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# editor's note



**W**e picked our cover photo this issue, courtesy of Small Luxury Hotels of the World, not only because it is fun, whacky, crazy stylish, youthful, but because it depicts well the changing face of the luxury travel market globally (see pages 45-48). The well-heeled Asian travellers are not an exception; they too keep evolving, keep defying traditional notions of luxury.

In the course of the year, I've interviewed many luxury players about the Asian luxury traveller. A common thread is how confounded they are by their clients today. Yet, I don't see anything mystifying or perplexing about the new luxury traveller. Perhaps that's easy for a journalist, who does not handle a single client, or who isn't too 'close' to the business to see the writing on the wall, to say.

To me, it's clear that there has been a shift in the luxury sector, from 'product' back to 'person'. Simplistically, whereas previously a five or six star product was what defined luxury, today it's a person's inclinations that define it. That in turn brings about an inexhaustible list of luxury definitions – the luxury of being in remote locations, the luxury of experiencing authenticity, the luxury

of doing nothing and, yes, the luxury of letting one hair's down – the list goes on.

Whereas before the industry would project its idea of luxury onto the guest, who invariably would lap it up, today it is the client who tells the industry what his idea of luxury is. Whereas before, the client might be content with just a few trendy or aspirational destinations and products, today he can go anywhere, get ideas from everywhere; luxury therefore can be anything for him.

The industry finds this uncomfortable to say the least because for so long it 'knows' the client and is able to lead him by the horn. Well, the sooner industry players understand the shift, and focus instead on the person as an individual with different inclinations at any given time, the faster they will reap the rewards.

Meanwhile, do enjoy the luxury of letting your hair down. Happy year-end and here's to a rich 2018 from all of us at *TTG Asia Luxury*.

**Raini Hamdi**, Senior Editor

## TTG ASIA LUXURY

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**TTG** | Publishing | **Travel Trade**

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

*TTG Asia Luxury* is a product by TTG Travel Trade Publishing, a business group of TTG Asia Media. It is mailed free on written request to readers who meet predetermined criteria. Paid subscriptions are available to those who do not meet the criteria. MCI(P)033/08/2017. PPS1884/02/2017 (025625). Printed by Times Printer Pte Ltd, 16 Tuas Avenue 5, Singapore 639340.



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Above A young Chinese couple in Oia, Santorini, Greece

## Where travel experts thrive

As prescribed formats make way for a new consumption ethos with bespoke concepts and boutique brands, travel experts find themselves becoming more valuable. By **Yixin Ng**

**Tailor-made itineraries** have gained traction among China's luxury travellers as the demography becomes better travelled, more globally-oriented, more plugged-in to the gamut of products available and more motivated by more complex needs, according to buyers interviewed at ILTM Asia in Shanghai this year.

As well, *The Chinese Luxury Traveller 2017* by Hurun Report shows the proportion of luxury travellers choosing standard packages fell from 37 per cent in 2015 to 26 per cent last year.

When planning travel itineraries with travel agencies, 27 per cent prefer fine-tuned packages, 23 per cent opt for fully-customisable holidays, while 12 per cent prefer self-planned.

The market for personalised luxury travel is set to expand, the report further revealed, as 40 per cent of respondents indicated their intention to use custom-designed services in future, while a mere 10 per cent planned to travel as part of a traditional tour group.

For Chinese luxury agents like Li Chang-song, the breadth of options presented to consumers through the Internet has fuelled a desire in travellers to look beyond existing packages for top quality products.

In turn, the need to fall back on the expertise of agents to sift through the overwhelming volume of information has increased.

"There is a great phenomenon happening – people are now more aware of quality products... Yet our customers still (come to) us asking what the difference is between (say) Four Seasons and Ritz-Carlton, what are the different concepts," said Li, who is managing director at Deluxe MICE Tour & Luxury Travel.

*Ge xing hua*, which translates to personality-driven or relating to the individual, was an oft-heard buzzword at ILTM Asia, reflecting how perceptions of quality and



value have changed for Chinese travellers.

In another study by Agility Research, Chinese HNWIs put quality first, followed by uniqueness of product (travel or otherwise).

In contrast, Singaporean HNWIs surveyed ranked uniqueness of product fourth in importance, behind quality, self-reward and exclusivity.

The trend towards top quality and uniqueness of product has manifested itself in, for example, a new love for boutique, single-brand, or independent hotels, observed Austin Huang, CEO of Chinese mobile and online luxury travel agency, Geetrip.

Chairman and chief researcher of Hurun Report, Rupert Hoogewerf, pointed to this as one of the more striking trends in Chinese luxury travel. Aman made top 10 in Hurun's 2017 ranking of hotel groups by popularity among Chinese HNWIs. Banyan Tree Hotels & Resorts, meanwhile, has risen to fourth place, which Hoogewerf said was a feat considering the brand's scale relative to international chains in the ranking.

The obsession with unique travel styles in China has validated the viability of a total bespoke style of travel products, even in an economy that has become nearly synonymous with volume-driven growth.

"Before, agents take charge of designing programmes. Now, most high-level consumers have their own ideas and want to go 'ground up' in the itinerary design," said Geetrip's Huang.

"They need to see themselves in the itinerary," Huang added.

This invariably leads back to the role of agents. Huang said that as independent resorts tend to be the more obscure names – such as Geetrip's bestseller, Brando Resort in Tahiti – guests "do not have

## The Chinese upmarket traveller...

- ❖ values quality and uniqueness of product above exclusivity
- ❖ values travel experts even more
- ❖ is less shy to interact with locals

many ways to discover or book these resorts" – and that is where the experts comes in.

Geetrip provides travel advice and content, in addition to property listings on both web and mobile platforms.

Moreover, as single-brand resorts tend to be located in destinations safely tucked away from mass-market destinations, access is often an issue, again necessitating help from travel service providers.

On how trends in luxury consumption relate to new currencies for service providers, Amrita Banta, managing director of Agility Research, added: "HNWIs are (seeking) a story that can be excitingly told.

"After-sales service and feasibility to customise/personalise are (hence) important influences

other than design/styling and craftsmanship."

The appetite for unique experiences and narratives don't just end at products and services. Aymeric Naudin, assistant general manager at China's Sparkle Tour (Beijing), said: "More than just a stay they want to live like a local. It is not about spending money or being flashy. It could be (as simple as) dining at a place where locals go and interacting with them."

The moneyed crowd in China today are better able to realise these goals, he added, being "less shy to interact with locals", language barrier being a lesser problem.

Naudin hence suggested that the role of agents in the business of personalisation is becoming "more about connecting people than about travel service".

"It's a lot more work, but (the task is to) get organised and find the right partners overseas – partners who understand those needs and who can also deliver because it comes down to a lot of details and pushing doors that normally cannot be pushed."

DMCs have also had to adapt, according to Naudin.

"We don't use DMCs the way we used to; we can go direct to hotel or find a B2B channel. DMCs have more of a ground handling responsibility and it's about looking for extraordinary activities and making those connections happen rather than just booking a package and giving something typical."

“

**(The role of agents is becoming more about connecting people than about travel service.**

Aymeric Naudin, assistant general manager, China's Sparkle Tour





## Higher spending power may not mean more travel dollars



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**Above** Macau Galaxy: Chinese high-rollers are trickling back into the enclave

**By Yixin Ng**

As the effects of China's 2013 anti-corruption measures ease, the purchasing power of the wealthy in China evidently has returned, although it is not translating into travel extravagance.

Hurun's 2017 *Chinese Luxury Traveller Report* shows spending power surged 57 per cent from RMB14 million (US\$2.1 million) per capita in 2015 to RMB22 million in 2016.

Overall luxury spend returned to pre-2013 levels after increasing 20 per cent in 2016 over the previous year; however, the average per household travel expenditure, for example, remained relatively unchanged at RMB380,000 in 2016.

Signs that leisure travel expenditure is not moving in tandem with higher spending power are consistent with the experience of most buyers interviewed at this year's ILTM Asia. Some, like Wang Ze Lin, outbound director of Resort Saloon, actually noted a fall in travel spend in the past year.

In 2014 and 2015, the agency's bookings for resort destinations such as the Maldives, Mauritius, Fiji and Tahiti were typically for five-star or five-star plus properties. In 2016 however, preferences took a sharp turn towards four-star properties and the trend has persisted into 2017, said Wang.

Wang attributed the change possibly to the effects of China's slowing economic growth. China last year saw its slowest growth in GDP since 1990, according to media reports.

But Aymeric Naudin, assistant general manager of CYTS Sparkle Tour (Beijing), pointed out that for a country as large as China, any growth at all could be considered "a good trend".

"Even a small increase is big because the base is huge," he said.

Surmised Hurun Report, "Enthusiasm for overseas travel shows no signs of abating, with the proportion of time spent overseas for tourism purposes among luxury travellers rising five percentage points to 70 per cent of the total. The economic (growth) slowdown in 2016 led to luxury travellers spending more time at work, but this did little to reduce their appetite for travel, making them determined to make the most of their time abroad to go travelling."

And unlike Resort Saloon's experience, last year saw "the highest average willingness to spend extravagantly on accommodation", according to Rupert Hoogewerf, chairman and chief researcher of Hurun Report, with 60 per cent of wealthy Chinese travellers spending at least US\$500 per night on rooms.

As well, despite many observing a shift in Chinese luxury travellers' preferences away from shopping in recent years, the Hurun Report revealed that respondents in 2016 spent an average of RMB220,000 on shopping during their travels, up nearly 57 per cent year-on-year. Almost half (48 per cent) made purchases to the value of RMB50,000-RMB200,000, and five per cent of them spent more than RMB500,000.

It also noted that while per capita spending among average Chinese tourists fell by RMB40,000 year-on-year, the high-end segment continues to flourish in comparison.

Moreover, senior trip consultant at Deep Blue Trip, Eric Lee, shared that clients have been splashing out more money on travel as they develop a taste for smaller groups, personal vehicle and guide, and better quality services.

Meanwhile, it remains to be seen if Chinese high-rollers are trickling back into Macau. Although there was chatter in the first half of 2017 that this was the case – the mainstream media reported figures from Macau's Gaming Inspection and Coordination Bureau showing a 34.8 per cent rise in gross gaming revenue from VIP baccarat rooms to US\$4.46 billion in the April to June period – more caution ensued in the second half of the year.

Serena Chin, spokesperson for Wynn Palace and Wynn Macau, said: "I don't know if China will loosen controls, but as of now, we have been seeing in the news that senior government officials are visiting Macau quite frequently, and it's a sign of support."

When it comes to choice of destinations, Europe and South-east Asia led by a considerable margin in 2016. Hurun stated that Europe has long been the destination of choice among affluent Chinese travellers, while South-east Asia is up-and-coming, having surpassed the Americas over the past two years. The latter finds particular favour among the millennial generation, with 34 per cent of respondents choosing it as their top pick, propelling it from the fourth place to first.

For the more elite of luxury travellers, however, Naudin observed that South-east Asia has passed its prime as an aspirational destination. "Six years ago guests wanted to visit South-east Asia. Now, they want to visit extremely niche destinations that most Chinese have never heard of before."

"The kind of guests we have take very long holidays, travelling to farther ends of the globe, with some even opting for 88-day pole-to-pole cruises."

In the next three years, Hurun predicts that round-the-world travel, polar exploration and adventure travel will be popular. Younger respondents who aspire to visit Africa and polar regions soared to 36 per cent in 2016 (+23 per cent in 2015) and 32 per cent (+17 per cent in 2015).

A key challenge going into 2018 is the stiff competition from OTAs, which according to Li Changsong, managing director at Deluxe MICE Tour & Luxury Travel, control 70-80 per cent market share. "Offline agencies like us don't have the (reach) or power that they have," he said.

Online players Ctrip, Hhtravel and Zanu rank among the 10 most popular companies for luxury travellers in a ranking by ILTM.

Mainland China's Top 12 luxury travel agencies are, in order, 8 Continents, Diadema, D-Lux, CITS Amex, Hhtravel, My Tour, Magic Travel, Ctrip, Zanu, CITS, CTS and CYTS.



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## A growing pie but full of challenges

Indonesia's luxury travel market is looking healthy but not all is rosy for high-end travel planners.

Mimi Hudoyo reports why



**There are good reasons** why Indonesia's luxury travel market is glowing.

The country began 2017 on a strong footing, according to World Bank's 2017 *Indonesia Economic Quarterly* published in June (latest available data at press time), its real GDP growth projected to increase from 5.2 per cent this year to 5.3 per cent next year.

Real GDP growth strengthened to five per cent year-on-year in the first quarter of 2017, compared to 4.9 per cent in the previous quarter, driven by a rebound in government consumption and surging exports, according to the report.

The Indonesian rupiah exchange rate against the US dollar is also stable at around 13,000 rupiah.

In Indonesia, financial institutions play an important role in boosting outbound traffic through the facilities and services they offer their premium credit cardholders.

MasterCard, for example, last year launched a special programme for its World Elite cardholders, giving them privileges and rewards

“

**Travellers are also becoming more active during their holidays. Activities like skiing and cycling are popular.**

Anthony Akili, group president and CEO, Smiling Tour Indonesia

such as access to passenger lounges at 750 airports, concierge services and exclusive dining options.

Recognising the role financial institutions play, NTOs such as Tourism Australia have in the last couple of years developed links with banks as part of their partnership strategy with the industry in Indonesia to boost traffic to their countries.

Brent Anderson, Tourism Australia's manager-Singapore and Indonesia, said: "(Working with banks) is unique to Indonesia. We have a direct partnership with BCA Bank which gives us access to the middle class and the upper middle

class in Indonesia, and with Bank Danamon, which is the publisher of American Express cards in Indonesia for the luxury market."

He added: "Four years ago, the (packages available) were very much the Penguins Kangaroo or the Opera House which had been marketed for more than 10 years. The banks have allowed us to introduced new experiences quickly."

Arrivals from Indonesia to Australia for the year ending August 2017 (September 2016 to August 2017) totalled 195,000, a 17 per cent increase year-on-year. At press time, the expenditure for the year was not available yet, but for year 2016, Indonesians spent A\$700 million (US\$565 million) in Australia, an increase of 19 per cent year-on-year.

A healthy economy, stable currency and hungry banks have given outbound travel companies which have luxury travel divisions reasons to be optimistic that the market can grow 15 per cent to 20 per cent this year.

But it's not all rosy. Some travel





companies were surprised at minimum growth during the recent Lebaran (end of fasting month), Indonesia's biggest holiday season which this year coincided with school holidays, compared with last year's Lebaran.

WITA Tour, for example, came up with new programmes to destinations such as Brazil and Cuba in order to bait high-end travellers who usually want novel places. "The result was not what we expected. There were packages where we expected to get three groups but only one materialised," said director of sales Rudiana.

Rudiana believed the political situation in the country following the Jakarta governor election and the imprisonment of the former Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama had a psychological impact on some people.

"Many luxury travellers are from the Indonesian Chinese families and it is apparent the case has impacted their appetite to travel," he said.

A multitude of travel fairs held by different international airlines operating in Indonesia has also brought changes in travellers' buying behaviours, Rudiana said.

"There are too many travel fairs. Each airline holds its own travel fair, offering attractive discounted fares. Clients thus take the opportunity to buy tickets at bargain prices. In the past, travellers decide on a destination first, then seek air tickets and packages. Now they hold the tickets first and plan the trip later," he said.

There is also a tendency towards free and easy packages, especially among families who are asking travel planners to book just the hotels, restaurants and car rental for them.

