’s Yupha.

“It is not expected that (luxury) outbound travel will increase significantly in the near term, but an expanding middle class will be a crucial factor behind the growth in travel out of Thailand, and (this group) is expected to more than double (in future).

“They will provide a new light for outbound travel from Thailand,” said Yupha.

Golden age of luxury journeys

Mature Singapore luxury travellers, having done the 'must see' destinations, now seek the 'must do' activities, reports **Paige Lee Pei Qi**



An insatiable appetite to venture farther and experience novelty, coupled with the strong Singapore dollar, is what keeps the Singapore luxury outbound market robust.

Chang Theng Hwee of Country Holidays Travel, a luxury travel firm that recorded a 25 per cent year-on-year growth last year, said: "The growth momentum is continuing and I believe we are riding positively on a demographic trend. The baby boomers of the 1960s, who are between 45 and 60 (years old), are now reaching the golden age of travel.

"Many are financially successful and have done the 'must-see' in their younger days, and now they want to experience unique destinations with touches of luxury," he said.

Chang elaborated: "The experiential travellers these days will go

“

...as this group is often strapped for time...there is a need to zoom in on (offering) specific destinations and experiences.

Lim Hui-Juan,
co-founder/COO,
Quotient
TravelPlanner

more for specialised interests and themes instead of a destination.

"Many travel to indulge in their special interests such as the arts, wildlife, wine and horse riding. For example, many are re-visiting New Zealand but opt to stay in luxury lodges in the remote wilderness, (while others) are looking at taking a gourmet and winery trip to France and Italy."

According to Chang, whose company specialises in exotic destinations, Botswana, Antarctica and Canada rank among Singapore luxury travellers' favourites to indulge in pristine wilderness while being pampered.

Deep-pocketed travellers from Singapore are also becoming a discerning lot, observed Hajar Ali, founder of luxury travel firm Urbane Nomads.

"The Singapore traveller is very sophisticated

with regards to travel destinations and activities. There is always an element of self-selection with these people, who are usually more adventurous in their tastes with regards to destinations and activities pursued.

These adventurous activities run the gamut from heli-skiing and dog-sledding, to wilderness camping, she added.

The strong Singapore dollar, ample flight connections at Changi and the access afforded by the Singaporean passport have created a thriving outbound market, contributing to the "good business" Urbane Nomads had last year, shared Hajar.

Similarly, Simon Cameron, founder and managing director of Lightfoot Travel, acquired many new clients last year and saw a double-digit growth in revenue. While the company's clientele com-





Above Singaporeans enjoying a leisurely night out at Clarke Quay, Singapore

prises more expatriates than local Singaporeans, Cameron believes the rising trend of Singaporeans seeking experiential travel is poised to even out this ratio.

According to Cameron, the Maldives was the top selling destination last year, while Italy took the top spot for Europe.

He said: "We are seeing enquiries for longer-haul destinations, which can stretch up to 14 days, especially to places like South Africa in the post-Ebola period, and Latin America after the World Cup."

Lim Hui-Juan, co-founder and COO of Quotient TravelPlanner, said: "South American countries such as Chile, Peru and Ecuador continue to be high on the agenda of luxury travellers.

"(However), as this group is often strapped for time, and travel distances are long, there is a need to zoom in on (offering) specific desti-

nations and experiences.

"These can be in the form of a night out in an indigenous reserve led by a Maori who shares an in depth insight into his culture and ancestry, or fly fishing with a former fly-fishing champion in remote spots only accessible via a helicopter."

Meanwhile, Cameron singled out Sri Lanka as an emerging luxury destination in the region. He said: "This country is increasing massively in popularity and prod-

uct. It is always a place that people do not think others will go to. But it is one that needs to be booked far in advance because of its boutique nature luxury offerings, be it small hotels or serviced villas."

Likewise, Urbane Nomads' Hajar has observed luxury accommodation providers in Vietnam, Japan, China and even neighbouring Bintan luring time-starved Singapore luxury travellers to their comforts, especially during long weekend breaks in Singapore.

**The
Singaporean
upmarket
traveller...**

- ❖ wants out-of-the-ordinary tours that can form conversation starters
- ❖ is highly value conscious
- ❖ seeks to include a gourmet experience in the travel itinerary



A bright spot that will get brighter

There is much to rejoice about when it comes to the Vietnamese luxury outbound travel market, reports **Greg Lowe**

Vietnam's luxury outbound market, while relatively small, continues to grow healthily, with clients travelling farther afield, spending more and staying longer, specialists said.

Over the past decade outbound travel from Vietnam has increased significantly, with growth in the luxury market catalysed by wider demographic changes and rising affluence, said Andy Carroll, global head of sales & marketing at Exotic Voyages.

"Thanks to the increasing level of income of the upper class, the continual growth of the national flag carrier, Vietnam Airlines, and an increasing number of newly established outbound travel companies in Vietnam, the number of outbound tourists in general from Vietnam has increased almost 10

times from 2003 to 2013," he said.

"In short, Vietnam's luxury outbound market is on the rise and is unlikely to slow down in the near future."

Greater wealth has also unsurprisingly seen more Vietnamese purchasing international luxury branded goods, with the high costs of such products in the domestic market helping fuel a rise in the number of locals travelling abroad for big ticket shopping sprees.

"With luxury taxes remaining high in Vietnam, and a greater awareness and demand for luxury brands among the Vietnamese, popular destinations for shopping such as Paris and Italy have become major destination choices," said Nicole Lim, managing director of Quintessentially

Lifestyle. "Wealthy Vietnamese are (also) looking for unique travel experiences that resonate on a deeper emotional level. These include authentic cultural experiences, photography tours, sporting events, international fashion shows or private events.

"For instance, Vietnamese were the seventh largest group of visitors, in terms of numbers, for the WTA 2014 (Women's Tennis Association) in Singapore even without any advertising (of the event) in Vietnam."

Asian destinations, especially Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, China, Japan and South Korea, still lead the outbound luxury market from Vietnam. Recently too, there has been an upswing in trips to Australia. New York, London and Paris remain the most popular

“

With luxury taxes remaining high in Vietnam... popular destinations for shopping such as Paris and Italy have become major destination choices.

Nicole Lim, managing director, Quintessentially Lifestyle



A portrait of contentment in Piazza Navona, Rome, Italy

The Vietnamese upmarket traveller...

- ❖ is travelling farther, staying longer and spending more
- ❖ loves destinations that are rich in experiences and great for shopping
- ❖ still travels within Asia more than anywhere else
- ❖ likes to double-up on a leisure trip by including business travel or medical tourism

longhaul choices. “Our luxury travel clients are travelling more often and going farther,” said Lim.

Wealthy Vietnamese, who comprise the majority of the outbound market, prefer urban leisure destinations to out-of-the-way places, said Exotic Voyages’ Carroll.

“They tend to visit big, busy cities such as Tokyo, Singapore and Bangkok, or famous beaches in southern Thailand or Bali, and won’t hesitate to stay several nights at five-star hotels and resorts.

“On the other hand, we don’t get a lot of requests for adventurous destinations or places that are less-visited. By travelling abroad, Vietnamese travellers want to look for new and exciting experiences outside of their country, particularly shopping opportunities, and

culinary and culture exploration, rather than going on mountain treks or getting onto off-the-beaten paths.”

Exotic Voyages has found that a significant number of Vietnamese wants to add a leisure component to a trip to visit friends and family living overseas. Lim added that many rich Vietnamese also like to double-up on their leisure travel by incorporating some business or medical tourism.

“They like to combine their trips with business purposes, and flying business-class is the norm for the elites here in Vietnam,” she said.

“One of the key trends is an increase in health and wellness tours, especially to destinations such as (South) Korea, Japan, Thailand and Singapore.”

There are some sensitivities,

however. While the country is generally politically stable, save for last year’s anti-Chinese riots, Carroll said Vietnamese travellers can be very sensitive to negative news about destinations. “A perfect example of this is the significant loss of inquiries for Japan tours after the earthquake in 2011 even though not every part of the country was affected,” he pointed out.

Nevertheless, such concerns are not expected to limit the market’s growth, which the trade believes will become increasingly diverse with bigger budgets as it matures.

“Luxury outbound travel will continue to grow,” said Carroll. “We also expect the length of stay to increase...Five years ago a one-night stay was the most common, now it is five nights and heading to seven.”

Down time is good time

When the economy slows down, rich Malaysians find more time on their hands and make trips rather than money, reports **S Puvanewary**

Bern Tourism



It will take a lot to undermine rich Malaysians' unquenchable thirst for luxury vacations and exotic trips, according to the country's travel specialists catering to the upper end of the market.

While the average Malaysian traveller may grumble over pricier overseas holidays due to a weakened ringgit, which lost nearly 12 per cent against the US dollar from August 2014 to last February, the travel plans of the affluent are hardly affected.

Lim Chee Tong, managing director of Jebesen Travel & Tours Services, commented: "High-end travellers are not affected by the ringgit depreciation. What is a few dollars' difference for them? The weakened ringgit has no punch, no impact at all."

A specialist in luxury cruises, Lim is optimistic of seeing a 20 per cent year-on-year growth in the outbound cruise segment this year.

"The trend towards luxury cruising increases every year regardless of how bad the economy is. When (the economy) is good,

(wealthy travellers) don't have the time to travel – they make money. But during a recession, they have more time to travel. Only political turmoil or a major disease outbreak overseas could disrupt the luxury outbound market."

Similarly, other luxury travel specialists paint a positive picture of booming business from upscale travellers this year, despite a marked slowdown in the Malaysian economy.

Desmond Lee Ee Hoe, group managing director of Apple Vacations Group of Companies, believed the luxury segment remained immune from economic fall-offs as his high net worth clients expect "value-added services" and "hands-on experiences" for their money spent. Echoing Lim's sentiments, Lee also remarked that these cash-rich travellers have more time to travel during a downturn.

Apple Vacations' luxury division, Signature Private, organised about 100 private tours overseas in 2014 and Lee is confident his company's performance will surpass

last year's figures based on forward bookings to-date. Itineraries this year include exotic destinations such as the North Pole, Mongolia, Siberia and the Silk Road.

"Malaysian luxury travellers like cruises, enjoy good food and

“

There is a growing trend for river cruising, and they (rich Malaysians) mostly travel to Europe and the Mediterranean for such pleasures.

Desmond Lee Ee Hoe, group managing director, Apple Vacations Group of Companies





The upmarket Malaysian traveller...

- ✦ is not impacted by a weakened currency
- ✦ is inclined to travel more this year as the slowdown of the Malaysian economy affords them more leisure time
- ✦ shows a rising interest for lesser-explored destinations like the North Pole and Siberia

shopping, and visiting exotic places which they may not be comfortable going on their own. Safety is important," said Lee.

