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## China cruising: what's next?

Some stay while others go. China's cruise market is not for the faint-hearted but will it favour the bold? Raini Hamdi finds out

## 'Sin city' no more

A reinvented Pattaya wants to show the world that it has the makings of a family-friendly destination, writes Xinyi Liang-Pholsena

## Master of change

PPHG's CEO Lothar Nessmann tells Karen Yue how he's driving change to transform the group



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# A damming issue

Serving as South-east Asia's most iconic waterway, the Mekong River is the lifeblood of the countries it flows through. However, fears are being raised that the rampant construction of dams will take its toll on the environment and tourism, writes Marissa Carruthers



Want to read us on the go?



# Bored with unique experiences

## How the phrase loses its meaning



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**U**nique experiences. Two words that invoke anticipation, excitement, wonder – but why oh why am I so bored with them?

The race in travel & tourism to provide unique experiences to travellers is relentless. Just this past month, examples include Airbnb throwing a contest offering participants the chance to spend a night in a custom-designed bedroom on the Great Wall of China (although it had to withdraw the contest after an online backlash).

Or, just look at the new wave of unique experiences being offered in the Maldives. They include The Muraka, the world's first undersea residence at Conrad Maldives Rangali Island; an ice rink at Jumeirah Vittaveli (I'm still baffled why anyone would want ice when the bluest water is all around); and the Sculpture Coralarium at Fairmont Maldives Sirru Fen Fushi, although the fate of this underwater art museum cum coral regeneration project is still unclear at the time of writing (<http://bit.ly/2MGwUCV>).

It's not unique experiences themselves that bore me; it's that the term 'unique experiences' is so over-used that it has lost its meaning and be-

come an industry cliché.

Here's a typical example, from a speaker at IITM Asia Pacific opening forum recently: "We believe that nowadays this market (Gen Me and Gen X) is defined through the combination of the richness and uniqueness of the travel experience itself, not just the hotel brand or the flight class. Accordingly, this experience must also deliver a level of social bragging rights that allows travellers to express their individuality. It needs to be aspirational, enviable – and, above all, Instagrammable."

The industry is taking the need to provide unique experiences all too seriously that it may be counter-intuitive. The first issue I have is, unique for whom? Travel is an experience in itself and unique to an individual. This past year, I've been to places that are unique for me, for example Paestum in southern Italy, and others that aren't, for instance, New Zealand, even though I'm sure it is for others.

Moreover, unique experiences can easily be copied in today's global world and social media sharing. There are many undersea or underwater restaurants now. There are so many tours and activities that 'living like a local' has also become another cliché. Isn't it exhausting to keep try-

ing to come up with unique experiences when a differentiator today can quickly become a standard tomorrow? And in doing so, isn't the industry actually helping to create the 'very demanding, always want something new, something Instagrammable' customers it laments about today?

Who says we have to empower the customers so completely? Why not lead and shape the customer towards mindful travel rather than 'insta' travel (Instagram, instant gratification travel) which is so fleeting – like a spoiled kid who gets a new toy and seeks what's next?

Ask new questions to shape the new traveller, e.g. what's a unique experience that *cannot* be copied?

For me, that always has been great customer service – it's unique to the place that offers it, is unique for everybody, and is almost always the first thing I remember about the travel and something that stays with me. Is it an Instagrammable experience? No, it's far more lasting and what keeps me loyal to a place, brand and service.

I fear the incessant chant on something as nebulous as the need to provide unique experiences is sidetracking the industry from discussing more meaningful issues.



**Who says we have to empower the customers so completely? Why not lead and shape the customer towards mindful travel rather than 'insta' travel (Instagram, instant gratification travel) which is so fleeting, like a spoiled kid who gets a new toy and seeks what's next?**



**04 What's next for China cruising?**  
Some stay while others go. China's cruise market is not for the faint hearted but will it favour the bold?