"They even ask us to find a local guide in the destination who speaks Bahasa Indonesia, instead of taking a tour leader

**Left** Indonesian luxury travellers enjoying themselves in Harajuku, Japan

## The Indonesian upmarket traveller...

- ❖ continues to spend but is no longer loyal to one brand
- ❖ is more active and adventurous
- ❖ is more independent about planning own trip

from here, which is naturally more expensive!" sighed Rudiana.

Like WITA Tour, Destination Travel Indonesia which claimed that 20 per cent of its total market is the premium segment, also experienced minimum growth in the first half. The bright spot was, spending continued to be high.

"Some of my clients travel abroad twice a year and Europe continues to be their top destination," said Yento Chen, CEO of Destination Travel Indonesia. "They are continuing to spend, but with more choices of airlines, they are no longer loyal to one brand, but choose first class or business class based on the best price, even if that involves one transit."

More travellers today are travelling with the extended family, or friends with common interests. "That way, they can have us create programmes which suit them," said Yento.

Smailing Tours and Travel Management Company shows it is up to agencies to swing with the pendulum back to them. Putu Ayu Aristyademi, vice president marketing and communications, said the company saw the trend of passengers buying air tickets first, thanks to the growing number of travel fairs, so it offered a 'book-fly-play' programme tailored to their needs.

"We realise that these travellers do not like to travel with people they do not know. So we switched the approach with a 'book-fly-play' programme and dedicate special staff to cater to this premium segment," she said.

The company also came up with programmes for small families or group of friends travelling together in response of the growing demand for such travel, whereby the travellers know one another and have similar interests. The package as a result becomes more affordable without losing its exclusivity.

Also, in line with its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary, a Smailing Platinum club was launched last year to cater to its loyal upmarket travellers.

Smailing claimed it is enjoying a 30 per cent growth in the premium market this year, thanks to the new initiatives and revised strategies.

Anthony Akili, group president and CEO of Smailing Tours and Travel, noted the growing popularity of domestic destinations such as Labuan Bajo (Komodo) and Raja Ampat (West Papua), while overseas, destinations like Niseko-Sapporo/Hokaido, Russia and Scandinavia are selling.

Travellers are also becoming more active during their holidays. "Activities like skiing and cycling are popular. They also like to try the culinary delights of the destinations," he said.

Destination Travel's Yento also noticed the new trend of high-end travellers being eager to visit Indonesian destinations beyond Bali. "They are more adventurous now. They go to places like Belitung, Komodo and Raja Ampat so long there are comfortable accommodations and the trip is exclusively tailored for them. For example, in Raja Ampat, we hire our own boat for the group," he said.

“

**There are too many travel fairs. Each airline holds its own travel fair, offering attractive discounted fares...Now (travellers) hold the tickets first and plan the trip later.**

Rudiana, director of sales, WITA Tour





**Above** A Cambodian tourist, clearly a soccer fan, enjoying himself in Bangkok

## Visa pains prevent longhaul sojourns

Laborious visa processes are preventing Cambodians from taking luxury longhaul trips, reports **Marissa Carruthers**

**Cambodia's luxury travellers** are looking beyond Asia, but strict visa policies and lengthy processes are holding them back.

A record number of Cambodians are travelling abroad, with outbound trips hitting 700,027 for the first five months of 2017, according to figures from the Ministry of Tourism. This represents an 18.8 per cent rise on the same period the previous year.

In 2016, outbound tourism grew 20 per cent to 1.4 million, from 1.2 million the previous year, with Cambodians spending about US\$600 million abroad.

This comes coupled with the travel industry noting a rise in demand for luxury travel. Sinan Thourn, chairman of Cambodia PATA Chapter and CEO of B2B Cambodia, said while Cambodia's economy has shown a relatively poor year, with outbound travel

remaining pretty static, the luxury market is one area that has continued to grow.

He noted Buddhist travel is increasing within the luxury market, with a rising number of requests for destinations such as Sri Lanka, Nepal, India and Myanmar. Private tours across Asia are also popular, with medical tourism a major reason for the country's big spenders to head to Singapore, Bangkok, Malaysia, China and France for treatment. They will often be accompanied by their families and will extend their stay for shopping and leisure activities.

Asian countries currently remain at the top of desired destinations, with Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Hong Kong, Japan, Macau and South Korea topping the list. Shopping for designer labels and casinos are sought-after activities.

Domestic luxury travel is another



area that is growing in leaps and bounds as more high-end products enter the market in the coastal areas of Sihanoukville and Kep, as well as the country's rapidly developing islands.

While the industry notes a rise in Cambodians seeking high-end products, Sreat Mom Sophear, CEO of Sophiya Travel & Tours, said there remains a huge untapped potential as Cambodians become more curious to explore abroad and broaden their horizons.

This comes coupled with a shift in attitudes and lifestyle, she noted. "We can see today people in Cambodia are putting more value on lifestyle," said Sreat. "People will allocate money to a vacation, which they wouldn't five years ago. Today, they want to upgrade from a three-star hotel to a five-star hotel. They want to go to new destinations and see new places."

While the country's GDP is growing – it increased by seven per cent last year, causing the World Bank to revise Cambodia's economic standing, pushing it

“

**We can see today people in Cambodia are putting more value on lifestyle. People will allocate money to a vacation, which they wouldn't five years ago.**

Sreat Mom Sophear, CEO, Sophiya Travel & Tours



## The Cambodian upmarket traveller...

- ❖ is looking for new travel experiences away from Asia
- ❖ has a thirst for luxury longhaul travel, but this is dampened by tough access to visas
- ❖ still puts shopping for designer goods at the top of his/her list

from a low-income to middle-income economy – Sreat said Cambodia's affluent segment has always had the cash to splash abroad, but it is only now that they spend it on vacations.

She said: "My parents' generation had a lot of money but they kept it under the mattress, not even in the bank. They wouldn't travel at all as they think it is a waste of money and don't see the benefit of travelling. Now my generation, and younger generations, have different thinking and they will travel."

This increased thirst for travel has led to more Cambodians looking outside Asia, with the US, Europe and Canada proving popular longhaul destinations. Sok Sopheaktra, general manager of 2World Travel Cambodia, has seen a spike in bookings to Europe, rising from 100 last year to more than 300 for 2017.

He added many are luxury tourists seeking a "change in destination for their holidays". Italy, Switzerland, France and Germany are proving the most popular.

Emirates launching a direct link from Phnom Penh to Dubai, taking in Yangon, is also expected to stimulate growth in luxury longhaul travel. However, a major challenge for Cambodians is access to visas, said Sinan, citing lengthy interview processes and masses of paperwork as putting many off.

He said: "There isn't the huge

rise in interest for the US or Europe as we'd expect, and it's not about distance or cost. There are a lot of people here with money who want new experiences but it's about the visas. This is a big mistake from other countries. It's not that Cambodians don't have money to travel, it's this issue, the way we are treated at embassies, the interviews and paperwork."

Sreat agreed, saying it is often "very hard to get visas". "It's difficult for Cambodians travelling to these countries because of the visa issue. Nowadays, they have more budget, there is more information on how to get abroad and the market is more open but this remains a major problem."

Her travel agency has established strong ties with embassies and consulates throughout Cambodia to try and make the process easier and quicker for clients.

"This is where the challenge is for travel companies and tour operators in Cambodia," she said, noting that despite the hurdles she has seen a rise in demand for luxury travel to the US, Canada, New Zealand and Europe, mostly England, for the remainder of 2017.

"This is largely to do with the direct Emirates flight," she said. "This is a very good sign for the luxury market and if we can secure more direct flights, a good economy and stable politics, then I can see the luxury market increasing rapidly."





Apple Vacations & Conventions

**Above** Malaysians on holiday in Lake Bled, Slovenia

## Malaysian travellers exercise prudence

It's the ringgit and higher costs  
that are vexing their minds,  
reports **S Puvaneswary**

**Malaysia's luxury travel market** is soft, with forward bookings showing no signs of improvement, according to planners.

Currency is a major factor. The ringgit has been steadily declining, which makes going on holiday more expensive compared with a year or two ago.

At press time on October 30, the currency closed at RM4.24 against the greenback, a slight improvement from its all-time low of RM4.49 against the US dollar in December 2016. This is still a far cry from January 2015 when the ringgit traded at RM3.43 against the US dollar.

And while it may appear that the economy is finally on the road to a slow recovery after a two-year downtrend, Central Bank of Malaysia governor Muhammad

Ibrahim has highlighted the main challenges for this year, which include higher inflation, volatile capital flows and lingering uncertainties in the global economic and financial environment.

Nevertheless, if all goes well, a rebound in oil prices on the back of a production cut agreement between the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and some non-OPEC producers, as well as higher commodity prices, should see the economy growing slightly over last year. The World Bank has revised upwards Malaysia's Gross Domestic Product forecast for 2017 to 5.2 per cent, from 4.9 per cent.

Still, business owners who form a part of the luxury sector will have to contend with higher costs of doing business due to an increase in the minimum wage policy and the



minimum retirement age act.

All these additional costs will eat into profits.

As these financial considerations become more pronounced, coupled with a weak ringgit, many well-heeled travellers are becoming even more prudent about their overseas holidays.

Corporate Information Travel business development manager, Foo Sze Zhaun, said: "Revenue from premium travel has been on a decline over the last two years as clients are more careful on spending.

"They are either shortening the length of their trips, or choosing destinations that are more affordable."

Citing an example, he said: "Prior to 2015, we saw a healthy movement to Western European destinations such as Germany, Switzerland and Scandinavia.

"Now Central and Eastern Europe has gained popularity due to lower ground costs."

Barbara Sette, managing director of Sette Reps, the sales representative office in Asia for local operators in Eastern Europe, Balkans and Russia, also noticed a pick up in demand to these places whereas demand for Central Europe is on a year-on-year decline.

Said Sette: "People are more concerned about the package costs and are also more careful about their spending.

"They check prices and compare offers. In the past, they were not checking as much. They were less concerned about prices."

She revealed that forward bookings for the second half of 2017 remain weak, partly due to political uncertainty of when the 14<sup>th</sup> general election will be called.

"People are sitting tight and seeing what changes will happen after the election," said Sette.

As market share has shrunk, competition among operators these days is huge.

"To remain relevant, we have to

## The Malaysian upmarket traveller...

- ❖ is more prudent in spending
- ❖ is becoming more independent and making their own bookings
- ❖ looks for discounts and good deals

be innovative while offering good value for money," said Sette.

Adam Kamal, manager at Aidil Travel & Tours, saw airline and hotel bookings decline over the last two years.

The luxe traveller used to expect end-to-end services in the past, however, this is changing, partly due to technology advancements and partly because of more awareness about the convenience and discounts available when they make purchases online.

“

**They check prices and compare offers. In the past, they were not checking as much. They were less concerned about prices.**

Barbara Sette,  
managing director  
of Sette Reps



Adam said: "We see a growing trend of luxury travellers doing their own hotel bookings through their hotel loyalty membership. They are also using hotel VIP Concierge services to book restaurants and shows.

"From time to time, credit card companies also offer Buy 1 Free 1 air ticket for business class passengers. Airbnb has also become a popular choice where the high-end segment can book luxury vacation homes and yachts for their vacations.

"To remain relevant, we have to keep offering new, exotic destinations such as seeing the Northern Lights in Iceland or cruising in Antarctica.

"Clients are less likely to be as adventurous when the destination is new."

This is also the route that Apple Vacations & Conventions has taken. Its group managing director, Desmond Lee, said to keep interest high, the company sells "in-depth" tours to destinations which no other Malaysian agent is selling, such as Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia.

His rationale: "People are willing to travel and see new destinations provided you can offer them a comfortable journey at the right price."

Apple Vacations has seen a year-on-year decline of some 15 to 20 per cent in the volume of the luxury travel market.

Lee said those travelling are also trading down on hotel types and more are opting for premium economy rather than business class seats.





# *Transformational cruises*

Small ships that think big about delivering next-level experience are jostling for a slice of the rich luxury travel pie. **Yixin Ng** checks out a few of these operators

**T**he cruising wave is sweeping through Asia, bringing with it large ships touting capacity and accessible comforts, but also new expectations for what makes an exceptional cruise holiday.

But there are also other, smaller cruise operators from around the world that are exemplifying transformation – a new offering to think about when your clients come knocking for that ‘something different’. Here are three examples.

**Scenic Luxury Cruises & Tours**  
*[In a nutshell] Till now a river cruise*

*operator offering itineraries in Europe, Asia and Russia. In 2018, Scenic will launch polar journeys onboard its very first ocean ship and what it calls the world’s first ‘discovery yacht’, which will come complete with helicopters and a submarine.*

The market is crying out for small ships that offer bonafide big-ship-level comforts, and the *Scenic Eclipse* will be the company’s answer to that. “Although there is always room for more river ships, the company’s vision is to look at where travel is going – especially in the luxury market,” said a spokesperson for the company.





"And Scenic noticed five years ago that there was no true luxury ship with the bells and whistles of larger ships in the small ship designation."

This might be Scenic's first foray into ocean cruising, but it is not holding back. The 200(polar)/228-passenger *Eclipse* boasts a long list of features combining the best of both small and large ship worlds – all verandah suites, 10 dining concepts, eight lounges and bars, butler service for every guest and a nearly 1:1 staff to guest ratio; a 550m<sup>2</sup> spa; four indoor and outdoor swimming pools; plunge pools and jacuzzis; a 220-seat theatre; and fitness facilities.

The real cutting-edge features, however, are the yacht's transport modules – a seven-seat helicopter (two for its Antarctica itineraries), a seven-seat submarine, 14 Zodiacs, kayaks and e-bikes.

More than just being statement pieces for Scenic, these modules push the limits of where cruise activities typically begin and end for guests. "Guests are taken to areas that may have never been visited before – as in Antarctica with the helicopters. It is about looking for experiences that will

leave an indelible mark on the guest," said the spokesperson.

Polar expeditions are the talk of the season in luxury travel. Scenic's introduction of the yacht to sail the Arctic and Antarctica is timely to say the least. From December 2018 to March 2019, it will offer 12-day Antarctica; 21-day Antarctica, South Georgia and Falkland Islands; and 25-day Chilean Fjords and Antarctica itineraries. And from June to August 2019, the *Eclipse* will depart on 10-22-day Arctic sails with Norwegian Fjords, Canadian Atlantic and Iceland configurations.

The *Scenic Eclipse* will sail Athens-Venice, Venice-Barcelona and Barcelona-Miami from August to September 2018. October sails will be to the Americas and include Cuba and the Caribbean as well as Panama and Colombia itineraries.

### Quasar Expeditions

*[In a nutshell] Offering Galapagos cruises that can be paired with overland Jeep tour extensions. It was founded in 1986 with a focus on cruising, but today is also a regional DMC.*

When we sat down with Quasar

**Facing** Eclipse carousel  
**Above** Quasar driving around the park; Quasar snorkeling

Expeditions to discuss transformational cruises, sales manager Eric Andrews gave his computer two quick taps and, with a glint in his eyes, revealed the tagline accompanying his material: *Transforming lives*.

This may be a bold claim, but one that Andrews can make with some conviction. "I went to the Galapagos when I was 15 and after one week it changed my life – I became a marine biologist and a guide. That trip is why I do what I do today."

Wildlife is a clear sell-point of Quasar's 8D7N Galapagos cruises, which depart from Baltra and San Cristobal island. The Ecuadorian peninsula is the only place in the world where marine iguanas can be found, said Andrews. This rare native species, along with sea lions on Lobos island and bird varieties like Galapagos martins and blue footed boobies make up the region's vibrant eco fabric.