"There is a growing trend for river cruising, and they mostly travel to Europe and the Mediterranean for such pleasures."

Although prospects for Malaysia's luxury outbound market remain rosy, Abdul Rahman Mohamed, deputy general manager, channel management at Mayflower Acme Tours, is concerned the demand will soften with a prolonged recession. Nevertheless, he acknowledged that the luxury market was less volatile and would normally rebound "much faster" than the mass market.

Mayflower Acme Tours hence constantly introduces new itineraries and destinations to retain loyalty and interest of upscale travellers, offering niche products such as private shopping and cooking classes in Milan; skiing, sightseeing and spa treatments at Switzerland's W Verbier; and safari holidays in Africa.

"With product differentiation

and unique itineraries, we forecast a year-on-year growth of between five and eight per cent this year," Rahman said.

He said Europe was still a favourite among affluent Malaysians, especially Switzerland, southern Italy and lately the Balkans.

Other exotic destinations like Cuba, Tahiti, Bora Bora and Sey-

Switzerland (above, Bern) remains a favourite among rich Malaysians
below A young male snorkeller with a turtle at an island coral reef, Seychelles

chelles are getting more popular, especially for the well-travelled who have already visited classic European destinations such as London, Paris and Milan. There is also a growing number seeking stylish secluded retreats such as Necker Island in the Caribbean, Ulusaba Private Game Reserve in South Africa and Kasbah Tamadot in Marrakesh.



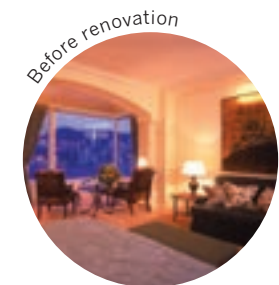
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*RE-MADE
FOR THE
FUTURE*

THE PENINSULA HONG KONG

The greatest past has the brightest future, says **Raini Hamdi**



Above The old Deluxe Harbour View Suite

The 87-year-old Peninsula Hong Kong has sent a clear signal that it wants to connect with the clientele of the future with its landmark HK\$450 million (US\$58 million) renovation, which placed prominence on technology.

Hong Kong's historic address – famed for the white glove, green Rolls Royce and red carpet treatment – is also the city's technologically sharpest hotel, redefining the smart and intuitive accommodation of the future.

The rooms look shockingly sleek, bravely burnishing the old-comfort feel for a linear design that withstands fads. A few stubborn guests are known to have a fit at first; they want their old fix back, not this clean and modern style that can be found in similar-level brands. But once they realise that the emperor's new clothes does not change the emperor – no one does craftsmanship, quality and thoughtfulness quite like The Peninsula Hong Kong – all is well again with the world.

And all is so well with the room because the technology works: clearly-marked, easy-to-use, accessible, stylish. The cliché *right at the fingertips* has regained credibility. Here are three favourites:

- **Personalised entertainment** Multiple wireless tablets (preset in 11 languages) bring to the room 90 international TV stations and 450 Internet radio channels either on the tablets or 55-inch Blu-ray LED TV – all free, with fibre-optic cabling in each room ensuring the streaming is uninterrupted. Movie-lovers can download a video, or access a range of HD movies, again free-of-charge. A soundbar speaker system with powerful subwoofer delivers the ultimate surround-sound experience.

- **I'm in control** Desk and bedside tablets, and LED-



Facing A total transformation that focuses on technology **Top** Grand Deluxe Harbour View Suite bathroom **Above** In-room tablet in German

touch screen panels located where they should be on walls, put guests in full control of all in-room functions at a mere touch. Call the valet, check the weather, put Do Not Disturb, change mood lighting, draw the curtains from the bed upon waking up to take in the harbour views and the list goes on and on.

- **Functionality** Multiple, dual-voltage (110V / 240V) electrical power sockets with universal adaptors and chargers have been concealed within flawlessly finished, dark-chocolate burl-wood and glass cabinetry, with touch-of-a-button access. Wireless connection to the all-in-one fax / printer / photocopier / scanner creates an instant work office.

Everything is marked so you can find the noise-cancelling earphones, the hair-dryer and other amenities you need.

An outstanding example of how to use technology as a means to an end, not the end, and one that will ensure The Peninsula Hong Kong is venerated and loved for generations to come.

*AS
FRESH
AS PINK
ROSES*

THE LANGHAM HONG KONG

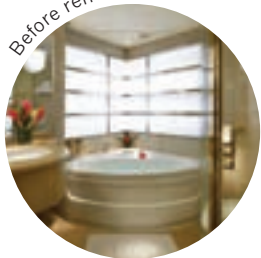
The pink rose finds its perfect spot,
says **Raini Hamdi**



Before renovation



Before renovation



Facing and above Langham Suite – feels like home;
Left The old Executive Suite and bathroom;
Below Langham Director Suite Bathroom

Take a palette of soft greys, light turquoise blue and hints of bronze and beige. Add personal memorabilia and handpicked furnishings – an oval table here, a statement art piece there. And freshly-cut pink roses in every room. The effect is incredibly homely, inviting and appealing, which is what The Langham, Hong Kong has achieved with its US\$30 million renovation.

The re-design extends to 230 rooms and suites of the 498-room hotel, and one look at the new Langham Suite (55m²) or the Grand Langham Room (34m²) is bound to lift the spirits after a long journey. You let out a relieved sigh, just as you would when you reach home – except you’ve just arrived. And when you see that immaculate, chic, white marble bathroom, and the soft, feminine touch of a stem of fresh pink rose, it’s hard not to whoop with gladness. Outside, Hong Kong weather by contrast is drab, cloudy and cheerless.

Back in the living room of the suite, you notice the faux fireplace, framed in finishes of dark, stained walnut and polished nickel. On a mini-bar cabinet is a silver three-tier plate stand filled with irresistible mini cakes, patisserie and fresh berries, a silent greeting of ‘welcome home’.

The renovation also extends to two signature suites, the Penthouse Suite (125m²) and the Director Suite (89m²).

London-based interior and architectural design firm GA Design has created a residence reminiscent of an elegant European-style home which befits the brand’s London heritage.



beach resorts phuket



Look, the beach!

Why go to a beach destination when you can't see the beach? But Phuket's beaches have been cleaned up and now's the time to pitch the island to luxury clients. Phuket, which suffered a poor performance last year, needs them, writes **Raini Hamdi**

One of the biggest headlines for Phuket in the past year was a ‘new broom sweeps clean’ story – literally. The military-backed government cleaned up the island’s beaches of vendors and beach chairs. It was a poorly-kept secret that these operations were controlled by the mafia.

Although this led to The Big Sun-lounger Debate, with one camp wanting the beach chairs back, another agreeing but provided they are properly managed and limited to certain parts of certain beaches, and yet others preferring the new look; what’s certain is the beaches of Phuket – Patong, Laguna, etc. – have been returned to the people.

Patong Beach on Phuket’s west coast, for example, was lined with vendors after vendors selling goods and offering services such as umbrella rental and Thai massage, detracting beach-goers from its white sands, magnificent sunsets and vibrant nightlife. The clean-up, initiated by a National Council for Peace and Order, removed troublesome food stalls, massage huts and illegal stalls along the 3.5km beach.

In a separate clean and green move, Go Eco Phuket, a group of eco-aware scuba-divers, diving shops and businesses from Phuket, once again joined forces with groups and individuals from the public and private sectors to organise one of Thailand’s largest coastal and reef clean-ups around the islands of Racha Yai and Racha Noi last August.

The Go Eco Phuket clean-up was first organised in September 2012 when over 650 divers and beach cleaners removed around 15 tonnes of rubbish, including a massive discarded fishing net that weighed over 4.5 tonnes. There was a second clean-up of the reefs and bays a year ago in August 2013.

The third clean-up aimed to



Far left Amari Phuket beach; **Above** Trisara main pool and beach

remove at least 1,000kg of rubbish and debris from some of the reefs and bays around Phuket.

Meanwhile, illegal taxi services in Phuket are also being cleaned up by the National Council for Peace and Order.

All this is helping create a new buzz and image for Phuket. Hoteliers interviewed reported an immediate positive impact on leisure travel and MICE following the beach clean-up in July last year, publicity they badly-needed following the military coup in May.

Amari Phuket, for instance, enjoyed the best October and November last year since the hotel opened in 1982, outperforming its budget by 25 to 30 per cent, according to Onyx Hospitality Group vice president-area general manager, South Thailand, Pierre-Andre Pelletier.

“The clean up (of Patong beach) helped, as well as the US\$20 million investment on the property’s renovation, which enabled us to achieve higher rates,” said Pelletier. “Before, MICE groups didn’t really want to come to Patong, but now that word is out that it has a resort feel again, more are coming.”



Before, MICE groups didn’t really want to come to Patong, but now that word is out that it (Phuket) has a resort feel again, more are coming.

Pierre-Andre Pelletier, vice president-area general manager, South Thailand, Onyx Hospitality Group

beach resorts phuket

Amari Phuket hosted a string of incentive groups from Singapore and Malaysia – bank, insurance and petroleum companies among them – in the months after the beach clean-up and is targeting for more incentives this year.

“Our location is just great, as we’re a stone’s throw from Patong, yet away from it all.”

With smart and stylish-looking new rooms, and new services such as a room akin to a first-class airline lounge that enables early arrivals or late check-outs to shower, work or just relax, Amari Phuket aims to be the best upscale hotel in Phuket. It also now boasts a total of 345 rooms as a result of the addition of 148 one- and two-bedroom units and suites from parent Onyx Hospitality’s residences development adjacent to the hotel.

Luxury resort Trisara, which celebrated its 10th anniversary last year, also described the clean-up as being positive for Phuket’s image. Former general manager Antoine Melon (at press time, Anthony

Lark, who joined Trisara during its development and design period, has replaced Melon as managing director and general manager), said 2014 proved to be Trisara’s “best year ever despite the military coup, with the hotel having the highest RevPAR in the country” on the back of an AOR of 63 per cent and an ARR of US\$850 yearround.

But while established upscale and luxury hotels such as Amari Phuket and Trisara claimed best performances, the overall Phuket hotel industry report card 2014 in reality was cloudy.

Marketwide occupancy was 69 per cent in 2014, compared with 74 per cent in 2013, and ARR was US\$146 versus US\$147 in 2013, according to C9 Hotelworks Market Research. The coup in May caused the most pronounced contraction of 14 per cent in June in international and domestic arrivals. The onset of the high season in October brought back a two per cent rise and a five per cent increase in December.