**06 A damming issue**  
Rampant dam construction along the Mekong River is sparking fears of degradation to the environment, livelihoods and the tourism sector

**09 Master of change**  
Pan Pacific Hotels Group's CEO Lothar Nessman is driving changes to transform the organisation

**11 Wooing China's wired travellers**  
A look at the top travel apps and platforms in China, and how best to target Chinese luxury travellers

**13 The value of feedback**  
Why customer feedback is important, and what can hotels do to hear the voice of their guests



**14 Going for the long haul**  
APAC's carriers are flying longer and farther than before, driven by strong demand and a new wave of fuel-efficient planes

**16 Grand ambitions on the plate**  
Macau's a rising food star with its new UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy status

**19 Towards European comeback**  
Despite limited air connections, Malaysia turns on its charm offensive to woo European tourists

**23 'Sin city' no more**  
A reinvented Pattaya wants to show the world that it's a family-friendly destination

**26 Connect**  
Glowing testimonials for TTG's former publisher Michael Chow, and hottest readers' comments

## Coming Up

### NEXT ISSUE: OCT 2018

**Singapore** As the country revels in the sumptuous portrayal in *Crazy Rich Asians*, Singapore's tourism stakeholders want to show that the city is more than just a playground for the moneyed but is home to a veritable trove of crazy rich experiences for all visitors

**Philippines** The closure of Boracay has diverted visitor traffic to the up-and-coming Cebu, but the city's transport woes threaten to unravel the progress made

**Indonesia** Among Bali's most visited areas, Badung Regency is not resting on its laurels and is rolling out new attractions and facilities to attract tourists

**Beach resorts** A look at South-east Asia's classic beach resort destinations, from Phuket to Langkawi



A night view of Singapore's lively downtown

# A NEW GATEWAY AND GETAWAY IN SENTOSA



Home to a host of world-class attractions and easily accessible from Singapore's central business district, Sentosa island is one of Asia's most-visited tourist destinations, both for leisure and business.

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Village Hotel at Sentosa offers an experiential stay for meeting and leisure groups with opportunities to bond and discover the rich culture and heritage of its surroundings. The hotel has 606 cosy guestrooms decorated in sun-washed hues of nature by the sea. For a trendier island getaway, The Outpost Hotel delivers an authentic experience with 193 rooms in a stylish interpretation of colonial black and white design. Its rooftop pool and bar with a picturesque panoramic view is great for evening cocktails, networking and social events. Promising an array of exquisite services, The Barracks Hotel offers 40 premium guestrooms with direct pool access for a dip or lounge amidst the tranquillity and privacy of the heritage buildings.

The adjacent Mess Hall, an ex-military outpost is re-imagined as a global village offering diverse and shared experiences, with new retail and international F&B concepts.

## ADVENTURE AND ROMANCE IN EVERY EXPERIENCE

Situated on elevated ground, the Pool Deck presents unique themed pool experiences and various outdoor spaces for all guests. The Pamukkale Pool, inspired by the dramatic cascading pools in Turkey, will be the prime spot to chase the sunset on the island. Against the backdrop of the glistening sea or lush nature, it is the ideal setting for corporate launches, networking and even team building activities.

The meticulously restored Events Centre heritage building and new Village Square, housed in Village Hotel at Sentosa, provide over 800 square metres of flexible space suitable for hosting small and mid-scale events, from corporate launches to social events. Thoughtfully crafted and designed to reflect the charming uniqueness of its locale, the Revelry Hall at the Events Centre is a beautiful space ideal for meetings, conferences and corporate dinners.



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# What's next for China cruising?

Some stay while others go and come back later. China's cruise market is not for the faint-hearted but rewards may be bigger for those who stick around.

Raini Hamdi takes a look at two cruise lines that do

Royal Caribbean International and Dream Cruises are two cruise lines that stand to benefit from Norwegian Cruise Line's (NCL) decision to pull *Norwegian Joy* out from March 2019 and return to China to operate seasonally from summer 2020 (<http://bit.ly/2AXmNYX>).