Since 2013, Quasar guests can also opt for a post-cruise extension in the form of Jeep adventures in Patagonia, which Andrews said give travellers "safety, comfort but most of all





freedom". He said: "In 2013 we created a new concept of travel in Patagonia. We partnered with Jeep to provide travellers their own vehicle and a guide who is also their personal driver. Travellers get to explore Patagonia at their own pace."

Guests can design their own adventure, choosing from activities such as kayaking, flyfishing, trekking, horseback riding, lake cruises, a puma trekking safari, or even sipping whisky chilled with glacier ice.

"At the end of the day, it's people who transform your lives, much more than the actual accommodation. So we are very focused on that – guests can hang out with gauchos (South American cowboys), do what they do, have a barbecue with them, and create that connection," Andrews said.

### Ganges Voyager

*[In a nutshell] The company that reintroduced cruise ships to the holy river Ganges, taking guests on a journey to unravel the historical transformation of life around the ancient river*

Ships once plied the Ganges for

trade, and today, they are the best way to connect travellers to sites rich with cultural and religious significance, Raj Singh, founder and director of Ganges Voyager, said.

"The river was the reason the area developed (the way it did). It allowed for trade activity and was key for people to get around. But once the railways came into India, the cruising stopped."

A century on from the disappearance of cruising from the Ganges, Raj in 2009 introduced the *Bengal Ganga* to the stretch running from Kolkata to Varanasi. "It took me four years of research (and groundwork) before we got our first ship in 2009. Since then, we have launched the *Ganges Voyager* in 2015, the *Ganges Voyager II* in 2016, and the next will be in 2018."

The company is said to be the sole operator of luxury cruises in India, with the "only other vessels encountered (on the Ganges) today being local fishing boats and the occasional barge and trawler".

An itinerary running till April 2018 takes guests upstream from

“

**At the end of the day, it's people who transform your lives, much more than the actual accommodation.**

Eric Andrews, sales manager, Quasar Expeditions

Kolkata through European East India companies settlements, stopping at Bandel's Imambara, a colonial-era Islamic school. Other attractions along the roundtrip include Rajbari temples in Kalna, the Khushbagh tomb complex and the village of Mayapur, headquarters of the Hare Krishna movement.

The appeal of the Ganges to Asian travellers, Raj said, is its inextricable links with religion. The vistas along the banks were once witnessed by Gautama Siddhartha when he became Buddha, making them "important areas to explore for many Asian travellers", said Raj. The company has seen interest from Singapore and Thailand, and is currently testing waters in the China market.

About Ganges' fourth ship in 2018, Raj said: "It will have a shallow draft that allows it to go from India through Bangladesh and into eastern India, almost to the Burmese border. Travellers can cruise the whole way for 3,500-4000km. It might take about six weeks to get to the other side." For travellers preferring shorter journeys, weekly sectors are also an option.

**Above** Ganges Voyager II exterior





Above Belmond Andean Explorer

# Romance of rail travel

As well-heeled travellers  
yearn for slow travel  
with luxury trappings, is  
it time again for another  
golden age of rail travel?

**Yixin Ng** finds out

**T**his year, Japan's *Shiki-Shima* train hit the tracks, garnering a flurry of press with its "ultra-luxury" positioning and suites priced up to US\$10,000.

Luxury train travel is back in the spotlight, its appeal closely tied to the nostalgia for a bygone era of slow travel.

Jess Yap, general manager at Singapore's Country Holidays, observed a growing interest in train holidays, attributing this to the pull of slow travel coupled with the refinement and comfort of riding in luxurious cabins.

Trans-Siberian and Canadian Rockies train journeys are by far popular among Yap's clients, and she has also gotten requests for Japan's *Twilight Express* and *Shiki-*

*Shima* trains.

Gary Franklin, managing director, Belmond Trains & Cruises, agreed. "The appeal of luxury rail holidays is increasing as it is the ultimate in slow travel. Asians, like our other guests, love spending time with family and friends, and the train (allows them) to put the distractions of their busy lives aside and (enjoy) a more relaxed pace," said Franklin.

The concept is central even for the speedier trains of Japan. Before the *Shiki-Shima*, the country saw its first luxury cruise train in 2013 – the *Seven Stars* by Kyushu Railway Company. Of the unique allure of train journeys, Koji Karaike, chairman of the Kyushu Railway Company, mused: "Scenes pass by (the windows), silence spreads before breakfast, and the lights in



**The appeal of luxury rail holidays is increasing as it is the ultimate in slow travel.**

Gary Franklin, managing director, Belmond Trains & Cruises







the train cars (come) on. Only a cruise train can offer such a fine experience where we can feel the transition of time.”

That said, the *Shiki-Shima* got the attention it did for good reason. Wax nostalgia all we want, there’s no denying that today’s luxury travellers also love shiny new things and modern comforts.

The train’s design received the expert touch of Ken Kiyoyuki Okuyama, an automotive designer with Ferrari and Maserati projects to his name.

Clad in sleek champagne-gold armour, the train carries just 17 suites and 34 passengers in 10 cars, and boasts Michelin-starred culinary creations and glass-walled observatory cars.

One of the world’s most noted iterations of a cruise train that “captures the glamour of the golden age of travel” is the *Venice Simplon-Orient-Express*. Come March 2018 however, it will be jazzed up with the addition of three “ultra-luxurious” Grand Suites to its rake.

If the rehashed superlative hasn’t already given this away, Franklin revealed that the upgrading was part of efforts to both capture the essence of rail-era

glamour and “bring it into 2017”.

Additionally, the company’s latest train launches – the *Belmond Grand Hibernian* in Ireland and *Belmond Andean Explorer* in Peru – have marked its transition “into a new era of train travel (with) contemporary, clean interiors”, Franklin said.

On-board experiences have also been refreshed over the past year. “From this season, house drinks at meal times will be included aboard the *Eastern & Oriental Express*. In the bar car, the social hub of the train, we’ve introduced an innovative mixologist cocktail menu and contemporary soundscape compiled by DJ & music producer Mr Has, and a more relaxed dress code – all of which work toward appealing to the younger Asian travellers.”

Train holidays are also loved for their associations with adventure and discovery, not unlike the wonder that surrounded travel in its nascent days.

On why rail cruising could make a comeback, Country Holidays’ Yap said: “If cruises take people to corners of the world, trains take people into the heart of it.”

Franklin elaborated: “Trains are a unique form of holiday as they

**Above** Venice Simplon-Orient-Express new Grand Suite

“  
**If cruises take people to corners of the world, trains take people into the heart of it.**

Jess Yap,  
general manager,  
Country Holidays  
Singapore

offer an adventure to destinations often only reachable by rail. Train travel allows guests to discover some of the world’s most special and untouched regions.”

But today, the ubiquity of travel in middle-class lifestyles has raised the threshold for discovery, and luxury train operators are having to plunge deeper into destinations in order to keep the spirit of adventure alive.

Belmond is keeping up “not only through a fresh look at décor, but also through on- and off-board offerings designed to connect guests with the local culture and customs”, Franklin stressed.

For example, guests of the *Belmond Andean Explorer* can also disembark at Lake Titicaca to experience the way of life on one of the floating islands before returning to the train to dine on a menu of local, seasonal produce.

Aboard *Eastern & Oriental Express*, Belmond in September launched two immersive off-board experiences. In Thailand, guests can cycle through rice fields and visit a farm where they can “get under the skin of local life over lunch”.

Aymeric Naudin, assistant general manager at China’s CYTS Sparkle Tour, said: “It’s the same sort of concept as with luxury cruising. It has to be done right and (include off-board components). On some Trans-Siberian trains that fall on the cheaper end of the scale, you barely get to stop. You would have come all that way to see nothing.”

So, to answer the question of whether train holidays could become the next big thing, Naudin said it comes down to educating clients on train journeys and helping them look past price considerations.

“It does not take much convincing for travellers to take to the idea of rail holidays.

“What they need is explaining and educating (on the product and itineraries), especially as such new modes of travelling are not well understood,” said Naudin.



# Seabourn Sojourn: Less is more



All photos by Raini Hamdi

Small is beautiful, less is more. That's what **Raini Hamdi** discovers about Seabourn Cruise Line following her cruise to Alaska on the *Seabourn Sojourn*

**SHIP** The *Seabourn Sojourn* does not have rock-climbing walls, central parks, water slides or a surfeit of F&B. It is not built for that clientele, rather, for the less-is-more passengers who want a more personalised and an eco-conscious cruise experience. Being small, it is able to navigate the narrows, bays and arms inside fiords. The inside passage Ultimate Alaska that I took, sailing June 1 from Vancouver and ending in Seward (Anchorage) in Alaska on June 12, was a perfect example (see box, right).

**SHIP EXPERIENCE** The ship was virtually full, with 420 passengers, 266 of them from the US and the rest comprising 17 nationalities. With a crew of 42 nationalities,

the onboard ambience felt fairly international, and attempts were made to cater to a diverse audience.

If I had to pick the three biggest strengths of the ship, it would have to be the F&B, the room product and the service.

**F&B** The ship's collaboration with three-Michelin-star American chef Thomas Keller, the genius behind The French Laundry restaurant in Napa Valley, California, accounted for its delectable menus. For 11 nights, I was never bored by the F&B; in fact it became an enjoyable ritual for me each morning to go through the daily card sent to my room and see what's on the menu at The Restaurant, the most elegant dining room serving fine

**Above**  
*Seabourn Sojourn*

Western; Restaurant 2, a small, by-reservations-only venue serving fine French; The Colonnade, which served a theme buffet dinner each night (on this journey it included Indian, Chinese, Vietnamese and Japanese); and The Patio Grill, casual alfresco dining.

I particularly like that there was little food waste. I get put off by large portions but they were perfect on this ship. If you wanted more, you could always have more.

There are six lounges and bars. My favourites include The Square, as it's lined with wonderful books, and the Observation Bar, which offers 180-degree views of the scenery outside.

**ROOM** My Veranda Suite is an ample 28m<sup>2</sup> accommodation with a full-length window and glass door to a private veranda (6m<sup>2</sup>). Smart, timeless design makes the space roomier, with a living room that has a long sofa and a dining table for two; a bedroom with a queen-size bed and flat-screen TV; a walk-in closet; and a bathroom which has a bathtub, two wash basins and a separate shower room. The comfort I enjoyed was better than in many luxury hotel rooms I've stayed in. It's all about details, such as having more shelf/storage space than I could use, correct lighting in the bathroom and excellent water pressure, which many hotels somehow don't get right.

**SERVICE** Whether they were from Columbia, the UK, Malaysia, Ukraine, Japan, Canada or South Africa, what the staff had in common was a warm and friendly disposition. No request was received as if it were a nuisance; none was ever forgotten – even though Seabourn's policy is tips are neither required nor expected.

**PRICING** Prices for Alaska sailings in 2017 started from US\$4,999. The cruise was virtually all-inclusive,



and I found prices for laundry or spa services to be fair. I could do unlimited laundry for US\$50, for example. A professional shampoo, haircut and style was US\$69.

Itineraries, fares and additional details of Seabourn's complete fall 2018/winter 2019 cruise schedule can be viewed at [www.seabourn.com](http://www.seabourn.com)

**VERDICT** A meaningful, enriching cruise in an intimate ship that packs a punch in delivering a quality and environment-friendly experience. At the end of the cruise, many guests turned to each other saying: how on earth did 11 days fly by so quickly and how do we readjust to our humdrum lives?

That, was a sublime sojourn.

## CONTACT

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From top Time to explore a port-of-call; glorious food onboard; The Patio Grill

## ITINERARY: 11-DAY ULTIMATE ALASKAN SOJOURN



One of Seabourn's exciting shore excursions entails a dash through a glacier tunnel

This is an 'Inside Passage' cruise, sailing inside fiords – narrow, deep inlets that protect the ship from open seas. Only smaller ships, such as the *Seabourn Sojourn* – 198m long, 32,346 gross tonnage, 225 staterooms – can navigate through the channels.

The magnificence of an Inside Passage to Alaska hit me the morning I woke up to a spell-bounding scenery of high cliffs, snow-capped mountains and forested islands as the ship wound its way around narrows, bays, straits and arms.

There were six ports-of-call between Vancouver and Seward. The noteworthy ones for me were Ketchikan, Sitka and Juneau.

**Ketchikan**, dubbed Alaska's first city, is a showpiece of Tlingit culture, a native group that was respected as warriors and artisans. It has the world's largest collection of standing totem poles and I learnt a lot about the culture from my visit to the Totem Heritage Center. I also enjoyed strolling through its former red-light district, Creek Street, where brothels now peddle souvenirs. But their bawdy past lives on through informative signage. One said: "Dolly's House – where both men & salmon came upstream to spawn".

The second port-of-call which made an impression on me, **Sitka**, is the former outpost of Imperial Russia, which sold Alaska to the US for a song – about US\$7 million in 1867, or less than two cents an acre. The Russian influence was palpable: The Russian Orthodox church is right in the heart of downtown. The Russian cemetery located in a nearby forest, with headstones crafted from the ballasts of Russian ships, is a poignant reminder of

Sitka's Russian past. Apart from the history, I enjoyed a visit to the Alaska Raptor Center where I was able to get a close view of bald eagles and owls. These birds are injured and are being rehabilitated to fly again. A few never recover flight and remain in the outdoors at the centre for visitors to see them in the natural habitat.

The third, **Juneau**, is Alaska's capital city, popular for its shopping streets lined with historic buildings, such as the Alaskan Hotel & Bar which first opened in 1913, and for exciting shore excursions. I went on a gruelling seven-hour hike to Mendenhall Glacier but what got my heart racing on this excursion was a walk through a glacier tunnel. It was less than a minute as the opening was short, but it was as scary as it was exciting.

Glaciers are a huge part of the attraction in an Alaskan cruise. In another excursion, I hopped onto a catamaran which snaked its way through the Endicott Arm Fjord to get as close as possible to a tidewater glacier and, as luck would have it, I was treated to three calvings. Two were spectacular, a cathedral of ice splitting off from the glacier and sinking straight into the sea with a thundering sound, creating a few waves in its wake.

The ship's itinerary itself culminated in a visit to Glacier Bay National Park, a UNESCO Heritage Site. Only two vessels a day are allowed in the area, which boasts seven tidewater glaciers. To view the magnificence of the Margerie Glacier, which is about 1.6km wide and 76m high, in the open deck of this fine ship, in the company of other fellow guests in Seabourn jackets as blue as the ice before us, certainly was a highlight of the trip.





# Luxury stirrings



**Above** Luxurious Rupakot Resort in Pokhara

The image of Nepal as just a haven for backpackers and hikers may soon be a thing of the past as the destination flirts with the luxury market, discovers

**Marissa Carruthers**

**A**s the taxi swerves off the road to avoid two cows shrouded by thick plumes of dust any visitor to Kathmandu quickly becomes accustomed to, it's hard to imagine there's much catering to the luxury market in Nepal.

However, Nepal is a country of contrasts and away from the chaotic pothole-riddled roads and the thronging crowds of backpackers hopping from one bar to the next in Thamel – dubbed the backpackers' Disneyland – there are plenty of tranquil retreats that dot the capital and beyond.

Having long been regarded as a budget destination, efforts are

being made to shake-off this image and throw the spotlight on the rising volume of high-end offerings that the country is on the brink of becoming home to.