C9 Hotelworks managing direc-

tor Bill Barnett expects 2015 to be “volatile, given the Russian rouble depreciation and broader external geopolitical events impacting key source markets”. The island also has a pipeline of 32 new hotels which will be opening between 2015 and 2018, a 10 per cent rise in supply. Patong leads the development and most of the pipeline are four stars.

Last year’s luxury additions included Point Yamu by COMO which aims to siphon off the well-heeled to an unspoiled area of Phuket on the eastern side of the island.

General manager James Low said: “(Clients at Point Yamu by COMO) get a rustic feel of Phuket, as this area still has rubber and pineapple plantations, and is not as over-developed as the western side. Plus the all-around views of Phang Nga and the islands from the resort are so direct and special, to the extent you can see the first limestone formations for which Phang Nga is so famous for.”

Below Amari
Phuket jetty





Point Yamu by COMO



Above The pool at Point Yamu

By Raini Hamdi

LOCATION

The resort, now open for around 18 months, is located on the Eastern side of Phuket on the tip of Cape Yamu. We drive from Phuket In-

ternational Airport and soon hit a narrow road that leads to the hotel. The isolated surroundings makes me wonder if we're on the right track – and why anyone would build a hotel here.

AMBIENCE

Ah, I see why: hard-to-match 360-degree views across the Andaman Sea and the limestone karsts of Phang Nga Bay.

The special scenery is not lost on the architect, Jean-Michel Gathy (the resort was initially meant to be a Chedi), who enhances the serenity with a pool area as supreme as the view. Stretching the length

of more than 120m overlooking the bay, it is Point Yamu's centrepiece and makes up for the lack of a beach at the resort. The hotel arranges a transfer by boat to a nearby island where it has dedicated facilities for guests wishing to spend the day at the beach.

ROOM

My Verandah Pool Suite is princely in size. The 156m² room comprises a pantry and dining area, living room, bedroom, bathroom and, my favourite spot: the spacious outdoor terrace which has a queen day-bed, dining area and private pool. Again, what views!

The suite has touches of the Mediterranean, Singaporean and Thai, a result of the designer being Italian, COMO being a Singapore-led company and the resort being in Phuket. It's a bit of a jumble for my simple mind.

I find it unfortunate, too, that some of the materials and artefacts chosen to depict local flavours throughout the hotel border on

kitsch and do not do justice to the elegant and classy architecture. Overseas visitors, however, may find them playful and charming, which probably is the well-meaning intention.

FACILITIES

I adore the hip and trendy poolside Italian restaurant, La Sirena, which serves good pizzas and seafood, and also offers a COMO Shambhala menu which, to my delight, is far from rabbit food. It offers a range of tasty, healthy, good value-for-money choices.

Nahmyaa is equally good, offering street-inspired Thai. I love the spiced shrimp with *lebkrut* leaf *pakora* and the crispy fried whole garoupa with tamarind, lemon grass and ginger.

Given its hideaway location, Point Yamu must have good food. It delivers.

Other facilities and services include a COMO Shambhala Retreat, an excellent fitness centre, a Play by COMO programme for kids, a range of activities for adults from rock climbing with private instruction to a fishing expedition, and beautiful meeting/banquet spaces.

SERVICE

There are real stars among the staff, like Khun Krongsin at La Sirena and Khun Benyapa at Nahmyaa. Overall, service is heartfelt and professional.

VERDICT

A welcome addition to the island's luxury hotel offering and one that reclaims Phuket's image as a serene and sensuous beach resort destination.

Name Point Yamu by COMO
No. of rooms 79 rooms and suites, and 27 private villas
Address 225 Moo 7, Paklok, Talang, Phuket 83110, Thailand
Contact
Tel: (66) 76-360-100; Email: pointyamu@comohotels.com; comohotels.com/pointyamu

Strength of the rich

Europe is back as the number one market to the Maldives and luxury resorts believe they are still in paradise despite a slowdown in Russia and China markets. **Raini Hamdi** finds out why

A decline in arrivals was becoming a bad habit for the Maldives. In January, a drop was again registered, minus 7.8 per cent, the fourth consecutive month a decrease was recorded.

China, which in recent years edged out Europe to become the Maldives' top source, had gone south by 1.7 per cent in September, 3.5 per cent in October, 4.9 per cent in November, 12.2 per cent in December and a whopping 33.1 per cent in January. Adding to the woe, Russia unsurprisingly was the worst performing market in January, dipping 38 per cent, figures from the Maldives Ministry of Tourism show.

All this saw Europe being back as the number one market to the Maldives, its marketshare rising from 43.9 per cent in December to 54.1 per cent in January. Italy rose 16.9 per cent in January, the UK 6.6 per cent and Germany 8.7 per cent. With Lufthansa looking to operate twice-weekly Frankfurt-Male flights, Europe is likely to hold on to its regained position.

“

Russia is still not what it used to be, admittedly. However, we are fortunate that we have a diverse market mix. Since opening in 2008, we have been cultivating European and Asian businesses.

Dominik Kuenstle, general manager, Constance Halaveli



While February figures showed a vast improvement, with China registering a 30.5 per cent increase in arrivals, this was due to the Lunar New Year holiday and it remains to be seen if the Maldives has indeed reversed the consecutive drops suffered before February.

The industry's sentiments are that it has not. However, those who operate in the upper segment are convinced the high-end market is resilient.

Andrew Drummond, general manager of Maalifushi by COMO, believes the real luxury market will remain healthy for the Maldives.

“There is no question the Maldives has experienced a slowdown. Having said that, Maldives has positioned itself as a luxury destination and because of this there will be a sizeable section of the market which is going to be relatively impervious to some of the currency



variations,” he said.

“Many of the visitors who holiday at the deluxe end of the market will themselves be operating in different parts of the world and will have spread their currency risk, if not their wealth, globally to minimise the impact of exchange rates.”

The resort opened on July 1 last year and hopes to get its share of the luxury market with its location in the Thaa Atoll in the south, where it is the only resort in operation. The region is known for its diving and surf breaks, and COMO also aims to strengthen the offering with its holistic wellness concept.

The more established Constance Halaveli, which opened in 2008, too, is certain the luxury market for the Maldives will hold. “Russia is still not what it used to be, admittedly. However, we are fortunate that we have a diverse market mix.



“

Discounts will help bring back the volume, particularly in attracting travellers who have stayed away because of prices.

Mohamed Riyaz,
managing director,
Lets Go Maldives

Since opening in 2008, we have been cultivating European and Asian businesses. We believe our resort offers a sense of place, a true Maldivian feel and that the product suits all nationalities,” said Dominik Kuenstle, general manager of Constance Halaveli.

Mohamed Riyaz, managing director of Lets Go Maldives, said hotels have been discounting 20 to 30 per cent since January and are planning more discounts for summer. He said this would help bring back the volume, particularly in attracting travellers who had stayed away because of high prices.

David Kevan of Chic Locations UK, too, observed that hotels were giving discounts in the form of extra free nights, room or meal upgrades, etc., saying this helped tremendously as the British pound had dropped in value against the US dollar, the hotel currency in the Maldives.

Plenty of takers still for luxury villas in the Maldives. Above Garden Villa at Cheval Blanc Randheli Maldives



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Constance Halaveli



Above Constance Halaveli beach view

By Raini Hamdi

LOCATION

North Ari Atoll, 25-minute sea-plane transfer from Male airport.

AMBIENCE

The resort is shaped like a stingray with a curiously long tail. It boasts the longest (850m²) jetty in the Maldives. Most of its villas are therefore overwater and this is its entry-level accommodation. The sight of their Maldivian thatched roofs all the way to the end of the jetty creates a distinctly local ambience.

ROOM

My luxurious Villa 35 has a warm, tropical island character and is laden with modern trappings including Apple TV, Nespresso machine and speedy Wi-Fi. From my plunge pool on the outdoor terrace, I have a dreamy view of a cream-coloured

sandbank with luscious palm trees. In the evenings, my eyes are trained on the waters as invariably, four or five baby sharks will swim pass my villa. Staying at Constance Halaveli is such fun because of the abundance of nature – trees, birds, small island residents and marine life.

FACILITIES

The Beach Grill and the main buffet restaurant Jahaz are casual – in fact, part of the fun is dining without shoes and feeling soft sand beneath my feet. The overwater signature restaurant and bar Jing is a surprising contrast – it exudes the style and sophistication of a Michelin-star restaurant and serves interesting East meets West cuisine.

A wine-tasting session at Jing Wine Cellar is a must, because sommelier Arun Kumar's passion for wines is intoxicating!

There is a U Spa by Constance. My massage bed looks down to the ocean and I go ooh and ah at the sight of colourful small reef fish while my masseur gives me a

45-minute jetlag treatment.

Then, it's off to the hotel's gym, which is large and extremely well-equipped – there are even spinning bikes. I am also able to run around the island and even on the long jetty, which is just fantastic. The main swimming pool looks pretty inviting. Alas, there simply isn't time for it, not if I want to go snorkelling.

The house reef teems with colourful fish and corals, though visibility is a bit poor. The dive centre has a good programme comprising snorkelling expeditions, sunset cruises and fishing trips, and the team there is delightfully cheerful and friendly.

SERVICE

With the exception of a couple of encounters where the service does not feel sincere, the service overall is warm, friendly and professional.

VERDICT

The place to go for an authentic and natural Maldivian experience.

Name Constance Halaveli
No. of villas 86
Address Alifu Alifu Atoll
Halaveli 09130, Republic of
Maldives
Contact
Tel: (960) 666-7000; sm@
halaveli.com; www.halaveli.
com

50 and fabulous



Above Fireworks display at Marina Bay Sands on Singapore National Day 2014

The Lion City celebrates 50 years of independence and the birthday bash kicks off with hotel perks and new attraction openings, reports

Paige Lee Pei Qi

Celebrations for Singapore's Golden Jubilee start now and travellers can expect nothing less than sparkly treats and red-carpet treatment.

Hoteliers, attractions and retailers have been quick on the draw, pulling out special promotions for both tourists and staycationers.

Pan Pacific Hotels Group



Sgajiv/Dreamstime.com

and excitement in Singapore.

“In addition to this, we will be unveiling more exciting rooms and dining promotions throughout the year that can be enjoyed by both Singaporeans and visitors to the country,” he added.

Ritz-Carlton, Millenia Singapore rolled out the *Celebrate Singapore, Celebrate You* room package at the start of the year. It includes overnight accommodation, buffet breakfast, S\$50 (US\$36.50) dining credit, a bottle of champagne and a limited edition Ritz-Carlton ‘Singapore 50’ lion beanie.

Nathalyn Fong, spokesman, Ritz-Carlton, Millenia Singapore, said: “The hotel came up with a celebratory themed room package to leverage the jubilant nationwide atmosphere.”

About the limited edition beanie created for this promotion, Fong explained: “The lion beanie wears a red and white jersey alluding to the colours of the Singapore flag. It is a fitting commemorative tribute to the nation and doubles as a memento for guests.”

As the hotel provides panoramic views of Marina Bay, Fong said Ritz-Carlton is anticipating high demand for rooms especially dur-

ing the National Day (August 9) weekend. She said: “In the lead-up to National Day and on National Day itself, Marina Bay will be the epicentre of nationwide festivities and for the viewing of the spectacular fireworks display.”

Tour East’s group vice president of sales and marketing, Judy Lum, said: “SG50 gives us a great reason to tell the Singapore Story starting from 50 years ago to present-day Singapore, and to the future.”

“The luxury segment is about experience more than price,” she added.

Travellers, for instance, can relive Singapore’s history through visits to the Changi Chapel and Museum as well as Kranji War Memorial, to learn about the impact of World War II in Singapore.

Adding to the festivities, two new widely acclaimed museums will debut on Singapore’s arts scene this year.

The Singapore Pinacothèque de Paris opened last month, while the

(PPHG) has launched an SG50 promotion at its two Pan Pacific and three Parkroyal hotels here, offering 50 per cent savings to selected travel consultants who book through the group’s website.

Timur Senturk, vice president, operations, ASEAN, of PPHG, said: “With many large-scale celebratory events planned throughout the year, we see SG50 as a great opportunity to heighten awareness

“

With many large-scale celebratory events planned throughout the year, we see SG50 as a great opportunity to heighten awareness and excitement in Singapore.

Timur Senturk, vice president, operations, ASEAN, of PPHG



destination singapore

National Art Gallery will open in November.

Both are expected to add pizzazz and to pique interest among local and international art enthusiasts alike in Singapore as a destination to discover high-quality art.

The first international outpost of the Parisian private museum, Singapore Pinacothèque de Paris is now premiering masterpieces by a roll-call of master artists including Vincent van Gogh, Edvard Munch and Jackson Pollock. The museum, set amid lush greenery in Fort Canning Park, also allows visitors to take in hilltop views of downtown Singapore.

As for the 64,000m² National Art Gallery, a collection of 19th- and 20th-century Singapore and South-east Asian artpieces will call it home. The gallery will hold the title of the largest arts venue in the region when its doors swing open this November.

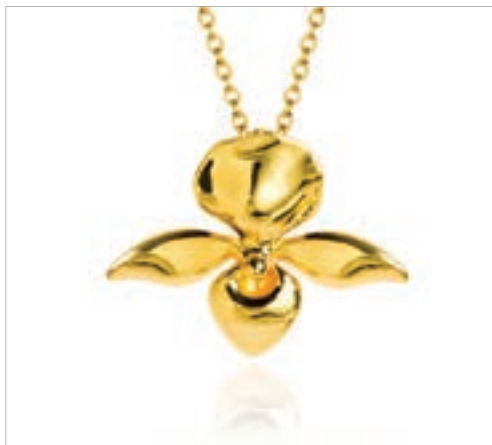
Jewellers are also chipping

in with limited edition SG50 craftpieces. One such retailer is pure gold and diamond retailer, SK Jewellery, which is selling 999 pieces of SG50 gold bars engraved with 'Celebrate SG50 Together' and iconic Singapore images like Marina Bay Sands and Gardens by the Bay, using special 3D technology to bring them to life.

RISIS, another jewellery-maker, has created five unique pendants each representing a different facet of Singapore – nature, the arts, travel, business and food.

Your clients entering or leaving Singapore from September onwards are also in for another treat: be sure to ask them to look out for the parade of raintrees lining the 3.4km stretch of East Coast Parkway to Singapore Changi Airport that will be lit up every night until the end of the year to bid visitors welcome or goodbye – a little something extra for visitors in this extra special year.

Below RISIS' SG50 pendants celebrating Singapore's 50th National Day



Five
luxe
products

Zafferano Restaurant. Lounge. Bar.

Located on the 43rd storey of Ocean Financial Centre, this contemporary Italian restaurant and bar, which can fit 150 guests, offers a panoramic 270° view of Singapore from its open-air rooftop terrace. Expect refreshed and modern takes on classic Italian fare.

Both lounge and terrace areas are also available for booking to host private cocktail parties.



Enter the Shimano Cycling World

Celebrated as the world's first experiential and interactive cycling gallery, Japanese designer and manufacturer Shimano has opened a bicycle museum next to the Singapore Sports Museum at the Singapore Sports Hub. With 20 bicycles on display, the 650m² gallery also contains eight exhibits that visitors can not only view, but also listen to and touch.

Japanese pampering in Singapore

Take a spa trek at Ikeda Spa Prestige, which promises to teleport guests into a tranquil and traditional ryokan of Kyoto. Warm tatami rooms and steaming onsen beckon at this spa retreat, which also features a Hinokinuro Sento, an onsen-style public bathhouse.

Dreaming of sushi?

The scion of master sushi chef Tokio Hashida, Kenjiro Hashida, is helping Hashida Sushi's first overseas venture in Singapore. The 26-seat fine-dining restaurant at Mandarin Gallery features an omakase menu. The chef will prepare his impeccable sushi right before the diner's eyes, testament to the freshness of the food.

Adrift by David Myers

Celebrity chef David Myers has landed on Singapore shores with his new Marina Bay Sands venture, Adrift. Paying homage to the colourful food cultures from both sides of the Pacific, Myers' travel-inspired menu is a mash-up of flavours, starring modern Asian dishes such as Wagyu Beef Satay and King Crab Melt with Pimento Cheese.



Above
The centre bar at Zafferano Restaurant
Right Celebrity chef David Myers

Suite beginnings



Above Ritz-Carlton, Macau

Upcoming hotels in new integrated resorts are giving Macau's tourism landscape a new sheen, reports **Prudence Lui**

Macau will be awash with fresh luxury accommodation options within the next few years as new integrated resorts (IRs) begin operations.

The IRs bring to the table a new crop of high-end global hotel brands that will help put Macau on the map of international luxury travel and could drive more inbound from the US and the UK.

One such example is Marriott International, which launched the first JW Marriott and Ritz-Carlton hotels on May 27 under Galaxy Macau's phase-two expansion.



New hotel entries represent only good news because they will, in the long-term, increase the ADR and RevPAR for the Cotai Strip.

Josef Dolp,
managing director,
St Regis Macao,
Cotai Central

which will be the fourth and final hotel in the Sands Cotai Central when it opens on August 1, commented: “I think new hotel entries represent only good news because they will, in the long-term, increase the ADR and RevPAR for the Cotai Strip.”

“For the St Regis project, the intention has always been to attract more non-gaming business, and that will help drive more luxury travellers to Macau. My experience here in Macau is that new offerings will always drive additional business, especially customers from Hong Kong and the key cities in China.”

The five-star hotel will feature 400 lavishly appointed guestrooms and suites ranging between 53m² and 477m², with a butler for every room, and the signature Iridium Spa.

It has a 599m² Astor Ballroom for up to 350 guests. For a more spacious event, the meeting floor at St Regis connects directly to Sheraton Macao Hotel, Cotai Central’s 1,329m² Kashgar Ballroom that seats up to 5,000 pax.

Mark McWhinnie, senior vice president of resort operations and development for Sands China, said the arrival of new upscale hotels opens the destination to a wider range of visitors and is an opportunity to showcase the IR’s diverse duty-free retail, dining and entertainment products under one roof.

“As Macau continues to grow over the next 18 months, so will the influx of visitors from South-east Asia and farther afield, and customers are very familiar with these brands.”

Other IR developments will also be coming on stream in the next 30 months. These include Studio City, which is slated for a mid-year launch; The Parisian, Wynn Palace and MGM Cotai next year; and Lisboa Palace in 2017.

JW Marriott Hotel Macau is the largest and flagship property for the brand in Asia, and Ritz-Carlton, Macau is the brand’s first all-suite hotel in an IR, said Rauf Malik, vice president of operations for the hotels.

Malik said: “The hotels provide access to Galaxy Macau’s 75,000m² Grand Resort Deck with lush oasis gardens, the world’s largest Skytop Wave Pool and the longest Skytop Rapids at 575m.”

Dining is also a central component of the hotels’ luxury proposition. The legendary Man Ho restaurant continues to serve traditional Cantonese cuisine at JW Marriott,

while Ritz-Carlton, Macau has Lai Heen spinning out authentic Cantonese dishes including Steamed Crab Claw with Egg White in Hua Diao Wine, and Double-boiled Chicken Soup with Fish Maw and Sea Coconut in Bamboo.

“We have specifically designed private and elegant dining rooms at our dining outlets which are ideal for intimate and celebratory occasions,” said Malik, who added that the hotels’ range of wines, spirits and tea includes a rich French Bordeaux selection of vintages and premium aged *pu’er* tea.

Josef Dolp, managing director of St Regis Macao, Cotai Central

Four
luxé
products

Double the space

Plaza Premium Lounge Management will double the size of its lounge at Macau International Airport in the coming months. The number of VIP rooms, which are soundproof (and each comes with its own restroom) will grow from two to seven. The 4,950m² lounge can currently seat 130 people.

Bombana goes to Galaxy Macau

The reputed 8½ Otto e Mezzo Bombana opened on May 27 under Galaxy Macau's second phase of development, the brainchild of chef Umberto Bombana who holds three Michelin stars for the Hong Kong branch of the same name.

The 80-seat restaurant features a 200m² dining room and two private rooms. Signature dishes include Seared Red Tuna (Fennel Pollen, Tomato and Citrus Emulsion), as well as Tajima Short Rib and Beef Tenderloin (Red Wine and Plum Sauce, Whipped Potato).



Above Joana Vasconcelos' *Valkyrie Octopus*

A dash of colour

MGM Macau has engaged world-renowned Portuguese artist Joana Vasconcelos to exhibit at its Grande Praça until October 31, marking her first solo exhibition in Greater China.

Her colourful piece *Valkyrie Octopus* hangs from the skylight dome of the building's central atrium and combines artisanal techniques such as crocheting and Nisa embroidery from the Alto Alentejo region of Portugal, with LED lights and boldly coloured, patterned material.

Three large sculptures from the *Tetris* series are also on display and

invite visitors to become part of the artwork.