While Nepal's tourism was halted by the 2015 earthquake, the industry is shaping up to be back on track this year. International arrivals in 2016 hit 753,002, compared with 2014's 790,118 foreign visitors, and the country expects to welcome one million international tourists this year. And it seems serious efforts are being pumped into transforming Nepal's image as it builds itself back from the devastating natural disaster.

While Nepal cannot compete with the likes of glamorous



# destination nepal

Singapore or Dubai when it comes to luxury offerings, the country is blessed with experiences unlike anywhere else, and it is this, combined with the global thirst for authentic travel, that Nepal's tourism industry is seizing and selling.

This segment recognises it has long leaps to go but, for now, is tapping into the country's pristine natural beauty, the Nepalese warmth and generosity, and the seemingly endless cultural diversity and adventure travel on offer to create unique experiences.

Not for the faint-hearted, Nepal is real and – away from the comfortable conclaves of five-star hotels such as the luxurious Rupakot Resort in Pokhara and the stunning Dwarika's Hotel, an 87-room heritage hotel in Kathmandu – it is raw, with authenticity found in every hidden corner.

Infrastructure remains the country's major challenge, and as the minivan crawled along the bumpy winding road that connects Nepal's two main tourist centres, Kathmandu with Pokhara, the gateway to the Himalayas, there wasn't an ounce of luxury in sight.

The road, which hugs the mountain, is full of terrifying blind bends with sheer drops, occasionally revealing crumpled buses at the bottom of ravines, a shocking reminder of how dangerous the roads are. Endless streams of colourful lorries blaring their horns hurtle towards you at a terrifying speed, and the 206km journey takes a staggering six to eight hours to complete.

"The roads are bad and no one wants to spend hours on them," said Shital Chandra Dharel, of Himalaya Heart Treks and Expeditions, a sentiment that is echoed by the industry and is evident from the journey.

Thankfully, the drive can be traded in for a 30-minute flight between the two cities – although

these are often plagued with delays caused by the weather. However, several tour operators and luxury hotels are happy to put on a private helicopter to carry groups from A to B.

Tapping into the luxury trend, Thrill Nepal Adventure Trek & Expedition recently launched a series of luxury packages, including a three-hour Everest champagne breakfast with a private helicopter (US\$4,500), and a three-hour helicopter tour to Annapurna (US\$4,200).

"Nepal is a land of extraordinary adventure and it is, quite simply, one of the world's most fascinating and beguiling countries," said managing director, Ananta Raj Timilsina.

And with the Himalayas being the country's main draw, the industry is developing a range of luxurious ways to view the world's highest peaks. For example, KGH Hotels, which owns a series of properties in Kathmandu and Pokhara, puts on luxury trekking for guests, provides helicopters to transport them around the country, with a helipad at their Waterfront Resort in Pokhara, and options to get a chopper to Annapurna base

camp for champagne breakfast or other tailor-made trips.

"Where else in the world can you have that experience? You can get a helicopter from the hotel to see the wildlife, hills then the mountains and stop at base camp," said Ranu Sheela Pokherel, KGH Hotels sales and marketing manager.

Royal Mountain Travel is also developing a series of comfort treks that are set to launch in early 2018. These offer more upmarket teahouses to stay at and tailor-made treks to suit guests. A network of 10 community homestays that cater to high-end travellers is also being created across the country.

"Luxury these days is often about creating meaningful experiences, and Nepal is rich in this area," said Royal Mountain Travel founder and managing director, Shiva Dhakal.

Nepal's untapped potential is huge, with a Dolma Development Fund survey revealing investment opportunities in four- and five-star hotels and resorts of US\$80 million to US\$100 million, with a 17 per cent to 19 per cent hurdle rate for investment made into these high-end options.

And a series of luxury hotels is set to open from 2018, including properties to be managed by Dusit International, The Leela Palaces, Hotels and Resorts, and Marriott International, a sign that the luxury segment is picking up pace.

Sonam Dolma Lama, Dwarika's Hotel's executive director of international sales and marketing, said: "There is no doubt that luxury tourism has potential future in Nepal's market."

"There are many reasons to travel to Nepal for those in search of experiences, whether it be an adventure, retreat or simply enjoying the authentic Nepali food, people and indigenous culture that is completely different from anywhere else."

“

**Luxury these days is often about creating meaningful experiences, and Nepal is rich in this area.**

Shiva Dhakal, founder and managing director, Royal Mountain Travel







foray into Nepal. The luxurious mountaintop resort will comprise 44 rooms and 20 villas, a wellness spa, all-day dining restaurant, meeting facilities and swimming pool. It is located about a one-hour drive from Kathmandu.

### **Fairfield by Marriott Kathmandu**

As the first Marriott International hotel in Nepal, the 115-room Fairfield opened its doors in May. The hotel is home to all-day dining restaurant Kava, which serves local, Indian and international cuisine, a bar and lobby lounge, business centre and an in-house market, which is open 24/7 serving snacks and beverages.

### **Sheraton Kathmandu**

Set to open in June 2019, the 225-room contemporary tower is designed by SRSS Architects, and is centrally located near Narayanhiti Palace Museum. It has five meeting spaces, with the largest being 1,000m<sup>2</sup> in space. Amenities include a spa, swimming pool and fitness suite. This will be Starwood Hotels and Resorts' second property in Nepal (see Aloft).

### **The Leela Palaces, Hotels and Resorts**

India's premier luxury hospitality brand is gearing up to open four luxury properties across Nepal. The Leela Kathmandu will be the first, followed by a hotel in Lumbini, the birthplace of Buddha. This forms part of the group's plans to establish a Buddhist Trail from Nepal to Bodhgaya, Nalanda and Varanasi in India. Other destinations in Nepal where Leela hotels are planned include Pokhara.

**Above** Aloft Kathmandu Thamel  
**Bottom** Sheraton Kathmandu

Five  
lux  
products

### **Aloft Kathmandu Thamel**

Slated to open in March 2018, Starwood Hotels & Resorts' Aloft brand will debut in the capital's tourist centre. The 175-room resort also features 923m<sup>2</sup> of meeting space, the brand's signature dining venue, Nook, a gym, swimming pool and business centre. There will also be a W XYZ bar hosting live performances.

### **Dusit International**

Slated to open in 2020, the Dusit Thani hotel marks the Thailand-based hospitality company's





# Five star returns



The Murray, Hong Kong

**Above** The Murray Hong Kong Grand Room

After a long absence of new luxury hotels, Hong Kong is suddenly seeing a spate of them, a development welcomed by the industry, **Prudence Lui** reports why

**L**uxury hotel openings have been dormant in Hong Kong since the Ritz-Carlton debuted in 2011, as investors are put off by escalating land costs and a lack of opportunities in the CBD. However, after a conspicuous absence, a new wave of international luxury brands is finally starting to open in prime spots from now to 2020.

On Hong Kong Island, the 336-room Murray Hong Kong, a Niccolo Hotel, in Central, is taking reservations for stays in January (see Gasp!). Originally an iconic 40-year-old government office

building, it has been transformed into a luxury hotel – a high-profile preservation project costing US\$1 billion. Now an urban chic sanctuary, The Murray boasts oversized rooms and suites spanning 25 floors.

The St Regis, situated in the heart of Wanchai, is slated to open in 1Q2018, fielding 129 rooms with facilities including 721m<sup>2</sup> of meeting space and four dining venues. This will be followed by the 460-room Fullerton Hong Kong Hotel Ocean Park, scheduled to open in 2020.

On the other side of Victoria Harbour, the 398-room Rosewood



Hong Kong, also opening next year, occupies 27 floors of a mixed-use tower on Salisbury Road perched on the waterfront of Tsim Sha Tsui, with the InterContinental Hong Kong – itself slated to undergo a 12- to 16-month major renovation starting in 1Q2019 – as a neighbour. In addition to eight dining options, Rosewood Hong Kong's recreational facilities include a fitness centre, swimming pool and the brand's holistic wellness concept. The Manor Club executive lounge will grace its upper floors; and there will also be The Pavilion, its residential-style meeting and event space.

JLL Hotels & Hospitality's former head of research Asia-Pacific, Frank Sorgiovanni, has not witnessed new luxury supply entering the Hong Kong market since Ritz-Carlton in 2011 and, before that, The Upper House in 2009. Interviewed before he left the company, he said the accommodation sector in Hong Kong has been driven over recent years by its key inbound source market – groups from mainland China.

"Mainland group visitors were predominantly staying in midscale and budget hotels, and this had underpinned a boom in hotel construction in the 'lower-end' categories.

"At the same time, longhaul corporate business, whose budgets were slashed, had not recovered to its previous high in Hong Kong. Luxury hotels in particular fell victim to the decline in business travel budgets in recent years," said Sorgiovanni.

But as overnight arrivals into Hong Kong from higher-yielding mainland visitors are improving, there will be some support for luxury hotels from this cohort, he figured. What's more, the strong brand recognition they offer will also attract global guests, said Sorgiovanni.

“  
**Mainland group visitors were predominantly staying in midscale and budget hotels, and this had underpinned a boom in hotel construction in the 'lower-end' categories.**

Frank Sorgiovanni, former head of research Asia-Pacific, JLL Hotels & Hospitality



"The city is a popular staycation market with regional leisure guests – such short stays often support luxury hotels as part of an itinerary.

"However, these new luxury hotels need to offer something new to the market in terms of experience – higher quality of F&B options, day spas, and outstanding rooms. Good location is a must. The incoming new luxury hotels all seem to tick most boxes," he said.

According to Hong Kong Hotel Association (HKHA) chairman, Shaun Campbell, the new addition of globally recognised luxury brands is certainly positive for Hong Kong.

With the reopening of the Tsim Sha Tsui waterfront, the upgraded Avenue of the Stars precinct and other city attractions, Hong Kong will become even more appealing, considering it is easily accessible by air and is a safe destination with incredible culinary experiences for luxury travellers, he said.

Campbell does not believe there will be an oversupply of luxury hotels, which he said currently represent less than 10 per cent of the membership within HKHA. The association has a total of 104 member hotels, where the overall

average occupancy ran at 88 per cent last year.

"There is certainly room to welcome additional luxury hotels within the current demand levels in Hong Kong," he said.

"Moreover, the increase of hotel supply should not have any significant impact on pricing. Each brand has its own target market and strategy, which should generate incremental visitors."

Four Seasons Hong Kong general manager and regional vice president, Christoph Schmidinger, shared a similar view. He does not expect any oversupply as occupancy growth will be moderate until all new supply is absorbed.

Said Schmidinger: "The city offers an exceptional value for the luxury traveller when you compare it to other top destinations in the world like Paris. We expect prices might be affected in the short term but will return to current levels soon thereafter."

But he foresees other challenges.

"The luxury hotel sector is facing similar issues with many other industries in Hong Kong. Being a diverse city that is very much entwined with happenings in the rest of the world, geopolitics and unstable markets certainly pose a risk to future business.

"For sure, with the increased supply of luxury hotels, recruiting top talent will also become more challenging," said Schmidinger.

Faces of Hong Kong CEO, Ivy Sung, has been craving the new supply of luxury hotels. She observed that many hotel owners and hotel chains were concentrating their investments and efforts on mainland China and developing destinations such as Vietnam and Cambodia.

"The result is that Hong Kong was abandoned for quite some time and our hotel products have been on the waitlist for upgrading plans for quite a long time.

"Many of our hotels have lost



their bidding power when compared with those newly opened properties in China and newly developed cities in Asia,” said Sung.

She added: “It’s encouraging to have these good quality hotels added to our destination as they can lift the quality of the city a bit. Moreover, I believe that with good, healthy competition, the additional properties can help to balance out the rates in the market.

“We have quality clients who can afford luxury hotels but we have to prove to them that the prices are right. We have to make an effort to compel these quality clients to come back to Hong Kong, or keep them in Hong Kong versus losing them to other destinations in Asia. We have to work together to regain these clients.”

“

**Geopolitics and unstable markets certainly pose a risk to future business. For sure, with the increased supply of luxury hotels, recruiting top talent will also become more challenging.**

Christoph Schmidinger,  
general manager and regional vice  
president, Four Seasons Hong Kong



## Five lux products

### Yet another defining Chinese junk

Debuted in April, the 80-seat *Aqua Luna II* is probably one of the last traditional Chinese junk boats to ever be made. While the first *Aqua Luna* is known for its distinctive red sails, this addition provides sun lounges for guests to relax on, while the rigging supports blue and white Ming Dynasty dragon sails – where dragons traditionally symbolise power and luck.

It offers day cruises to Stanley on Hong Kong Island’s south side every Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday & Sunday while its Lamma Day Tour runs every Wednesday departing from Tsim Sha Tsui Pier 2 at 11.30 and from Central Pier 9 at 11.45. A new offering of Dim Sum Cruises can be enjoyed with signature dishes prepared by Dim Sum Library, Aqua Restaurant Group’s dim sum and modern Chinese restaurant.

### A tour bus with Michelin cuisine

Crystal Bus pioneers an air-conditioned sightseeing bus with an emphasis on quality service and product, even serving Michelin-star culinary experiences. The upper deck is spacious and can accommodate 28 people. The lower deck is the VIP area catering for maximum 10 guests who opt for privacy.

In addition to its existing two regular day-time departures, it added a dinner tour and a night drink tour in August. The 2.5-hour dinner tour covering 26



**Above** *Aqua Luna II* day cruises

**Above right** Ritz-Carlton, Hong Kong Chef’s Table

spots in Kowloon and Hong Kong Island departs at 19.00 whereas the night drink tour is scheduled at 22.00-23.15 and travels along Nathan Road, Mongkok and Tsim Sha Tsui Waterfront Midway.

### Gain insights into Hong Kong traditions

The Peninsula Academy’s ‘Hong Kong Traditions Well Served’ programme takes your clients on a journey to meet and learn from artisans of the city’s disappearing crafts. These include the creators of the bamboo-and-flower displays that adorn outdoor Chinese Opera theatres; paper-tearing artists; shadow-puppet masters, lion dancers and *qipao*-button crafters. These are Hong Kong’s traditional crafts and enable guests to learn the history behind artisans’ chosen vocations.

### Private dining with views of the kitchen activity

The Chef’s Table at The Ritz-





Carlton, Hong Kong aims to create a distinctive private dining experience by engaging diners through putting them in the centre of the action.

Instead of sitting behind a glass wall to observe the culinary activity, guests are escorted to the Chef's Table located on Level 102 of the hotel, and offered front-row seats inside an appointed private dining room. The epicureans can experience the vibrancy of the kitchen while enjoying the luxury of dining in a private enclave.

### Good-value Michelin food, anyone? Yes.

Chef Frédéric Vardon has opened a Hong Kong edition of his Michelin-star Le 39V on the 101<sup>th</sup> floor in the ICC (International Commerce Centre) building. The 40-seat restaurant serves as his first branch in Asia and the award-winning chef brings his original cuisine and tradition of Le 39V to Hong

Kong encapsulated in the mantra, 'Gastronomy is not synonymous with luxury' – simple and tasty cuisine which is of good value. Therefore, the menu is "graceful and simple" without artificial ingredients and focuses on the use

of seasonal ingredients. Private functions can be arranged; where the contemporary French-style venue can be configured into different spaces and tailor-made French menus based on guests preferences can also be arranged.