Cultural discovery

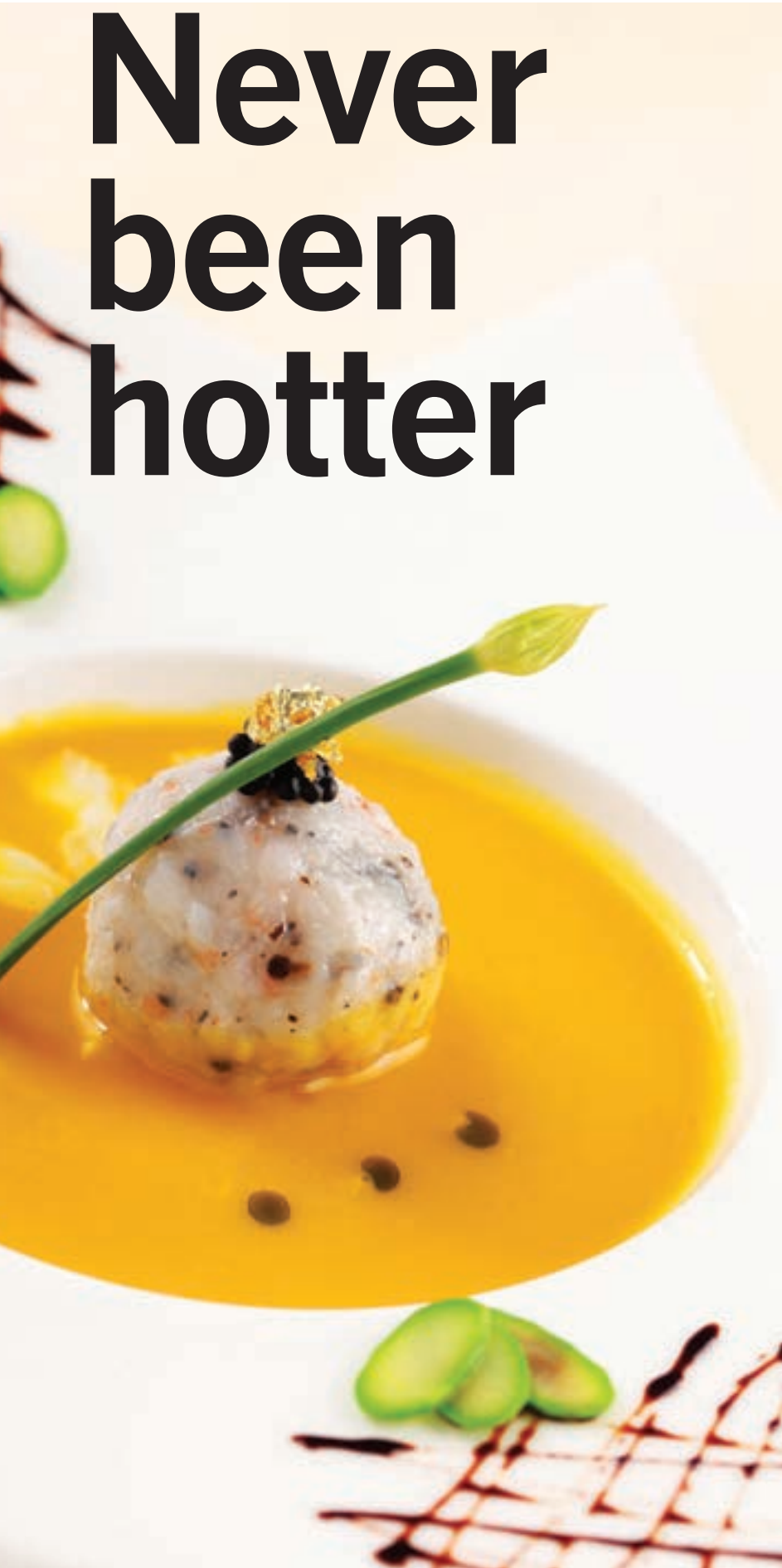
Mandarin Oriental, Macau is presenting the *Macau Cultural Discovery* package starting from MOP\$5,088 (US\$637). It includes one night's accommodation in a guestroom or suite, buffet breakfast for two at Vida Rica Restaurant, and a four-hour city tour covering UNESCO World Heritage Sites within Macau and visits to the outlying islands of Taipa and Coloane. A 14-day advance reservation is required for the city tour.

Below left Mandarin Oriental, Macau
Right Tajima Short Rib



8½ Otto e Mezzo Bombana

Never been hotter



Left Cuisine Cuisine at The Mira, Hong Kong tempts even the most jaded food lover with a fresh take on Chinese food

Despite knife-sharp competition, new high-end and unique local F&B venues are mushrooming in Hong Kong to please high-spending gastronomes, reports **Prudence Lui**

Dubbed a gourmet city, Hong Kong is back in the spotlight as one of the hottest international dining destinations, thanks to an influx of new players to an already ultra-competitive business.

As Hong Kong Tourism Board (HKTB) executive director, Anthony Lau, said: “While Hong Kong has long been the go-to destination for top-notch Chinese food, it is now becoming a stomping ground for foreign celebrity chefs to satisfy foodies flying in from around the world.

“As well as the Michelin-starred restaurants, you are spoiled for choice of cuisine and it’s not surprising to see new restaurant entrants every day.”

It is estimated that there are more than 10,000 eateries in town. Fine dining establishments in luxury hotels, such as Island Shangri-La’s Petrus and Summer Palace, jostle with newer concepts, such as *bon vivant* Bonnae Gokson’s SEVVA and The Mira Hong Kong’s Cuisine Cuisine.

Island Shangri-La’s F&B executive assistant manager, David Simon, described the influx of new restaurants in Hong Kong as “tremendous”, with “plenty of international big names having arrived and celebrated chefs opening new restaurants in the local dining arena in recent years”.

The competition is one of the main

destination hong kong



Hong Kong has become a stomping ground for foreign celebrity chefs to satisfy foodies...it's not surprising to see new restaurant entrants every day.

Anthony Lau,
executive director,
Hong Kong Tourism
Board

drivers of a richer luxury dining today, he said.

"Hong Kong diners are spoiled with so many choices, so they can easily become bored and like to try new restaurant concepts, which explains the constantly changing dining scene in this city.

"However, high food quality and service standards are still the golden keys to customer loyalty and repeat business, helping to keep a restaurant afloat in this ultra-competitive market," Simon added.

Said a spokesman of JC Group, which offers high quality Western and Japanese cuisine, coupled with panoramic views of the city: "Travel is never complete without a good dining experience. Everyone goes on travel for a purpose, either for adventure or to relax. And we think luxe travellers want both. Top level dining somehow encompasses both good food and great experiences.

"Take Inakaya in International Commerce Centre as an example. It offers an authentic robatayaki experience that you can't find in other restaurants in Hong Kong, and is on the 101th floor, offering

a splendid 270-degree harbour view. Wealthy travellers have come here especially for its food and view."

In addition to fine dining downtown, there is a trend towards private dining, which has mushroomed in traditional factory buildings around areas such as Wong Chuk Hang, Chai Wan, Lai Chi Kok and even Kwun Tong.

For instance, The Butchers Club in Wong Chuk Hang serves more than just average private dinners. Quite uniquely, the club dry-ages its beef in its own humidity- and temperature-controlled facility and can customise this for guests.

Founder Johnny Glover said: "Private dining has exploded in town. Chefs are now all looking to provide that special, personal experience people will remember. We have customers flying in from Australia, Taiwan and Singapore specifically for our private dining experience.

"Each experience is personalised and extremely conducive for doing business. A large number of our clientele is from the financial and legal sectors; they are captains of industries, politicians and the rich and famous."

Indeed, dining is a huge affair for luxury travellers, according to Lightfoot Travel's co-founder and



Many luxe travellers are interested in trying out local places in addition to the high end ones.

Lucy Jackson,
co-founder and
director,
Lightfoot Travel



director, Lucy Jackson.

"Most of our clients will request that specific restaurants are booked well in advance, and if they don't have their own choices they rely on our expertise to book them in a variety of places.

"Hong Kong has some of the best dining places in Asia, if not the world," said Jackson.

She enthused: "A fantastic Japanese option is Sushi Sase on Hollywood Road. Small and unassuming, it is known to be one of the best places in the city, yet isn't pretentious. For Western fare, the Krug Room at the Mandarin Oriental is a must for any visiting gastronome. With only 12 seats, there is no menu but rather 10 to 14 courses paired with the most exquisite champagnes."

Jackson added that while restaurant groups still dominate the dining scene, more independent places that strive to be unique and creative are opening in the city.

"There is just too much competition in Hong Kong and people's tastes are so fleeting.

"A restaurant cannot afford to be sub-par, or it will shut down pretty quickly. Also, Hong Kong people are obsessed with eating and they dine out often, creating the perfect atmosphere for restaurants to thrive."

And what advice has she for HKTB?

"They should produce an annual dining guide that lists the city's best restaurants in every category.

"We currently have a Michelin guide to Hong Kong, but many luxe travellers are interested in trying out local places in addition to the high end ones.

"We find that our clients like a mix of dining experiences, and presently there isn't a (platform) where they can learn about the more off-the-beaten-track restaurants."

Cuisine Cuisine at The Mira



By Raini Hamdi

LOCATION

Centrally located in Tsimshatsui, at The Mira, Hong Kong.

Name Cuisine Cuisine at The Mira, Hong Kong
Address 3/F The Mira Hong Kong, 118 Nathan Road, Tsimshatsui, Kowloon, Hong Kong
Contact
 Tel: (852) 2315-5222; Email: cuisinecuisine@themirahotel.com
Opening hours Lunch 11.30 to 14.30 daily, except Sun, which is 10.30 to 14.30
 Dinner 18.00-22.30 daily

AMBIENCE

As with the rest of The Mira, which is a member of Design Hotels, Cuisine Cuisine has a personality. It is not a typical Chinese restaurant

that uses traditional, prosperity-inducing colours and decorations. Rather, it is quite the opposite. How often do you see the colour emerald being employed in a Chinese restaurant? I love the elegant, cushy chairs in velvety green; the fashionable lighting installation covering a whole ceiling that comprises hundreds of glass orbs;

the crisp white linen tablecloths on tables for two's and four's – not 10's with a Lazy Susan in the middle. This is sleek and sexy Chinese dining, and it has a menu to match.

MENU

The restaurant serves Cantonese food – as envisioned by award-winning Chef Hung Chi Kwong. Just perusing the extensive a la carte menu makes me salivate; how can I not, when everything sounds so delicious? Stir-fried Lobster on Pumpkin topped with Sturgeon Caviar, Baked Alaska Crab Meat with Avocado, Sauteed Asparagus with Wild Mushrooms and Black Truffle... wait a minute, is this Cantonese?

Each dish is definitely Chinese in taste, but each presentation rivals any Michelin-starred plating. Chef Kwong's philosophy, I understand, is: "The art of culinary is to go beyond the taste... to the

most aesthetic and visually appealing presentation for my guests." It shows.

It's also clear he believes in sourcing the best quality from everywhere, Philippines to Norway, and is not afraid to embrace various cooking techniques to achieve his own unique Cantonese cuisine.

Aside from the extensive a la carte menu, there is also a creative dim sum a la carte menu, and lunch and dinner set menus which change seasonally. The wine list is also overflowing, with 350 labels.

This is also one Chinese restaurant that has the guts not to serve shark's fin. But what on earth is the seahorse and crocodile meat doing in the menu?

SERVICE

Restaurant manager William Chan used to work at The Peninsula Hong Kong, which I'm sure helps account for the sleek and professional service I received during dinner. His air of graciousness and warm ways set the tone for a relaxing evening. Although the restaurant is packed (and the clients are evidently sophisticated), service does not suffer at all. Staff are efficient and friendly.

There are in total 200 seats with seven private rooms; yet, I do not feel I'm in a banquet hall or a coffeehouse but a classy, well-designed restaurant with intimate seating arrangements.

VERDICT

Most clients will not want to leave Hong Kong without experiencing a Chinese restaurant. They – even the most sated among them – will remember this one.

destination bhutan

Silence



Silencing the mind at Punakha Dzong

Bhutan can be a hardship for travellers used to charming luxuries, but the rewards can far outweigh the inconveniences.

Greg Lowe reports

Since the first tourists visited Bhutan in 1974, the Himalayan kingdom has been attracting curious travellers for its pristine environment, soaring peaks, thousands of *dzong* (fortresses) and temples, and Buddhist traditions.

Bhutan has never been a cheap place to visit, however. As part of its policy to go for quality tourism, the government requires each tourist to spend at least US\$200 per day (excluding flights and visas).

Local DMCs work with international partners to curate bespoke tours, mostly centering around the cluster of luxury properties

across the country: Uma by COMO, Amanresorts and Taj, along with standalone properties such as Zhiwa Ling, part of National Geographic Unique Lodges of the World, and Gangtey Goenpa Lodge. Le Meridien Thimphu opened late last year.

Thus, itineraries are standard for luxury travellers, said Simon Cameron, managing director and founder of Lightfoot Travel, Singapore. "We're also burdened by the long travel times, constant road upgrades which cause daily delays, and slightly unreliable domestic flights."

The classic six-day, five-night experience includes a night in the capital Thimphu to acclimatise, followed by two nights in the ancient capital of Punakha and three nights in Paro, from where guests trek to Taktsang Palphug Monastery, or the Tiger's Nest, one of the most sacred places in the country. Those wanting to stay longer can add destinations such as Gangtey or Bumthang to their tour, though additional permits are required.

An important fact to impress upon clients is that what gives Bhutan much of its allure – inaccessibility – will add to the burden of travel. Those who lack the luxury of a private jet will be travelling by road and some of the journeys can be as long as 12 hours. This might improve thanks to a road-widening scheme which is due to be completed within the next year or so, and the government will have purchased two helicopters which the trade can use by year-end, said Damcho Rinzin, spokesman, Tourism Council of Bhutan, adding: "(Inspired by Visit Bhutan 2015), we're also developing other destinations outside Thimphu and Paro. We'll be focusing on developing homestays, cultural experiences and elements which make the most of what is unique to Bhutan's culture and environment."

But specialists dealing with the luxury segment said although the NTO is doing its part by promoting Bhutan at luxury travel shows such

as ILTM and Luxperience, developing high-end accommodation will be crucial in attracting high-spending clients. There is a difference between wanting an authentic local experience and desiring to sleep at a homestay, Cameron explained. "We can arrange home visits or an afternoon's cooking during which clients get to spend a good half-day with the entire family, watch and learn a bit of Bhutanese cooking, chat with the family," he said. "By the end of that, they would probably have had a good enough experience of squat toilets and freezing water."

Nevertheless, plenty of businesses are already "luxing up" experiences for guests. As Tim Christian Bilfinger, general manager of Le Meridien Thimpu, said: "We do not attract your average tourist; Bhutan caters to the curious traveller... There is already plenty to do to make what will already be an amazing experience."

There is a growing choice of options for clients wanting to give back, added Karma Choden, deputy managing director of Yangphel Adventure Travel, which offers philanthropy trips along with regular trips.

Karma Wangchuk, a former monk who now runs Vajra Guru Spiritual Tours & Travel, said many clients request spiritual experiences, such as making offerings at temples to staying a night or two at a monastery, to help them develop a deeper connection with the country, which is home to some 50,000 monks.

Regardless of the requirements of a given client group, anyone who has the privilege of visiting Bhutan is unlikely to leave without having had a positive experience. "'Humbling' was the word one of our Amankora clients used to describe it," said Cameron.



“

'Humbling' was the word one of our Amankora clients used to describe it (i.e. the Bhutan experience).

Simon Cameron, managing director and founder of Lightfoot Travel

Four luxe products

Zhiwa Ling

Recently accepted into National Geographic's Unique Lodges of the World, Zhiwa Ling in Paro is as much a cultural experience as it is a luxury resort. The 45-room lodge is located on a 4ha plot which also boasts a tea house, spa, meditation centre and outdoor hot stone bath, among other facilities. The property is decorated with numerous antiques, tapestries and spiritual objects and has its own temple on the second floor, made of 450-year-old timbers from Gangtey Monastery. There are also plenty of modern touches, including Swedish underfloor heating. www.zhiwaling.com

Spiritual travels

Combining a spiritual experience is a common request for many groups. Vajra Guru Spiritual Travels, headed by Karma Wangchuk, a former monk who was once general secretary of the International Buddhist Studies

Association at Delhi University, offers a range of spiritual experiences, from providing expert insights into the history of Buddhism, to running daily meditation classes during a trip. www.bhutanspiritual.com

Jambay Lhakhang Drup

This five-day festival held in Bumthang in late October/early November takes place near Jambay Lhakhang, one of the oldest temples in the country which dates from the 7th century, and is famous for its night-time ritualistic naked dance (no photography allowed). Luxury specialists such as Singapore-based Lightfoot Travel can incorporate the festival into a tour itinerary, but clients will need to spend at least two weeks in the country and book six to eight months in advance.

Gangtey Goenpa Lodge

Gangtey Goenpa Lodge added a new luxury offering in Phobjikha Valley when it opened in 2013. The property is constructed from stone and features 12 luxury rooms, each boasting a fireplace and traditional bath with stunning views of the lush green valley. The interiors and design are world-class. The lodge can also arrange balloon flights from September to October and March to May for groups of up to six. www.gglbhutan.com

Below Karma Wangchuk of Vajra Guru Spiritual Travels





Le Meridien Thimphu



Above The lobby

By Greg Lowe

LOCATION

With a central location in downtown Thimphu, guests can enjoy strolls around the enigmatic

capital. It's only a few minutes walk to the Clock Tower Square; and the nearby weekend market, with its myriad of stalls touting handicrafts.

More adventurous

types can go for hikes in the hills behind the hotel and the super helpful general manager, Tim Christian Bilfinger, also an ardent trekker, can give personal recommendations.

AMBIENCE

I was welcomed in traditional Bhutanese style and presented with a *tashi khada* (white scarf). The hotel itself takes on a contempo-

rary design which, while featuring local visual elements, has a more international aesthetic feel. The lobby is spacious, welcoming, with plenty of deep armchairs in which to relax, and another area with tables if you want to get your laptop connected.

The hotel had barely been open a month when I visited, which was in the middle of winter, so it was not full. But there were enough guests to make it feel warm.

ROOM

I had a City View Room, which meant mainly a view of the building across the road. The room was well-appointed. Again the interiors were contemporary, accented with Bhutanese elements. The bathroom featured a decent sized bath and shower, and the water was piping hot, which was an absolute blessing after returning from a six-hour trek to and from the Tiger's Nest.

FACILITIES

Breakfast was served in Latest Recipe, a buffet restaurant which offers Western and Indian cuisine, with a few local dishes too. The food was fresh, tasty and served in small enough batches that it never got cold.

Sese Shamu is the hotel's pan-Asian restaurant which offers a wide range of dishes from China and South-east Asia. It made a welcome change from just Bhutanese and Indian cuisine, the default second option in the country. While the local food can be good – the indigenous nutty red rice was a delight to eat – it's not especially diverse and one can quickly tire of *ema datshi* (chilli and cheese), which seemed to be served with almost every meal.

The other facilities included the gym and heated swimming pool, neither of which I used. There was plenty of exercise to be had exploring the city and going on hikes. Explore Spa, and a traditional hot stone bath, were more enticing, but there wasn't time even for those.

SERVICE

Service was seamless, which was all the more impressive given the newness of the property. Most of the staff were from Bhutan. All were charming – the kingdom's trademark hospitality.

VERDICT

Ideal for guests wanting a contemporary hotel. Location is the real winner here. My only grievance was having to pay for in-room Wi-Fi, which just doesn't feel right in this day and age, even in Shangri-La (which is surprisingly well-connected).

Name Le Meridien Thimphu
No. of rooms 78
Address Chorten Lam, P.O. Box 01286, Thimphu, Bhutan
Contact
Tel: (975) 2-337-788
Website:
www.starwoodhotels.com

gasp! the audacity of luxury



Plaza Premium embarks on US\$40 million expansion

Hong Kong-based Plaza Premium Lounge Management is investing more than US\$40 million on new lounge development globally in the next three years.

The company has confirmed eight new lounge projects this year, bringing its lounge service network to 35 international airports. The new projects are in Brisbane, London Heathrow Terminal 4, Phnom Penh, Salalah (Oman), Singapore, Shanghai, Siem Reap and Winnipeg (Canada).

As well, it is embarking on the Phase II development of the Plaza Premium Lounge in Macau (left) this summer, which will see the size of the lounge expanded from the current 460m² to 1,050m².

The Phase II development will also bring to seven, from two currently, the number of VIP rooms the lounge has, each covering an area of 79m² to 93m² and can seat 20 to 30 pax, ideal for small, private meetings.

The lounge will also be Asia's first landslide in/airside out service. Ensuring a seamless end-to-end airport experience, there will be exclusive Meet & Greet services with fast track immigration and security handling.

"We provide personal assistance to and from the gate, baggage handling and delivery, limousine transfer and buggy service, to let our guests breeze through the airport," said a spokesperson.

"Our concierge can do everything from arranging your airport shopping schedule, to arranging an airport lounge stay."

A tailor-made a la carte menu with hot food, snacks and beverages with select alcoholic drinks is offered at the lounge, which is located on the Mezzanine Level, Macau International Airport.