**Bottom left**  
Crystal Bus  
**Bottom right**  
Le 39V



Pierre-Monetta



# Beauty of remote



As Bali becomes accessible to travellers, the thirst for more remote places in Indonesia rises, helped by the entry of luxury properties in these destinations, report

**Ade Siregar** and  
**Mimi Hudoyo**

**B**ali, and to some extent Jakarta, have long been on the international tourism map as luxury destinations, thanks to an abundance of five star hotels, and the infrastructure to cater to the premium market.

However, Indonesia has a lot more to offer luxury travellers, not necessarily just the draw of swanky luxury products, but the beauty of pristine nature and culture in the more remote parts of the archipelago.

Destinations in the eastern part of Indonesia, specifically, have captured the attention of international travellers, thanks a number of pioneering luxury resort

projects and small cruises.

Nihi Sumba Island (East Nusa Tenggara) and Amanwana Moyo Island (West Nusa Tenggara) are luxuries away from the hustle and bustle of mass tourism. Vessels like *Amandira*, *Amanikan* and *Alila Purnama* take part in accommodating high-end travellers to traverse the remote parts of Indonesia.

Amanwana, on the just-remote-enough Moyo Island, 15km off the coast of Sumbawa, east of Bali, has 20 swish tents overlooking the turquoise Flores Sea.

Remoteness is the guests' secret weapon to achieving a real sense of luxury – living on an island of fishing villages and farmlands,





**Facing**  
Nihiwatu's  
beach, photo  
from Nihi  
Sumba Island's  
image library

with no loud, selfie-hogging tourists in sight.

Sandra Cullen, manager of Amanwana, *Amanikan* and *Amandira*, said: "The result of this is exclusivity and privacy."

The resort, which has an average stay of four nights, intends to preserving the jungle and "all that lives". It has a *rusa* (deer) breeding programme and its guests, who are mainly from the US, Europe, South Korea and Indonesia, are engaged in preserving the nature, said Cullen.

Nihi Sumba Island (previously known as Nihiwatu Resort) is another remote luxury experience. James McBride, its

managing partner, said: "Luxury is about people. It is about the experience, about connecting tourists and locals together.

"The geography of Nihi Sumba Island and the people are what makes the difference."

Just building a villa by the beach may be a luxury move but it may not capture the top travellers who are willing to pay high rates, he pointed out.

Nihi Sumba Island's key markets are the US, Europe and Australia but the resort has also seen the growth of the Asian and Indonesia markets, thanks to social media used both by its marketing team and its guests who share their experiences online.

McBride said the resort enjoys a 50 per cent average occupancy and up to a week length of stay.

What is it that drives high-end visitors to travel a long way to remote and relatively unknown destinations like Moyo Island and Sumba?

Cullen said: "Our natural environment enables us to (offer) water activities such as

snorkeling, kayaking, SUP (stand up paddle) boarding, wind-surfing, hobie cat sailing, also boat excursions for fishing or cruising.

"Land-based activities include trail biking, trekking and a jeep safari to a series of cascading limestone waterfalls and pools. And there is a primeval bat cave experience."

Nihi Sumba Island, on the other hand, offers a different way for guests to experience luxury. It calls it Philanthropic Activities.

"Our guests don't just take a walk by the beach, they also visit the school, see the clinic, feed the children," James said of his guests.

Nihi Sumba Island, through the Sumba Foundation, has been providing humanitarian aid through village-based projects. These seek to increase the degree of local health by establishing access for locals to clean water and educational programmes. It has also been at work to lessen the effects of malaria.

"We want to raise money to build more schools in Sumba and feed more children every week," McBride said.

Meanwhile, cruises are also playing a significant role in attracting luxury travellers to distant corners of Indonesia.

*Amandira* (a two-masted Phinisi vessel) and *Amanikan* (a custom-built coastal cruiser) take guests on sailings to single or combined destinations. The Komodo (March – October) and The Raja Ampat season (November – March) are the most popular among Aman's top three markets, the US, Europe and Asia.

The itinerary includes seeing the famous Komodo Dragons in their natural habitat on Komodo and Rinca islands and, of course, the magnificent coral reefs and marine life of Raja Ampat.

Wellness cruising is a new trend.

"Our voyages provide the

“

**The  
geography of  
Nihi Sumba  
Island and  
the people  
are what  
makes the  
difference.**

James McBride,  
managing partner  
of Nihi Sumba  
Island





perfect setting for a wellness vacation, as they soothe the senses and nurture the body. Specialists can be brought on board to suit the wellness programme required and bespoke menus will be created,” Cullen said.

*Alila Purnama* offers programmes for both individual suite bookings (for two persons) or private charters for up to 10 guests.

James Sidoti, sales manager, *Alila Purnama*, said: “Our programmes include sailing through the destinations of Komodo National Park, East Tenggara Islands, Ambon-Banda Spice Islands-Forgotten Islands, Raja Ampat and Cendrawasih Bay.”

*Alila Purnama* is equipped with three speedboats, enabling it to offer multiple activities at any given time. These include island hopping, trekking or setting up private beaches with sun beds, umbrellas, chilled beverages and canapés. “Other land activities include trekking to some incredible viewpoints, volcanoes and freshwater lakes; exploring caves, forests and beaches; and interacting with local villages and understanding their way of life and cultures,” he added.

Asia World Indonesia, an inbound travel agency catering to the luxury market, works with these high-end players to give deep-pocket clients such experiences.

Marcel Barmettler, general manager of Asia World Indonesia, said: “We are also sending a lot of clients to Labuan Bajo as Komodo is becoming more and more trendy.”

As the gateway to Komodo, Labuan Bajo in East Nusa Tenggara has seen growth in luxury accommodations. “The fauna and flora of the national park and top-notch diving spots within the national park make it interesting for luxury travellers,” he said.



## Four luxé products

### Jakarta's highest fine-dining restaurant opens

Henshin, a modern fine-dining restaurant and bar, has opened on the top three floors of Jakarta's highest hotel, The Westin Jakarta.

Billed as a food and beverage 'destination', it is directly accessed through the hotel lobby. The bar & lounge is on the 67<sup>th</sup> floor, where guests can choose to relax indoors or al fresco, in an area which can accommodate up to 90 people in total.

Moving up to the 68<sup>th</sup> and 69<sup>th</sup> floor, the fine-dining venue

offers an open-kitchen concept, allowing the chef to connect with each guest for an intimate dining experience. Guests can opt for cold or hot appetisers before enjoying the wide selection of main courses such as Ceviche Classico – marinated fish in lemon and Peruvian chili – and the signature Henshin Roll that combines foie gras, fried shrimp, spicy crab meat roll, unagi and avocado, and served with indonikkei sambal.

For a more private dining experience, Henshin also has two private rooms on the 69<sup>th</sup> floor, one accommodating 20 guests and the other 12 guests.

### Four Seasons Resort Bali at Jimbaran Bay re-launches

Four Seasons Resort Bali at Jimbaran Bay has been relaunched following a two-year renovation





programme. The resort's 147 pool villas have been renovated and re-introduced as new products.

The villas' signature Balinese design has been enlivened and modernised, while flexible living spaces that maximise the ocean and sunset views have been created.

All villas feature new landscaping, interiors, décor, furniture, electronics, thatch-roofing, wooden flooring and a custom Four Seasons Bed.

The Deluxe and Premier categories now have 50 per cent bigger bedrooms than before, with an additional indoor living room, bigger plunge pool, and an extra children's bedroom in the Family Premier Villas.

The pre-eminent Royal and Imperial Villas feature individual designs and 180-degree panoramic views across Jimbaran Bay. The Imperial Villa also offers an ocean-edge venue to host private

celebrations and weddings for up to 80 people.

### New Spice by Chris Salans

The Chris Salans Group has opened its third Spice by Chris Salans in Seminyak, Bali.

Spice by Chris Salans is a gastro-bar serving innovative drinks and a cuisine based on the flavours and healing properties of Indonesia's aromatic roots, herbs and spices.

The restaurant boasts celebrity chef Chris Salans' cuisine based on Indonesian flavours and French techniques, made famous by his flagship Mozaic Restaurant Gastronomique in Ubud.

The concept of Spice by Chris Salans is food-sharing and paired cocktails built around fresh ingredients, whole spices and fine imported spirits. There is also a good selection of wines.

Some of the more popular

**From left** Chef Hajime Kasuga of Henshin; Imperial Villa, Four Seasons Resort Bali; Spice by Chris Salans

dishes include Crispy Pork Belly with turmeric dressing and dukkah spice; Bangkuang Dumplings; Tapioca Root Fries; and Slipper Lobster with curry-leaf butter and tempé.

### Plataran Menjangan launches new villas and excursions

Plataran Menjangan Resort & Spa, located within the protected sanctuary of West Bali National Park, offers an escape to nature.

The resort recently opened six one-bedroom villas in the forest, adding to the existing five Luxury Ocean Villas.

The Forest Villas offer an 84m<sup>2</sup> building in traditional Joglo architectural design, with a terrace overlooking a spacious garden and the forest.

The Luxury Ocean Villa (five units) takes full advantage of the tranquil of the surrounding forest, while offering views of the ocean.

All villas have an outdoor bathroom complete with a stone bathtub, while the Luxury Ocean Villas have an outdoor plunge pool.

Under construction is the Ocean Mangrove Villas, which is located in the serene mangrove area. Highlights include an outdoor bathroom with views of the mangroves below, and a spacious outdoor terrace.

F&B facilities include the Octagon Ocean Club, the main dining venue; all-day Wantilan Open Kitchen Overlooking the ocean; and Wantilan Deck for a quiet private dinner on the deck.

Activities include trekking in the forest, learning about the vegetation, flora and fauna; a visit to the Bali Sterling conservation centre; a cruise to the Menjangan Island; or simply enjoying the peaceful surroundings at the villa's terrace – expect a visit from the Menjangan Wild Deer, the "native" of the forest.



# Luxury goes local



Above Singapore's Little India: as colourful as the sari

World-class attractions are no longer enough to pull in high rollers, as guests prefer splurging on authentic experiences exclusive to Singapore, reports **Pamela Chow**

**M**ore travellers are choosing Singapore for a slice of the high life, with revenues from luxury hotels heading north, according to the Singapore Tourism Board.

Tourism receipts in 1Q2017 rose 15 per cent year-on-year to S\$6.4 billion (US\$4.7 billion), the top three tourism spenders in Singapore being, in order, visitors from China (total receipts of S\$1.1 billion), Indonesia (S\$688 million) and India (S\$302 million).

The average revenue per available room for luxury hotels – classified as hotels predominantly in prime locations and/or in historical buildings – increased by

3.7 per cent to S\$397.

At 96.9 per cent, Marina Bay Sands topped the national average luxury hotel occupancy rate in 1Q2017 of 86 per cent. Its key overseas markets are Japan, China, Indonesia and Australia, while the Indonesian, South Korean and American markets are showing strong demand this year, said its senior vice president of marketing, Maunik Thacker.

Notably, industry players observed that big spenders are associating luxury less with premium hardware, and more with exclusive and tailored experiences.

Value-added services that are commanding more demand include personalised local tours and 'Singapore hospitality', i.e.



service with a Singaporean flair, according to luxury planners and hoteliers interviewed.

"Luxury is no longer about a fancy hotel and fine dining," remarked Garth Simmons, chief operating officer, AccorHotels for Malaysia, Singapore & Indonesia. To make Singapore a bigger draw, Simmons suggested offering more "emotional experiences and authentic connections... that you can't buy anywhere else".

He cited examples such as interactions with "the fun side of the locals", culinary lessons involving traditional recipes, and discovering hidden watering holes that Singaporeans frequent.

Bespoke tour providers are on the case of giving well-travelled upmarket clients the local love. Lightfoot Travel's 'Singapore in a weekend' itinerary, for instance, offers a private tour through heritage districts Chinatown and Little India, dining in quintessential hawker centres of Singapore, as well as a cooking class on local delicacies such as Peranakan cuisine.

Lightfoot's co-founder and director Nico Heath said: "It is important not to forget the culture that seeps through the Lion City. The historical landmarks and local food shouldn't be overlooked when visiting, and are certainly something to promote as a highlight of Singapore."

The Singapore Tourism Board and the Economic Development Board have also launched a new unified tourism and business marketing brand, *Passion Made Possible*.

The campaign promotes local stories, tours and experiences revolving around themes such as food, outdoor adventure, entertainment and culture. By now, *Passion Made Possible* has been introduced internationally.

But as the country's luxury segment is seeing a boom, operators are expressing the concern that

travellers may find Singapore lacking in high and consistent hospitality standards.

Apple Woo, head of sales & marketing for Celebrity Cruises, Asia-Pacific, said: "Singapore is well-positioned as a luxury destination, but has a lack of consistency in terms of service."

The Fullerton Hotels Singapore general manager, Cavaliere Giovanni Viterale, concurred, noting that service standards across various industries can be improved to complement Singapore's "world-class facilities and infrastructure", such as the new Changi Airport Terminal 4.

Australia is a key market at The Fullerton Hotels Singapore, alongside China, India, the US and the UK.

AccorHotels' Simmons added that as travellers today have come to expect "increasingly sophisticated and demanding" levels of service, the chain is progressively making use of data analytics to deliver higher levels of hospitality.

He suggested: "Singapore could be marketed more as a welcoming destination (with) its rich multicultural population, which should be utilised to make people from all over the world feel welcome."

Still, hardware remains as important as software. AccorHotels is also giving a number of its properties major makeovers: The Swissôtel Stamford and Raffles Hotel Singapore are getting an overhaul, while Swissôtel Merchant Court recently completed an 18-month long refurbishment.

Luxury hotels under AccorHotels saw a year-on-year dip of 0.3 per cent in the number of international stays in 1H2017. Guests from Australia, US and Great Britain made up the bulk of these stays.

InterContinental Singapore too recently underwent a multi-

million dollar renovation project to "enrich (its) guests' accommodation experience with influences of the city's rich heritage and multi-faceted cultures", said Brendon Elliott, area director of sales & marketing, InterContinental Hotels Group Singapore and director of sales & marketing, InterContinental Singapore.

With this revamp came the launch of InterContinental's Guided Heritage Trail through more than 20 historical sites, national monuments, art institutions and museums in the district.

Elliott added: "For a holistic destination experience, we will need to concentrate on our service standards to offer more personalised experiences to travellers."

For InterContinental Singapore located in Bugis, the US market continues to be its biggest market by number of nights stayed, growing by 15 per cent year-on-year in 1H2017. The Chinese and Indian markets are next, growing by 23 and 25 per cent respectively.

To add to the traveller experience, Marina Bay Sands has also refurbished its hotel rooms, as well as launched a multimedia light-and-water show *Spectra*.

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**For a holistic destination experience, we will need to concentrate on our service standards to offer more personalised experiences to travellers.**

Brendon Elliott, area director of sales & marketing, InterContinental Hotels Group Singapore, and sales & marketing, InterContinental Singapore







## Five luxé products

### Fullerton Hotel Singapore now offers local experiences

With The Fullerton Hotel Singapore's new Experiences, in-house guests can gain an insight into Singapore's vibrant heritage and culinary culture.

Clients can cook and bake their own local eats at the Local Heritage Cuisine culinary classes, or enjoy Craft Cocktail sessions or Artisanal Desserts classes conducted by the executive pastry chef. Culture vultures can also embark on a morning tour of Singapore's lesser-known gems led by Jane's SG Tours.

### Another Inter-Continental, riverside

Newly opened in September, the InterContinental Singapore

Robertson Quay is located in Singapore's waterfront enclave.