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Most responsible tourism destinations

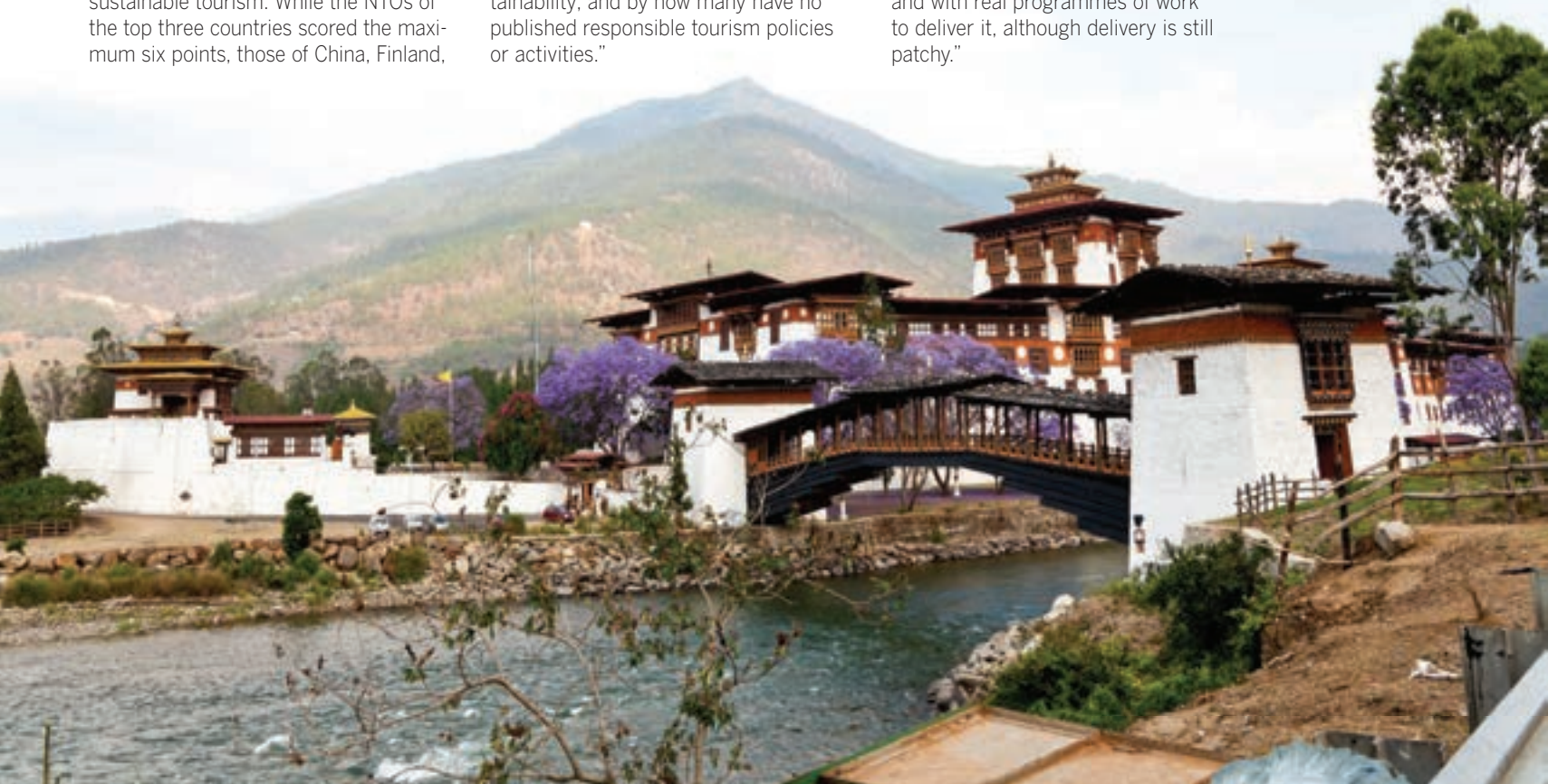
In a recent survey by UK-based Responsible Travel, Bhutan (below), South Africa and Sweden emerged tops as 'most responsible tourism destinations'.

Fifty national tourism board (NTO) websites were examined and six questions were asked relating to their vision, policies and activity in responsible and sustainable tourism. While the NTOs of the top three countries scored the maximum six points, those of China, Finland,

Ethiopia, Vietnam, France, Japan and the US scored zero, meaning they had no reference to sustainable tourism anywhere on their sites.

Responsible Travel CEO Justin Francis said: "We are very surprised that so many tourist boards' vision statements include no or little reference to sustainability; and by how many have no published responsible tourism policies or activities."

He added scathingly: "In many cases around the world we think responsibility in tourism is being achieved despite the tourist board not because of it. South Africa is a real exception. They have national and local strategies for responsible tourism enshrined in law and policy and with real programmes of work to deliver it, although delivery is still patchy."



How about some travel tips from Iris?

Style icon Iris Apfel (right), famed quarterback Steve Young and fashion designers Heidi Gosman and Penny Klein are the newest Rosewood Hotels & Resorts' Curators.

Part of a carefully selected collection of "luminaries", they share their insider secrets, travel tips and favourite activities in Rosewood destinations around the world.

Honoured by New York as a fashion icon and style maverick, the 93-year-old Iris is inarguably an institution in the Big Apple.

Originally an interior decorator, she is now a front row regular during New York Fashion Week.

In a promotional short film, Iris reveals her favourite places to eat and drink in New York, her love of travel and her preferred pastime in the city that never sleeps.

Former professional football player Steve Young was a quarterback in the National Football League for 14 seasons during the 1980s and 1990s. Named MVP of the NFL twice, the regular visitor to Rosewood CordeValle in San Martin shares the inside scoop on some of his favourite local California attractions.

Heidi Gosman and Penny Klein are the designers behind Heidi Klein, a luxury boutique specialising in holiday wear whose label now sells in over 150 stores in 39 countries.

The designers discuss the highlights of their favourite destination, Virgin Gorda, from swimming with turtles to snorkelling in The Baths.



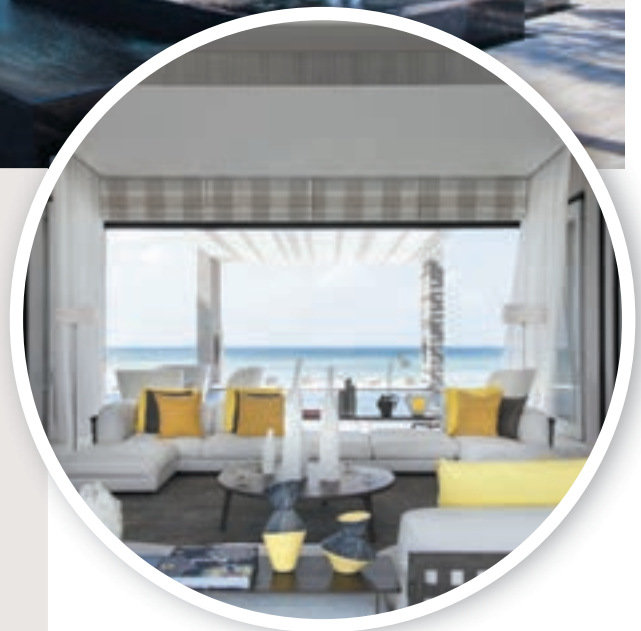


Cheval Blanc unveils Owner's Villa

Cheval Blanc Randheli, Maldives has launched the Owner's Villa, the ultimate accommodation type in a resort that is already long on the word, lavish.

So here's an insight into how much more lavish life can be:

- the private pool is 25m long
 - there's not one, but *three* successive living rooms decorated with fine crafts and bespoke furniture
 - there's a private dining room in which guests savour the best meals served by dedicated chefs
 - there's a separate Guest Villa equipped with an outdoor dining pergola
 - a cinema is only steps away from the main house
- Need we say more?



Say ahoy to luxury charters

It is full sails ahead for the newly refurbished *Royal Albatross*, the only tall ship in Asia specially designed for luxury corporate and private charters as well as dockside events.

Owned and chartered by Singapore-based company Tall Ship Adventures, the ship, berthing at Resorts World Sentosa, has a sailing capacity for up to 149 guests for day and evening charters. It features 185m² of upper deck space, three purpose-built stages, a restaurant-grade galley, professional sound and AV systems and a fully air-conditioned interior.

The ship's sails and rigging were designed by master rigger Jim Barry, who was also behind the ships in the

Pirates of the Caribbean films. All the ship's sails are operated manually using ropes and pulleys, just as they were over 200 years ago.

The ship enjoyed five minutes of fame when it featured as Bruce Wayne's private yacht in the second Batman film, *The Dark Knight*, starring Christian Bale and the late Heath Ledger.

The hourly charter rate starts from S\$5,000++ (US\$3,688) for a minimum of two hours, including the cost of fuel and service of the crew, but excluding F&B charges.

For international voyages, the ship sleeps 10 guests overnight in its five en-suite cabins and is certified to sail worldwide unrestricted. – **Jerlene Ng**





Mandarin Oriental's iconic Bamboo Bar reopens

The Bamboo Bar at Mandarin Oriental, Bangkok has reopened following an extensive refurbishment.

Originally just a tiny room in the hotel in 1953, the bar has grown into an institution frequented by the world's high society. Patrons have included Louis Armstrong, Mick Jagger and Audrey Hepburn, their pictures hanging proudly on the wall.

The bar's original black rattan armchairs have been restored and replicas of rattan seating shown in early 20th century photos created.

The hotel's general manager Amanda Hyndman said: "Our objective was to weave the past into the future.

"The new design better meets the changing needs of our sophisticated clientele, offering more intimate seating and comfort, and clever integration of the outdoor space and the adjacent Cigar Divan."

The Bamboo Bar's beverage and liquor concept places renewed emphasis on exclusivity and small production, boasting one of the largest collections of single malt Scotch whiskies in Thailand.

The famous Thaijito and other Bamboo Bar originals created by its barkeeper Sompong Boonsri for three decades remain on the cocktail menu, along with classics that are mixed according to their original recipes.



Let them eat cake

It was Beijing's Louis Vuitton, not Louis XVI of France, who enjoyed a slice of SEVVA sweetness at its new flagship store, the China World Mansion.

To celebrate the store's opening, the renowned restaurant, headed by Hong Kong's own Queen of Confectionery Bonnae Gokson, opened a pop-up café within the store named SEVVA for Louis Vuitton Series 2 Café.

Gokson created a special all-day menu for the three-week showcase that lasted from March 26 to April 12, featuring a selection of SEVVA's signature dishes from the past seven years. The opening also featured digital fashion show screenings of the Spring Summer 2015 collection by designer Nicolas Ghesquière.