Overlooking the Singapore River, the 225-room luxury hotel blends elements from the district's industrial past with sleek contemporary finishes. All rooms feature custom-made furnishings and amenities including a Nespresso coffee machine and personal cocktail kit, alongside wireless Internet connectivity. The property has four dining options including a 389-seat Italian restaurant & bar, Publico.

### Louis Vuitton opens duplex in Changi Airport

Fashion house Louis Vuitton will open its first duplex boutique in an airport at Changi Airport's Terminal 3. From January 2018, its unique glass house will take centre stage in the new Crystal Garden in Terminal 3's Departure Transit Hall. Covering 530m<sup>2</sup>, this is the first airport store in Asia-Pacific to be directly managed by Louis Vuitton.

### Elegant and intimate Japanese dining

Shangri-La Hotel Singapore's

**From left**  
Dom Pérignon  
served on the  
1-Altitude rooftop;  
Aloft Chicken  
Rice - Town  
Restaurant,  
Fullerton  
Experiences

refurbished Tower Wing brings with it a new intimate yet casual dining option.

Japanese restaurant and bar Nami is headed by Yokohama chef Shigeo Akiba, who has 30 years of culinary prowess and royal banquets under his belt. In the day, the restaurant is bathed in bright and inviting daylight and offers a pick of either a lunch menu curated by the chef or a simpler set lunch.

### A secret suite in the sky

Stellar at 1-Altitude and Dom Pérignon have created a 'secret' P2 Suite, discreetly located in the al-fresco diner 282 metres above the streets of Singapore. Guests are greeted at 1-Altitude with a pairing of Sturia caviar and Dom Pérignon P2, then escorted to the 'secret' suite for a behind-the-scenes tour. They will then enjoy Stellar's Plénitudes Garden, a food-pairing journey conceived by three Michelin-star chef Alain Ducasse.

After dark, the suite can also be transformed into an exclusive VIP party lounge.



## *The great leap forward*

The Asian market is “a big story” for Canada, with China now its third-largest arrivals source – and second in spending – after the US, reports **Raini Hamdi**

Lake Louise, Banff National Park, Canada

**China** last year accounted for 610,000 arrivals to Canada, up 24 per cent year-on-year, while positive growth was also recorded from Japan and South Korea.

Derek Galpin, managing director-China, Destination Canada, described the growth from China as “a huge leap”, considering Canada attracted only 160,000 visitors from the market in 2008.

What’s more, millennials are driving the growth, he said, a trend that is also evident in the Japan and South Korea markets to Canada.

While British Columbia and Ontario, namely Vancouver and Toronto, attract by far the largest numbers of visitors from China, millennials are helping to spread tourism to beyond these places, thanks to their independent and more adventurous nature. This also plays well with Destination Canada’s effort to increase year-round tourism, not just during the peak summer holidays.

“

**...tourism is increasingly extending beyond British Columbia and Ontario.**

Derek Galpin,  
managing  
director-China,  
Destination  
Canada

“The swing to millennials aged 20-34, making up 40 per cent of all visitors to Canada in the last three years, is the key to resolving this... First, they are more flexible and willing to try alternative seasons, which can also provide good value. Secondly, they are looking for outdoor adventures and experiences, which we have in droves,” said Galpin.

Thus, places such as Banff, Jasper and Lake Louise in the Canadian Rockies and Alberta are growing in popularity, thanks in part to new direct flights connecting Beijing with Calgary and Montreal, by Hainan Airlines and Air China respectively.

“You can see from the launching of new direct flights how tourism is increasingly extending beyond British Columbia

and Ontario,” Galpin said.

Overall capacity grew 26 per cent last year, with Canada now accessible from 11 gateway cities in China, and its four largest metropolitan areas are all served with non-stop flights from China.

Travel Alberta’s vice president business development, Karen Soyka, noticed “very promising tourism growth” and rising numbers of millennials from China, Japan and South Korea.

It is working with planners in Asia to develop special thematic itineraries such as RV (recreational vehicle) tours, marathon tours and photography tours that promote longer stays and more independent travel in Alberta.

“We are also developing ‘hub-and-spoke’ travel itineraries with Calgary and Edmonton as the ‘home-base’, and daytrips from these cities to nearby hidden gem experiences in lesser-known regions of Alberta,” said Soyka.

Canada has 16 UNESCO World Heritage sites and five are in Alberta.







## Far from a dog's life



A new era of glamour for the historic Fairmont Hotel Vancouver which has completed massive renovations

*By Raini Hamdi*

### LOCATION

'Location, location, location' is what hotels swear by. In this case, however, Fairmont Hotel Vancouver

defines the location, not the other way round. An imposing building with a distinct green copper castle-shape roof, the hotel brings glamour and reverence to the heart of Vancouver's shopping and entertainment district.

**Name** Fairmont Hotel Vancouver  
**No. of rooms** 557  
**Address** 900 West Georgia Street, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada  
**Contact**  
Tel: 1 (604) 684-3131  
Email: hvc.concierge@fairmont.com  
Website: www.fairmont.com

### AMBIENCE

The lobby is artistic and stylish, giving a great sense of arrival. There's a feeling of lightness, spaciousness and joy, the modern design appealing to me more than the classic interiors of grand old dames.

What's more the renovation of the lobby, which also includes a new restaurant, Notch8, hasn't robbed the hotel's history. White walls are adorned with framed architectural drawings of the property, which was originally opened in May

1939 by King George VI and Queen Elizabeth.

Notch8 itself pays homage to the hotel's role with the Canadian Pacific Rail, its decor reflecting the romance of rail travel, while its name refers to the ultimate running capacity only attained by engineers after years of experience. And that's how the word 'top-notch' is derived. There is so much to learn from this hotel!

I love its idea of having canine ambassadors at the lobby to welcome guests – you should see how our faces 'pawsitively' lit up when lovely Ella, a two-year-old Labrador/Golden retriever mix, is around.

### ROOMS

My room is a Deluxe King Non Smoking room, it too newly-renovated and continues the modern, residential theme, with touches of Victorian elegance. The room is highly comfortable. But the bathroom can hardly fit two people, however I do recognise this is not unusual in old structures.

My partner is a member of Fairmont President's Club and we arrive at this hotel from a stay at Fairmont

Chateau Lake Louise. But the data isn't captured. There's no turn-down service, a privilege accorded to members, despite my asking for it. There are no bathroom slippers and no drinking water.

Coming from Asia, it's a bit of a cultural shift: Turndown in luxury hotels is not a privilege, it is a given. It's also funny there's a bucket of ice in the room, but no water, let alone champagne.

### FACILITIES

The fitness centre is just great, with technogym machines and kinesiology wall. Other facilities include an indoor pool, the Absolute Spa and 5,110m<sup>2</sup> of flexible meeting space. And lovers of luxury brands, rejoice – Lobby level boutiques include Canada's flagship Dior while Hermes is just opposite the hotel.

### SERVICE

Friendly.

### VERDICT

A must-visit when in Vancouver, even if it's just for a drink or meal – for a dash of style to the trip.



# Neither twisted nor presidential

By Raini Hamdi

## LOCATION

It is hard to miss this hotel, not only because of its location in the heart of downtown Vancouver at West Georgia Street, but also because it's the second tallest building in Vancouver (188m, 69-storey high) and has a twisting shape, quite a statement made by Canadian architect Arthur Erickson. The link to Trump also draws attention as there are always passers-by who can't resist a photo of themselves with the name Trump behind them.

## AMBIENCE

I expected a Trump hotel to be somewhat over-the-top. In fact, the lobby is small and simple. The hotel has well-trained front office staff, who light up my arrival with their youthful vigour, friendliness and efficiency.

## ROOM

My corner suite 1906 silences my prejudice about a Trump hotel being possibly outlandish. Perhaps it's the L-shape layout or the warm colours and sleek design,

it certainly feels more like the home of someone with good taste than a standard hotel room. Floor-to-ceiling windows afford views of the city's gleaming buildings and a bit of the harbour. I love the wide and long balcony, the free-standing V+A bathtub, and the Nublado Italian heated marble bathrooms. Quality never fails to shine through, I'm reminded.

Then there's modern comfort – towel warming racks, Crestron

touchpad controls for thermostats, lights, shades and blinds, although I wish the work table was a little bigger.

## FACILITIES

The hotel's Asian ownership (Malaysian TA Global) brings to Vancouver the city's only fine-dining Chinese restaurant, the award-winning Mott 32 which originates from Hong Kong. The place is packed for dinner, and I'm astonished by the details employed by renowned Hong Kong interior designer Joyce Wang to mesh New York industrial style with Chinese imperial elements. The result is a contemporary East-meets-West fusion, which to me is in character for a destination such as Vancouver. The food, said to be based on traditional recipes passed down from generations, is simply delicious – oh, that crab leg pumpkin!

The hotel also fields Drai's, one of North America's largest night-life brands. It's Vancouver's only poolside lounge and, by night, the indoor pool transforms into a dance floor and there are two bars, an outdoor hot-tub and lounge.

Other facilities are a Champagne Lounge Bar, The Spa by Ivanka Trump, and 1,394 m<sup>2</sup> of meeting and event space.



The newest Trump hotel opened in February

## SERVICE

The hotel employs people of many nationalities and picks youthful ones who seem to love interacting with guests. I'm impressed, for example, by a Chinese staff who happens to be cleaning the elevator, chats with me and recommends that I eat at Mott 32, which she says is very good. That's a great elevator pitch by a staff that's not from F&B!

## VERDICT

Neither twisted nor presidential, in fact, this Trump hotel is insanely chic and homely.

**Name** Trump International Hotel & Tower Vancouver  
**No. of rooms** 147  
**Address** 1161 West Georgia Street, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada  
**Contact**  
 Tel: 1 (866) 660-9243  
 Email: [info@trumhotels.com](mailto:info@trumhotels.com)  
 Website: [www.trumphotels.com/vancouver](http://www.trumphotels.com/vancouver)





Greenpoint Technologies, Inc

Crystal AirCruises' all-inclusive itineraries to usher in the New Year and Chinese New Year encompass a jaunt to Australia and Hawaii from December 30 to January 4, and the wilds of Africa from February 17 to 23.

And for double New Year's Eve celebrations, turn back the clock and celebrate it twice on both sides of the International Date Line in Sydney, and in Hawaii, from December 30 to January 4 at US\$20,000 per person round-trip from Singapore.

"Our New Year's AirCruise itineraries showcase the creative destination programming that Crystal Skye can offer our guests, combining the convenience of air travel and the exhilarating adventure of land tours," said Thatcher Brown, president of Dream Cruises and Crystal AirCruises.

"In addition to our all-inclusive, global voyages, we also offer guests the option of chartering the aircraft to create personalised, bespoke itineraries that feature uncompromising commitment to discovery and enrichment that can only be realised through unique travel experiences."

Crystal Skye is made available for private charters for one to 28 nights. With its ability to fly nonstop for 19 hours, longer than any commercial air flight (surpassing the current longest route from Singapore to New York at 16-17 hours), it affords guests a wide range of destinations to choose from on their private journeys.

The Crystal US offices and Genting offices are the main sales points for the aircraft charters. The aircraft is operated for Crystal AirCruises by Comlux Aruba NV.

## CRYSTAL CRUISES THE SKIES ON WORLD'S LARGEST PRIVATE PLANE

Genting Hong Kong, owner of Crystal Cruises, has extended the brand to the skies with Crystal AirCruises, which launched the world's only twin-aisle private plane, Crystal Skye, on September 30 on an eight-night trip to Fiji and Tahiti. It was priced at US\$20,000 per guest including hotels, food, all beverages, entertainment, private plane transfers and butler service.

The plane also has the highest crew to

passenger ratio of any twin-aisle aircraft, and offers 88 Crystal Exclusive Class seats designed for maximum personal space and convertible to 180-degree lie-flat beds.

Features include a social lounge with stand-up bar, while food is prepared by an executive chef in two state-of-the-art galleys, and paired with an elegant premium wine list from the Crystal Skye Cellar.

## The dream suite in the air

Taking luxury air travel to the next level, Singapore Airlines is adding Suites – complete with full beds and bathrooms – to its A380 fleet.

Each Suite is now furnished with a flat bed with an adjustable recline and a separate chair. For couples travelling together, the beds in the first two Suites of each aisle can be converted to form a double bed. When not in use, the bed can be stowed completely, creating even more space within each Suite.

Each Suite also has a 32-inch full HD monitor that can swivel for different viewing angles, a full-sized personal wardrobe, customised handbag stowage compartment and amenity box. The Suites cabin also features two lavatories, one of which has

a sit-down vanity counter.

The new cabin products will enter service next month on the first of five new A380 aircraft entering the fleet. Retrofit work will also take place on 14 existing aircraft to ensure product consistency across the airline's entire A380 fleet.

The research, design, development and installation of the new products on all 19 Singapore Airlines A380s represents an investment of about US\$850 million.

The new Singapore Airlines A380 will be configured with 471 seats in four classes, featuring six Suites and 78 Business Class seats on the upper deck, as well as 44 Premium Economy Class seats and 343 Economy Class seats on the main deck.



Singapore Airlines







The Murray Hong Kong

## Hottest stay now in Hong Kong: The Murray

The Murray, Hong Kong, a Niccolo Hotel, is a high-profile preservation project by British international studio for architecture and integrated design Foster + Partners. Pre-opening offers are now open for booking till January 15, for stays during the period of January 15 to June 30, 2018.

The hotel, part of Hong Kong's Conserving Central Project, was previously the standalone Murray Building, one of the city's most iconic landmarks. The US\$1 billion contemporary urban chic sanctuary features 336 oversized rooms and suites spanning 25 floors. Other facilities include a rooftop bar with breathtaking views of the central business district and the green oasis of Hong Kong Park, a series of signature restaurants and bars, and creative meeting and event spaces.

The Murray offers some of the city's most spacious rooms and suites, with more than 75 per cent at 50m<sup>2</sup> or larger.

All accommodation features uniquely recessed panoramic windows allowing abundant daylight, an architectural feature which has won countless awards for ground-breaking and energy-efficient design. The innovative redesign across the hotel by Foster + Partners features interior surfaces covered with rare stones, leather and plush textiles creating a sophisticated urban chic sanctuary in the heart of the city.

Those looking to be one of the first to experience an urban escape at

the new luxury hotel can enjoy the pre-opening package priced from HKD\$3,850 (US\$493) for a N1 Deluxe Room.

During the introductory period, the following facilities will be available: guestrooms and suites, event spaces, and the following restaurants and bars: Murray Lane, Garden Lounge and The Tai Pan. In addition, Wellness at the Murray will offer limited spa services as well as access to the gymnasium.

Bookings made during the introductory period include an upgrade to a N2 Grand Room (50m<sup>2</sup>), daily breakfast for two, a complimentary Personal Bar (with exclusions) and an extended check-out time of up to 16.00, subject to availability.

Bookings for Explorer Suites (75m<sup>2</sup>) priced at HK\$8,630 include an upgrade to a Signature Suite (75m<sup>2</sup>) featuring views of either the city or the neighbouring Hong Kong Park. This offer includes daily breakfast for two, roundtrip private airport transfers with VIP meet and greet services at the airport, complimentary Personal Bar (with exclusions), a HK\$1,000 dining credit (excluding Guo Fu Lou Cantonese Restaurant) and an extended check-out time of up to 16.00, minimum two nights stay and subject to availability.

All rates are per room per night basis, subject to availability and a 10 per cent service charge.

## Hottest stay now in Cambodia: Shinta Mani Angkor

Shinta Mani Hotels will launch its first Bensley Collection property in mid-December, comprising 10 two-level villas in the heart of Siem Reap.

In collaboration with designer and architect Bill Bensley, the Bensley Collection aims to offer an exclusive portfolio of "super luxe hotels and resorts showcasing visionary concepts, extraordinary design and bespoke service", according to a press release.

"In creating his collection, Bensley has assumed complete freedom to let his famed creative spirit run free and showcase his masterful skill in crafting luxury experiences with his unique personal brilliance. He has designed the villas as he likes to live: surrounded by lush gardens which are completely private.

"Knowing the importance of sleep, Bill has designed the fluffiest most comfortable beds imaginable, with custom-tailored Khmer inspired bedsheets and a plethora of feather or 'as you like' pillows," said the press release.

On arrival at Siem Reap's International airport, guests will be fast tracked through immigration and whisked away to the secluded entrance of the villas where a unique arrival ceremony experience awaits.

Each exquisite villa will offer 156m<sup>2</sup> of space across two pavilions including a floor-to-ceiling glass bathroom with views over the garden and "the super-chic" outdoor bath.

Six of the villas can be combined into a three 312m<sup>2</sup> two-bedroom villas (each with its own pool) to accommodate a family or friends travelling together.

Guests will have full use of the restaurants, bars, Shinta Mani Spa by Khmer Tonics and facilities in the adjacent Shinta Mani Hotels, or can have personal service from any outlets in their villa.

A percentage of the daily room rate will be donated to the non-profit Shinta Mani Foundation created by the owner, to support health, education and development programmes for the less fortunate in the community.

Rate per villa per night goes from US\$450 to US\$1,100 depending on low and peak seasons.



Shinta Mani Angkor





Azerai

couples and families looking for distinction, quality and comfort at affordable prices”.

The name Azerai is influenced by Adrian Zecha's initials and a Persian word, caravanserai, a resting place with a central courtyard for travellers.

Azerai Luang Prabang has its roots as French officers' quarters. It became the Phousi Hotel in 1961 until it closed in 2014 whereupon work on Azerai began.

The new hotel has 53 rooms between 35-85m<sup>2</sup>, and rates starting from US\$250++.

The second property, Azerai Can Tho, is located on an eight-hectare islet in the Hau River and offers 60 river, lake and garden rooms priced from US\$250.

Access to the hotel islet from the city's arrival pier is a 10-minute ride. The hotel's entrance overlooks a small lake and a swimming pool, restaurant, lounge and bar. Walkways lead to a comprehensive spa featuring thermal zones, pilates and yoga studios, gymnasium, tennis court and children's zone with its own swimming pool.

Can Tho is Vietnam's fourth largest city and is well regarded as the country's 'Rice Bowl' and the Mekong Delta's leading city.

This isn't the first time Zecha has his eyes now peeled on the affordable luxury hotel space. At GHM, which he co-founded and is a director of, the mid-tier brand Tin Hotels was launched recently, with the first hotels opening in Dubai and Oman in the next few years.

At age 84, Zecha shows he can't get hotels out of his veins. Or luxury. He also launched Maha Yacht Club recently, which aims to bring hospitality excellence aboard superyachts.

– Raini Hamdi

## AFFORDABLE LUXURY BY THE FOUNDER OF AMAN

Amanresorts' founder Adrian Zecha, who lost the defining brand to Russian billionaire Vladislav Doronin, is back in hotels, this time attempting to redefine the affordable luxury space with a new brand called Azerai.

The first Azerai has opened in Luang Prabang in February, while a second is opening in Can

Tho, Vietnam, this month (December).

Azerai's website said the hotel is “the first chapter of a new story and brand of hotels that offers guests simple elegance, refined design, discreet and attentive service in places of unique beauty and cultural interest”.

It targets “experienced urbane individuals,

## Inaugural ILTM Asia Pacific in Singapore takes shape

Organisers of ILTM Asia Pacific, which will take place for the first time at Marina Bay Sands Hotel in Singapore from May 21-24 2018, said the show has seen the confirmed participation of luxury travel brands.

At press time, they include Alila Hotels and Resorts, Capella Hotel Group, Como Hotels & Resorts, Conrad Hotels and Resorts, Waldorf Hotels and Resorts, Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts, Jumeirah, Langham Hotels International, Leading Hotels of the World, Mandarin Oriental Hotel Group, Marriott Luxury Hotels, Ponant, Regent Seven Seas, Rocco Forte Hotels, Rosewood Hotel Group, Silversea Cruises, and Small Luxury Hotels of the World.

Referring to InterContinental Hotels Group's (IHG) attendance at next year's debut event, Simon Scoot, IHG's vice president - global luxury & lifestyle sales, said in an ILTM Collection press release: “We have been

partners with ILTM Asia since it started – it's in our DNA. The move to Singapore for ILTM Asia Pacific adds another choice for us.”

Simon Bosshart, director China at Switzerland Tourism, was quoted as saying: “We are looking forward to taking part in a show with the same ambience, story and concept as ILTM in Cannes, but dedicated to the Asia-Pacific.”

Switzerland Tourism joins Dubai, Turespana and Tourism New Zealand among many other destinations taking part in ILTM Asia Pacific.

Alison Gilmore, director of ILTM Collection, said: “We are taking shape already. Singapore is a city that provides an efficient backdrop for the business of ILTM, then transforms itself into a buzzing nightlife scene which will give us some great opportunities for our parties, all of which we will be making a lot more noise about over the coming months –

expect to see us bringing the world to Asia in a very productive and special way.”

ILTM Asia Pacific is an invitation-only event. The Marina Bay Sands Hotel in Singapore will be joined by the Ritz-Carlton and Conrad hotels as partner hotels for the new event for the region.

Asia-Pacific surpassed North America for the first time in 2016 to become the region with the largest amount of high net worth wealth (World Wealth Report 2016). By 2025, the report stated that Asia-Pacific's high net worth population would more than double to 11.7 million individuals.

Luxury travel is outpacing ordinary travel in Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines and ILTM Asia Pacific will now focus on this growth, collectively bringing together international and regional luxury travel suppliers to boost and build their businesses from this dynamic region, added the organisers.



# PHILIPPINE TRAVELLERS 'GET IT' WHEN IT COMES TO LUXURY

Luxury Gold, a brand spun off from Insight Vacations, has launched its 2018 escorted journeys of small groups across the globe, including nine new tours in destinations as varied as Japan, Croatia and Montenegro, and Scandinavia.

Launched recently in the Philippines – its most attractive and fastest-growing source market after Singapore – Luxury Gold is about curated destinations and service for travellers who have been there and done that, who want to get spoilt a bit and not be burdened around like a normal tour, and go to attractions where others lack access, said Robin Yap, president of The Travel Corporation, which operates both brands.

Saying that the Philippines is the most attractive source market after Singapore (Malaysia comes third), Yap said that while Singaporeans travel two shorthaul and two longhaul a year because of the size of the citystate, Filipinos travel twice a year, usually as a family, with five to six minimum members, making them a “very lucrative market”.

While Singaporeans would ask how much (is the trip), not how good, Filipinos ask if they would have a good time, said Yap, interviewed in Manila. “The Philippine market understands what luxury is about. Your lifestyle is about enjoyment, celebration, travelling in style.”

“We have been here for 37 years and we see how the market has grown. Typhoons and volcanic eruptions don't stop the people from travelling. They're very resilient,” said Yap.

The luxury group is small, up to 25 pax instead of 40 or more, personalised, has a travel concierge that can take guests to, say, behind the scenes in an opera and sip champagne with performers, book a Michelin-star restaurant which normally takes six months to reserve, stay in iconic hotels and palaces, or get a private limo transfer at the Vatican.

To further enhance the travel experience, Luxury Gold features the Chairman's Collection curated by The Travel Corporation's chairman Stanley Tollman, including lunch with an Italian count at his grand Tuscan villa, visiting the gardens of Alnwick Castle with the Duchess of Northumberland, dining with a French count at Paris' oldest cafe, and joining Princess Anita von Hohenberg for drinks reception at Artstetten Castle, all with select departure dates.

Yap said Luxury Gold vacations are 20 per cent more expensive but “clearly justifiable” by the quality of hotels, food and restaurant, departure dates which are clearly stated in the brochure, and the ability for travellers to manage their time.

Aileen Clemente, president and chair of Rajah Travel which is The Travel Corporation's GSA in the Philippines, noted the growing demand for luxury travel as Filipino travellers who started with budget trips become more mature in their travel preferences. – **Rosa Ocampo**



Anandi Resort & Spa Shanghai

## Urban wellness oasis in Shanghai

A wellness retreat to a riverside hotel amid verdant greenery located in – wait for it – skyscraper city Shanghai.

The Anandi Resort & Spa Shanghai is the city's first urban wellness resort featuring over 330 rooms, including 70 villas, three restaurants, a swimming pool, a 'Zen tea house' and 3,000m<sup>2</sup> of meeting facilities.

Being part of the Healing Hotels of the World, the spa and wellness aspect is

unsurprisingly front and centre, but this time with Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) influences. A TCM house is among the Anandi facilities, alongside a spa, gym, wellness centre, organic shop and restaurant.

At press time, the hotel owner was putting the finishing touches on this urban oasis concept in the Linkong area of Changning district, targeting an opening next year. – **Yixin Ng**

## Scott Dunn opens regional HQ in Singapore

Scott Dunn has expanded into Asia with the opening of its first regional headquarters in Singapore.

Founded in 1986 by Andrew Dunn as a European ski chalet operation, Scott Dunn has since evolved into a luxury tour operator curating private journeys for discerning travellers to more than 100 sought-after destinations around the world, it said in a press release.

Unveiling “an approach to luxury travel that the region has never experienced before”, Scott Dunn aims to bring its “distinctly personal touch, and more than 30 years of acquired knowledge of a vast range of destinations, to the Asian market”.

The Singapore-based team, alongside travel experts in London and San Diego, will tailor holidays to destinations worldwide including the Alps, Australia, Myanmar, Japan, New Zealand, South Africa and Thailand. The team also loves building bespoke multigenerational getaways that cater to the whole family.

“We are excited to bring the Scott Dunn offering to the discerning Asian market. Our guest base from Asia-Pacific has been growing steadily for some time with the increasing demand for experiential travel, so it has been an ambition of ours to get a team of specialists on the ground here for a while. Singapore offers exciting opportunities for us to grow – the country has a strong base of avid and sophisticated travellers who would benefit from the Scott Dunn experience. We look forward to expanding our services to this market,” said Dunn.



## Q&A

# SMALL LUXURIES WHEN YOU LEAST EXPECT THEM

Small Luxury Hotels of the World (SLH) has invested US\$1.3 million on a new loyalty plan, Invited. SLH's director of loyalty, Amanda Auld, tells Raini Hamdi how the new programme aims to win client faithfulness.

*You're*  
**INVITED**

INVITED is the only way to get into a world of instant benefits, available from your very first stay at any of our 500 hotels around the world. And the best thing? **The more you stay with us, the better it gets!**

[www.slh.com/invited](http://www.slh.com/invited)  
#SLHINVITED

**SMALL LUXURY HOTELS OF THE WORLD**  
*Independently minded*

maintained each year, guests will retain their status. I think the fact that advancing through the tiers is achievable is a key part of motivating guests to remain loyal.

### But how does SLH guarantee the benefits and the consistency across 500+ hotels it does not own?

SLH has invested £\$1 million (US\$1.32 million) in the delivery and running of the new programme. This investment includes ongoing costs such as the delivery of benefits including Reward Night Vouchers and Small Luxuries – these will range from a token in room gestures such as a bottle of champagne to more elaborate experiences, as well as non-hotel related gifts when they are home from their trip.

Behind the scenes, we are using Salesforce Marketing Cloud to run the programme. The rich data will enable us to target guests with relevant and bespoke information, and we now have a new loyalty hub on [slh.com](http://slh.com) that members can log into to get an overview of their membership status, the benefits they are due and what they need to do to get to the next level.

### What about earning the loyalty of travel planners? And why does Invited matter to them?

We have an existing loyalty programme for travel agents, Small Luxury Heroes, and all bookings should still be registered as part of them gaining their own rewards and benefits. Travel agents' main role with Invited is to ensure that their clients join the programme, and book stays through qualifying channels. We are relying on the travel agent community to educate our guests about the benefits of being an Invited member as the frontline members of the wider SLH family!

### Every luxury player I know is competing on recognition and personalisation to win customer loyalty. How is Invited better at it?

Invited is an evolution of the Club of SLH, rather than a complete reinvention of our loyalty programme. Research showed us that ultimately what our guests are looking for are guaranteed benefits when they stay at any of our 500+ hotels around the world. As SLH doesn't own any of the hotels in our portfolio, this consistency is a vital component of Invited that the Club couldn't promise, and that includes 10 per cent off BAR, complimentary breakfast and Wi-Fi for every member right from their first stay with us. In this way we offer added value right from the very start of the relationship that then begins the process of shaping our understanding of a guest so we can interact with them more effectively.

Moreover, the Club of SLH was never based on points, which was a big differentiating factor from most hotel memberships. Our members do not want points because it takes effort to work out value and to redeem. What members want is simplicity and Invited delivers just that – the

*It is interesting to note that members tell us that while they want recognition, it does not have to be grand gestures. It is more about understanding them and ensuring that the brand is being relevant and personalised in our interaction with them.*

more a member stays, the better it gets with SLH.

Guests are 'recognised' not only for the number or value of bookings that they make, but for their overall interaction with the brand.

### What are the fundamental changes to the plan?

The fundamental changes with Invited are delivering privileges consistently and the technology that SLH has invested in to delivering the programme. The hotel benefits remain – upgrades, late check-outs, etc – however, SLH are now gifting guests with added benefits like Bonus Nights, birthday gifts and Small Luxuries to surprise them and show that SLH understands that a thoughtful gesture makes all the difference.

It is interesting to note that members tell us that while they want recognition, it does not have to be grand gestures. It is more

about understanding them and ensuring that the brand is being relevant and personalised in our interaction with them.

The word of mouth that we get especially on social media when we surprise selected members with Small Luxuries speaks a lot about how well the new programme is currently being embraced by them.

### So how do guests get Invited?

Invited was launched on September 18. Guests can now join at [www.slh.com/invited](http://www.slh.com/invited) and are immediately eligible for member privileges including discounted member rates. As a member, the journey through the three tiers (Invited, Inspired, Indulged) is self-explanatory and, most importantly, attainable. The highest Indulged tier is based on six or more stays or a spend of US\$6,000 or more in a year. So long as this is



## NEW SHIPS TO WATCH

By Raini Hamdi



## WORLD DREAM

November 17

Purpose-built for the China and Asia market, *World Dream* is the second new ship of Dream Cruises after the debut of *Genting Dream* last November.

*World Dream* started sailing from Hong Kong on November 17 and from Nansha on November 19, taking guests on two-weekly

alternating 6D/5N itineraries to destinations including Boracay and Manila in the Philippines, and Ho Chi Minh and Nha Trang in Vietnam, as well as 3D/2N weekend cruises from Hong Kong around the Pearl River Delta.

*World Dream* has a capacity for 3,400 guests and 1,686 staterooms with triple- and quad- sharing, 70 per cent of which are oceanview.

New features and facilities include:

Dining: New Vintage Room chef table in partnership with Penfolds Wine, and two new seafood and steakhouse restaurants.

Entertainment: The largest VR game zone at sea including Vesaro car racing simulators, new signature shows, new laser shows, and new programmes for families and children.

Dream Palace: New all-inclusive concept designed to

enhance the first-class experience, including a new al fresco seafood dinner at the private pool deck.