SEVVA itself meanwhile is located on the rooftop of the Prince's Building in Central, Hong Kong. The 1,115m² penthouse comprises two dining areas serving a delightful menu of popular Western and Asian dishes, an outdoor lounge with unobstructed views of the harbour and the city, a Taste Bar featuring small plates and, naturally, a Ms B's Sweets corner.



New hotel brand Cordis enters

A new upscale global hotel brand, Cordis Hotels and Resorts, has been launched by Hong Kong-based Langham Hospitality Group, with the first Cordis slated to open in Hong Kong this year.

The Cordis Hong Kong (left) will open in August with 665 rooms and is a conversion from Langham Place, Mongkok.

Cordis, derived from the Latin term meaning 'heart', aims to compete with other international upscale hotels and resorts by focusing on the core pillars of intuitive service, connectivity, sophistication and a sense of community.

"Each Cordis hotel will be individual in style, architecture and design, all of which will be reflective of its location

and culture, and tailored to the requirements of our guests, from the corporate travellers to honeymooners to multi-generational families," said Langham Hospitality Group CEO, Robert Warman.

The Cordis portfolio will include hotels, resorts and residences, both new-builds and conversions, in Asia and North America.

According to Warman, Cordis has signed another four letters of intent for Cordis in Shanghai, Qingdao, Nanjing and Bali.

Other cities targeted for future Cordis hotels include London, New York, Miami, Los Angeles, Orlando, San Francisco, Dubai, Singapore and Bangkok.

First Niccolo opened in Chengdu

Niccolo Chengdu soft-opened on April 15, the first Niccolo by Marco Polo.

Located within the International Finance Square Shopping Mall, the hotel is 25 minutes away by car from Chengdu Shuangliu International Airport and is easily accessible by subway.

It offers 230 rooms and suites, with fashion-inspired interiors done by leading designers. Floor-to-ceiling windows flood rooms with natural daylight and uninterrupted views.

Dining options include The Tea Lounge (below), Niccolo Kitchen, Yue Hin Chinese restaurant and The Bar, while fitness facilities include a pool, saunas and gym.

Niccolo also provides tailor-made experiences for guests through its concierge, Niccolo City Insiders, so that guests can experience the local flavours of Chengdu.

The hotel is the first Ultratravel Collection member in China. Ultratravel Collection was created by the Global Hotel Alliance (GHA), of which Marco Polo Hotels is a member, in 2004, in a bid to distinguish the luxury properties of members in the GHA portfolio.



200 new China buyers at ILTM



Two hundred new China buyers are at the 9th ILTM Asia in Shanghai which is taking place June 1 to 4.

ILTM Asia senior exhibition director Alison Gilmore said the buyers were sourced not only from first-tier Chinese cities but emerging second and third tiers, including but not limited to Chengdu, Wuhan and Guangzhou.

Translators are on hand to help with communication for any luxury travel buyers attending.

According to Gilmore, the show aims to introduce at least 30 per cent new buyers each year. Last year, for instance, 42 per cent of a total of 468 buyers, from 21 countries, were first-timers to the event. This year's show targets an increase in buyer numbers to 500-550, of which 48 per cent will be new buyers to ILTM Asia.

"But this year we focus on Hong Kong and China as the region from where we are hosting the majority of our new faces," said Gilmore. "At last

year's ILTM Asia Global Forum, travel was cited as the leading leisure pursuit for China's wealthy. By 2020, we understand the number of foreign trips made from China will double."

Other key target regions where both new and the established buyers have been sourced are Singapore, Australia, Indonesia, Taiwan and Japan.

"With increasing numbers of wealthy travellers seeking new experiences across all four corners of the world, there are also increasing numbers of specialist buyers who are creating their bespoke itineraries," said Gilmore.

Another report, the 2015 China Luxury Forecast, by Ruder Finn and IPSOS Group (see *Luxury Markets - China*), also shows travel is now the number one category of luxury for Chinese consumers, and spending by Chinese travellers is expected to drive more growth in luxury markets outside China.

luxury people

Meier is COO of COMO

Veteran hotelier Hans Jörg Meier is now COMO Hotels & Resorts' chief operating officer.

The former senior vice president of GHM Hotels took up the mantle from Kuno Fasel, COMO's founding COO of 15 years, who remains consultant at the Singapore-based company.

Meier is in charge of all executive, management and operational responsibilities for COMO Hotels and Resorts, which last year opened three hotels, the Metropolitan by COMO in Miami, Point Yamu by COMO in Phuket and Maalifushi by COMO in the Maldives, and is expanding further.

It also recently streamlined its branding, with all properties in the portfolio now wearing the 'by Como' badge at the end, including the three Uma by COMO resorts in Bali and Bhutan.

Christina Ong, founder of COMO Hotels and Resorts, said: "We have much to benefit from Mr Meier's experience in both resort and urban hotels, in developed and developing countries. I have every confidence he will build on Mr Fasel's good work to steer COMO Hotels and Resorts into the future, building strong teams and delivering memorable experiences for guests."



specialists

Lightfoot turns five, aims to be 'light-footed'

In celebration of its fifth anniversary, Asia-based luxury travel specialist Lightfoot Travel has unveiled a new look and website.

The company aims to create stories through travel and this is reflected by its new logo, a single feather, which was inspired by Hermes, the Olympian god of transitions and boundaries, and the patron of travellers. His fabled winged sandals gave him the ability to travel, light-footed, wherever he wished.

The new website is a source of travel knowledge, featuring stunning visuals, the range of experiences offered in their itineraries, travel tips from its consultants as well as nuggets of information from leaders in the travel industry.



Lark is back at Trisara

Anthony Lark, who joined Trisara Phuket during its development and design period in 2000 and helped put the brand on the radar of luxury clients, is now back as its managing director and general manager.

He replaced general manager Antoine Melon, who resigned for a new posting in London.

In this new role, Lark will also continue to provide hospitality advisory services to the clients of Montara Hospitality Group, owning company of Trisara, which has expanded into management contracts.

"Anthony was the first general manager of Trisara and helped us build the foundation which made us successful. We are pleased to have him back on board to ensure that the resort continues to evolve to serve the changing needs of our clients," said Bill Black, president, Montara Hospitality Group.

The resort has started a three-year renovation plan which aims to increase guest satisfaction by improving its overall look and feel while innovating to meet the demands of the future traveller, including the creation of ever-more refined experiences.



Diethelm gets distinctive

Thailand-based Diethelm Travel Group has introduced two new product lines, Diethelm Distinctive and Diethelm Design. CEO Maarten Groeneveld said these products rely on specialised expertise to give clients added value.

Asked about the difference between the two, Groeneveld said every Diethelm Distinctive journey is “a hands-on experience” for guests. “Clients will have a sense of time being well spent as they will acquire new knowledge about local people and their way of life, culture and traditions, and the flora and fauna of the locality and its preservation,” he explained.

Diethelm Design, on the other hand, creates high-end individual itineraries for a journey of a lifetime. A new department has been set up to curate these journeys, led by Sam Vincent, who

has more than 20 years’ experience in the Asian travel industry.

“As the travel industry moves increasingly online, there is still the individual client who values personal attention, specialised product knowledge and a team who can create the journey of a lifetime for both individuals and groups alike,” said Groeneveld. – **Raini Hamdi**



Not just Bespoke in Beijing

Bespoke Beijing has changed its name to Bespoke Travel Company to reflect its growth and expansion in China.

The six-year-old firm recently opened an office in Shanghai, a move fuelled by demand for travellers seeking experiences provided by specialists, said founder and CEO Sarah Keenlyside.

The Shanghai office is manned by two staff with years of experience in the industry and the city, according to Keenlyside.

She said tours in Shanghai would be more glamorous compared to Beijing’s “earthy experiences”, ranging from excursions in the Yu Gardens with a poet, to Art Deco discovery walks and bespoke cocktail experiences.

Bespoke Travel Company offers itinerary design, smart car hire, knowledgeable local Chinese tour guides and new expert-led Signature Experiences.

“For a travel company to do a great job of your trip, internationally-minded individuals who live and breathe that city on a daily basis, and who are as obsessed with the latest restaurant opening as they are with traffic flow, are needed,” she said. – **Caroline Boey**



Call of the desert

For clients who want a special desert experience, luxury glamping is the way to go.

Set amid sprawling desert sands 115km from Jodhpur in the village of Dechu is Samsara Luxury Resort & Camp.

The resort is an alluring oasis in the middle of the endless dunes of Rajasthan’s Thar desert, with moats and fountains surrounding the complex of 32 villas and two suites.

Samsara is not short on experiences and excursions – visitors can go on a safari tour on camel or by jeep to get a glimpse of desert wildlife and the safari lifestyle.

Meanwhile, travellers preferring the off-beaten track can make their way to the sleepy town of Khichan to watch the demoiselle cranes of Eurasia and Mongolia that migrate there every August.

luxury deals



Belmond Asia Passport just for the travel trade

Belmond is extending the travel trade special discounts for product bookings through the Belmond Asia Passport.

Available throughout this year, travel specialists who book two Belmond products simultaneously get a five per cent off each product, while those who book three products get a 10 per cent discount off each product.

No black-out dates apply.

The offer is available when booking any combination of hotels, trains or river cruises (above) in the Belmond Asia portfolio.

One of the possible itineraries takes travellers to Yangon's famous rivers, where they can drift along the Ayeyarwady and Chindwin rivers aboard the *Belmond Orcaella* and *Belmond Road to Mandalay* by day, and retreat to the colonial-style Belmond Governor's Residence by night.



Water, wine, washoku, clients can have it all

Water, wine and washoku (traditional Japanese cuisine) are the ingredients of Palace Hotel Tokyo's (left) new Wanderlust Weekend package.

Focusing on the Japanese concept of wa (harmony), the two-night breakfast-inclusive package comprises:

- Water – two 50-minute treatments at evian SPA
- Washoku – kaiseki lunch for two at Wadakura, the hotel's Japanese restaurant
- Wine – dinner for two at Michelin-starred French restaurant Crown with wine pairings

To start, guests will be treated to delicacies from Wadakura's kaiseki menu, which will feature the season's finest.

Guests will also enjoy expertly-paired wines with their dinner at Crown, whose original chef and sommelier, Tokusaburo Tanaka and Katsumi Asada, are credited for fostering Japan's love for French cuisine and wine.

Completing the experience will be two treatments at evian SPA TOKYO, which combine traditional Japanese *seitai* trigger point work with Swedish-style deep tissue massage to improve energy flows.

Package rates start from 205,000 yen (US\$1,700).

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