Retail: Expanded duty-free shopping with new shops and brand partners, a beauty bar with personal beauty consultants, interactive product wall, and new marketplace and bazaars.

Wellness: New specially-designed spa packages based on organic products and traditional and western treatments.

## AZAMARA PURSUIT

March 2018

The upmarket cruise line subsidiary of Royal Caribbean Cruises has bought a new ship, *Azamara Pursuit*, with delivery taking place in March 2018.

The new addition is comparable in size to the *Azamara Journey* and *Azamara Quest*. As such, it will allow visits to unique ports that larger ships are unable to reach. The ship's décor will be updated to match the brand's upmarket position. These updates will be similar to the renovations recently introduced on the *Azamara Journey* and *Azamara Quest*, bringing guests the experience of a boutique hotel at sea. At press time, details of deployment have not been announced.

## SYMPHONY OF THE SEAS

April 2018

Royal Caribbean International's newest ship, *Symphony of the Seas*, will debut in April 2018 for her inaugural season in Europe.

Not only will she be the world's largest cruise ship at debut, she promises to thrill with innovations such as robot bartenders at the Bionic Bar powered by Makr Shagr; iconic AquaTheater showcasing unrivalled high-flying, high diving performances; and Ultimate Abyss – the tallest slide at sea – for “a thrilling crescendo of diverse experiences”, said a statement.

The “architectural marvel” will accommodate more balcony staterooms overlooking the open ocean, and legendary Boardwalk and Central Park

neighbourhoods than her sister ship *Harmony of the Seas*.

She will span 16 guest decks, encompass more than 230,000 GRT, carry 5,500 guests at double occupancy and feature 2,774 staterooms.

For the 2018 summer season in the Mediterranean, she will be calling on ports in Barcelona, Palma de Mallorca, Spain; Provence, France; and Florence/Pisa, Rome and Naples, Italy.

From November 24, 2018, the adventure-packed ship will make Miami, Florida her year-round home, sailing seven-night Eastern and Western Caribbean voyages.



## LUXURY CRUISES

### SEABOURN OVATION

May 2018



Seabourn Ovation

After an 11-day inaugural voyage departing May 5, 2018 from Venice to Barcelona, *Seabourn Ovation* will go on to spend the majority of her maiden season cruising the waters of Northern Europe, offering a series of seven-day Baltic and Scandinavian cruises between Copenhagen and Stockholm, which will include the line's signature three-day stay in St Petersburg, Russia. It will also sail on 14-day voyages, visiting the majestic Norwegian fjords and British Isles.

Like its sister ship *Seabourn Encore*,

*Seabourn Ovation* is fashioned by hospitality design icon Adam D. Tihany, boasting contemporary interiors and innovations consistent with Seabourn's reputation for understated elegance. It will round out the current planned expansion of the line's fleet.

The 40,350-GRT ship will carry just 600 guests at double occupancy. An all-suite ship, each suite has a private oceanview veranda with spacious enough for private al fresco dining, a living area with sofa seating and a desk/dining table, elegant bedding, a walk-in closet, in-suite entertainment options with a wide selection of movies, music, broadcast TV and radio channels, and a marble bathroom with separate bath and shower.

One of its F&B highlights, exclusive to Seabourn, is The Grill by Thomas Keller, reminiscent of the classic American restaurant from the '50s and '60s. Seabourn will continue to reveal updates about *Seabourn Ovation* via the dedicated microsite: <http://ovation.seabourn.com>.

### SILVER MOON

2020

Under construction at a cost of around 310 million euros (US\$363 million), Silversea Cruises' latest addition is due to join the line's fleet of nine ships in 2020.

Tentatively named *Silver Moon*, it will be the sister ship of *Silver Muse*, which was delivered in April at the Fincantieri shipyard.

At 40,700 gross tons and with a capacity to accommodate 596 passengers, *Silver Moon* will maintain the small-ship intimacy and spacious all-suite accommodation which is the hallmark of the Silversea experience.

One highlight is the Green Star 3 Design, assigned to ships that are designed, built and equipped in order to prevent air and water pollution. Furthermore, COMF-NOISE A PAX and COMF-NOISE B CREW are assigned on the basis of the noise levels measured on the ship. Results have shown that new-builds assigned these standards offer the very best levels of comfort to guests on board.

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# *It's a wrap, and here's to 2018*

The speed of change in the luxury travel market takes the breath away. ILTM buyers and ILTM Collection's director Alison Gilmore describe its impact to **Raini Hamdi** and give their take on the what to watch for in 2018





**AMIT KALSI,**  
FOUNDER & CEO,  
EXPERIENTIAL  
TRAVEL JOURNEYS,  
INDIA

**THE BIGGEST LESSON IS THAT LUXURY TRAVEL IS ALWAYS EVOLVING, ALWAYS REDEFINING ITSELF, NEVER SETTLED OR STAGNANT IN ITS APPEAL OR REACH.**

**1. Describe 2017 in three words**

Unpredictable, adaptive, evolving

**2. How does this impact you?**

The world has become unpredictable. When I say this I am referring to unexpected natural or man-made incidents, which continued to dominate the travel landscape in 2017 (natural calamities, acts of terror, political tensions, etc). This has led to a growing need of adaptive approach in our handling, planning and forecasting strategies (destinations, trips, experiences) for our discerning clients.

Such incidents are sure deterrents and can have short or longterm affects. We need to work around them or offer alternatives, and bounce back when the situation improves, and this can happen with a continuous source of reliable information on destinations we promote and sell and with help/support of our DMC and hotel partners.

The world of travel is also changing rapidly with new entrants in luxury travel, for which we need to adapt our strategies and offerings: Examples, luxury home stays, luxury villa rentals, Uber and the likes, hotel concierge revamped

teams becoming effective DMCs, credit card concierges, rise of travel networks and communities, etc.

**3. What's the most outlandish piece of business you had in 2017?**

Discerning clients in India are exploring the world, from established destinations to remote corners. This is very satisfying to me as a travel designer since this authenticates the fact that the Indian outbound market is maturing, tourists are becoming travellers, they are travelling deeper, they are exploring destinations and discovering experiences outside their comfort zones. They are moving away from being typecasts and willing to discover what can be achieved in complete safety, reliability and accessibility.

I have not yet come across a request which cannot be executed, or something which is outlandish enough to be mentioned.

**4. What's the biggest lesson for you about luxury travel in 2017?**

The biggest lesson is that luxury travel is always evolving, always redefining itself, never settled or stagnant in its appeal or reach.

With new products, new destinations, news ways of explorations and discoveries, it's all new every year. I have been selling luxury travel for many years, but with every client, destination, product and experience, I get a new perspective on the market. This excites me to a great extent. Authenticity, uniqueness, time and space, attention to detail, experiences, privacy, flexibility have all become synonyms to luxury travel.

**5. Your assessment of business in 2018?**

Business will continue to grow. But we need to keep a close watch

on global and travel industry developments, and continue to alter/amend our offerings strategically. Discerning luxury clients are more sensitive to destination news and developments, as compared to mass-market package tourists.

Clients will continue to travel, but we need to feed them with inspirations, alternatives and newer experiences. Fortunately as outbound travel designers we can do this, but it's surely a challenge for inbound operators who face deeper challenges in case their destination gets affected.

I am also very positive due to new investments, new openings in remote locations which were earlier deprived of, to name a few: Bisate Lodge, and One & Only (2018) in Rwanda; Miavana in Madagascar, Jabali Ridge in Ruaha National Park Tanzania; Wild Coast Lodge Yala in Sri Lanka, Gran Hotel Manzana Kempinski La Habana in Cuba, and a long list of new openings listed in 2017 and beyond. Such developments give us growing options to offer inspirations and revive growth to destinations.

**6. What are the pros and cons of ILTM having three Asian offshoots, Japan, Asia-Pacific and China?**

Moving to Singapore will offer a more Asia-wide perspective among exhibitors and I think a wider Asian buyer database. Singapore as a venue is also more neutral, accessible and have fewer hurdles (cannot survive without VPN override).

ILTM China can focus more on China (worldwide exhibitors seeking best of Chinese luxury travel buyers), since in terms of numbers, China surely surpasses all other markets including India, and hence demands a luxury show of its own.



### 1. Describe 2017 in three words

Transformational, celebratory, personal

### 2. Kindly elaborate why

**Transformational** 2016 was the year of experiential travel which saw vacationers looking for ways to tap into native cultures, meaningfully interacting with locals and becoming more than 'just a tourist'. This year, transformational travel has emerged as a key motivator, building on the idea of experiential travel but with vacationers seeking experiences that are motivated and defined by a shift in perspective, self-reflection and development, as well as a deeper connection with nature and culture.

**Celebratory** Whether a 60<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration in Marrakech (complete with exclusive use of Villa Des Orangers, a desert camp dinner, snake charmers and fire eaters), an eight-week trip following the sale of a business, or even reliving a honeymoon 30 years later, more clients are marking special occasions or lifetime milestones by experiencing new or much-loved destinations with family and friends.

**Personal** Travel has never been more personal; it empowers travellers to achieve what they want during their trip. Discerning travellers are now seeking trips that are tailored to their interests and abilities, and are venturing all over the globe to find them. What might be ordinary for one client, may be extraordinary to another, so by understanding our clients' likes, dislikes, and how to anticipate their needs allows us to make their journeys special and unique to them.



**ELDI LAU,**  
HEAD OF SALES  
- TRAVEL,  
QUINTESSENTIALLY  
TRAVEL GROUP,  
HONG KONG

TO CELEBRATE A JOINT 50<sup>TH</sup> BIRTHDAY, ONE OF OUR CLIENTS WANTED TO TRAVEL THE WORLD BY THE ALPHABET. ABU DHABI, BRAZIL AND CHILE HAVE BEEN COMPLETED SO FAR (AT PRESS TIME), AND FAMILY AND FRIENDS WILL BE JOINING THE COUPLE IN VARIOUS DESTINATIONS OVER THE NEXT 12 MONTHS.

### 3. What's the most outlandish piece of business you had in 2017?

To celebrate a joint 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, one of our clients wanted to travel the world by the alphabet. Abu Dhabi, Brazil and Chile have been completed so far (at press time), and family and friends will be joining the couple in various destinations over the next 12 months.

### 4. What's the biggest lesson for you about luxury travel in 2017?

Luxury is such a broad term, and means different things to different people. But across all its definitions,

the moments people treasure tend to be those unexpected personal touches or rare experiences that hold emotional value. Luxury is becoming redefined, with its focus being on the creation of unforgettable memories over just property aesthetics.

### 5. What is your assessment of business in 2018?

Leisure travel will be motivated more by the need for rest and relaxation, spending time or reconnecting with loved ones, exploring new destinations and seeking authentic experiences.

Business and incentive travel will become more popular than ever, with more companies creating travel experiences to reward staff and loyal customers to increase their return on investment.

Geopolitical issues (threat of terrorism, Brexit, etc) will impact travel decisions.

'Last-chance tourism' will rise, due to those destinations that are rapidly changing or even disappearing (Cuba, the Arctic, Lanai, Venice). This sense of urgency may also encourage more conscientious travel, so sustainable tourism and eco-friendly travel choices may become more popular.

Demand for international trips will increase both in popularity and length of travel.

Upscale trips will thrive and sell out earlier than in previous years.

More requests for business and first-class travel, as well as non-stop flights.

### 6. What are the pros and cons of ILTM having three Asian offshoots, Japan, Asia-Pacific and China?

**Pro:** ILTM becomes more specific and dedicated as an event, which is great for opening up new business opportunities as more international sellers will want to participate.

**Con:** Some sellers might only be able to join one event due to a limited budget.





**L. HAMMOND,**  
INDEPENDENT  
INCENTIVE TRAVEL  
CONSULTANT,  
SINGAPORE

## 1. Describe 2017 in three words

Connected, redefined, simplified

## 2. Kindly elaborate why

In this digital age, travel planning and customer interactions need to be available on a mobile basis, anytime, anywhere, as speed of response, immediacy is crucial for staying ahead.

Redefined in terms of what it means today to be luxury by the

totality of rich exclusive experiences and how these experiences need to be redefined and personalised. Luxury does not mean one thing to everyone.

Simplified in that luxury travel is going back to the core values of simple luxury living, i.e. eating simple clean, farm-to-table food, nothing overdone. Just good in its core.

## 3. What's the most outlandish piece of business you had in 2017?

Sorry, nothing outlandish...

## 4. What's the biggest lesson for you about luxury travel in 2017?

Personalisation

## 5. What is your assessment of

## business in 2018?

Pros: More travel opportunities for consumers than ever before; including more creative offers from luxury hotels.

Cons: Diluted definition of luxury, safety of travel in terms of terrorism.

## 6. What are the pros and cons of ILTM having three Asian offshoots, Japan, Asia-Pacific and China?

Pro: The biggest advantage of the multiple shows is the opportunity to deep dive into the opportunities of that culture, giving focus for planners and suppliers to more effectively explore possibilities for that region.

Con: More time away for travel planners and suppliers.



**ALISON GILMORE,**  
DIRECTOR, ILTM  
COLLECTION,  
BASED IN  
LONDON

## WE ACTUALLY BELIEVE THE UPPER END OF MAINSTREAM WILL BECOME MORE LUXURY.

## 1. How is the luxury market evolving and what's the impact on providers?

Since the birth of ILTM 16 years ago, we have seen customers grow more demanding and standards becoming higher and higher. Even outside the luxury sector, consumers are looking for added value in whatever form it takes. Brands are having to evolve, think smarter and anticipate future consumer demand. We live 'virtual' lives where we all think our next travel goal is to reach Everest Base Camp or to float in a hot air

balloon over the Nullarbor Desert because that is what we have seen in incredible Instagram posts or YouTube videos. Our expectations are high, and not only travel suppliers but travel advisors know that they not only have to meet these expectations but exceed them.

The fact that the industry has anticipated this demand is the reason that luxury travel is continuing to grow and grow – we are groundbreakers, instigators and as long as we continue to raise the travel experience bar higher and higher, our industry will continue to evolve.

## 2. Will 'luxury' travel become more mainstream?

We actually believe the upper end of mainstream will become more luxury.

## 3. Will there be a lot more luxury travel agencies as a result?

We are now in a world where everyone has the potential to be a luxury travel planner but relationships will still be key.

Trust is still the word we hear most often so, as the world of luxury consumer travel is diversifying, so is the world of luxury travel agencies, inbound and outbound.

## 4. What is your take on luxury travel in Asia-Pacific for 2018 and beyond?

It is clear that travellers from each sub-region and country have their own preferences and unique demands when they travel. This is the thinking behind launching an event targeted at the Chinese HNW traveller (ILTM China, Shanghai (October 31 to November 2, 2018) as well as relocating ILTM Asia to Singapore (May 21-24, 2018, see Gasp!) to widen the reach of this event.

The recent earthquake in Mexico City just a week before ILTM Americas came at a time where it was right to bring the world of travel not only together but to Mexico: the event was defined by a strong feeling that more travel not less is vital to transforming the world we live in.





# Lucy Jackson keeps the world moving

“The demand in luxury travel out of the APAC region is driving our tailormade business at a fast pace. In order to fine tune our product portfolio, Lightfoot Travel’s presence at ILTM Asia Pacific is the cornerstone to our product proposition for the year, particularly being based in Asia.”

Lucy Jackson Walsh, Co-founder & Director  
Lightfoot Travel (HK) Ltd

#keeptheworldmoving

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