One successful ship which accommodates more than 4,000 guests is out of the way as the two companies ramp up on China homeporting. Royal Caribbean will introduce its first Quantum Ultra class ship, *Spectrum of the Seas*, which has room for 5,622 guests, from June 2019. By then, the line will be fully deployed in China with *Spectrum* in Shanghai, *Quantum of the Seas* in Tianjin and *Voyage of the Seas* in Shenzhen and Hong Kong. Royal Caribbean International's president China and North Asia, Zinan Liu, said *Spectrum* would reach "new milestones in the luxury cruise sector in China".

Dream Cruises will continue to dual-homeport *World Dream* in Hong Kong and Guangzhou's *Nansha* next year while waiting for a new Global Class ship, which will debut in 2020. Not only will the third ship be 25 per cent larger and double the capacity of her sister ships, it will be "a pace setter" with "focus on Asia, and more specifically China", said Thatcher Brown, president, Dream Cruises.

In the face of lower ticket prices as a result of explosive capacity increase during 2016-2017, both players have similar strategies: pump in more luxury, in the belief the Chinese consumer has evolved and will be swayed to cruise by more innovative products and destination experiences. They also vow to continue training and educating smaller agents to sell cruises, so they can break through the predominantly wholesale charter distribution that is also partly responsible for China having low repeat guests compared to the US. Both acknowledge the need to create more enticing and longer itineraries.

Royal Caribbean, for instance, has planned "a more diversified" line-up of cruise itineraries sailing from China homeports. Among 117 open-to-sail sailings, guests can choose from 27 unique itineraries, featuring 23 destinations



across four countries, Liu said.

Without revealing details, he said: "The exciting sailings include 17 well-selected long ones – six or more nights – taking guests to their favourite Asian destinations; eight warm winter sailings bringing guests to subtropical and tropical destinations and providing an escape from the chilly winter weather; 12 weekend sailings, each of which lasts for three to four nights, tailor-made to meet millennials' needs for a brief escape from the hustle and bustle of their urban life; and special holiday/festival sailings to discover new cultures and traditions.

"Instead of reducing the number of cruise ships or cutting down the sailing season, Royal Caribbean International has always sought a more sophisticated way to serve the Chinese customers, i.e. by offering new, groundbreaking and customised options such as top-choice staterooms, meals, entertainment, shops and even destination tours," Liu said.

"Chinese consumers' needs have already evolved from cursory travels to an in-depth vacation experience. They prefer more customised products and services (so cruise companies will go) for more segmentation, tailor-made service, innovation and user-friendly technology."

Echoed Brown: "China's long period of sustained growth has spurred and expanded the middle class rapidly, simultaneously growing the cruise industry with more affluent Chinese consumers pursuing cruising as a vacation choice that offers value, convenience and enrichment.

"As the cruise market continues to evolve and mature, so will the need to provide a variety of cruise products that will be able to accommodate the various needs and tastes of a new generation of travellers. We must continue to educate and support our industry partners so that they can help us grow our addressable cruise market in China."

Geopolitical crises such as the spat between China and South Korea which affected some routes could of course happen. But overall, they believe the market will continue to grow and evolve. In just four years, the number of Chinese cruisers has grown five-fold to almost 2.5 million, a rate the cruise industry has never seen before. "With advancements in high-speed rail connectivity and the continued growth of value regional carriers, there is opportunity to reach new audiences throughout China," Brown added.

Cruise experts observe that cruise lines with larger fleets, such as Royal Caribbean, have the ability to be patient as the market catches up, knowing the long-term result will be very strong. And though Dream Cruises has but only two ships at present, as an Asian company it might be more committed to the region while parent company Genting Hong Kong has more experience with Asia/China from a long history of building up the Asian cruise market with Star Cruises.

Still, it is unlikely cruise lines will be that patient if the market is a lost case, which China is not. Royal Caribbean Cruises during earnings call on July 26 said China sailings had "performed very well" and bookings were "nicely ahead" in both volume and rate for the rest of the year and into next year.

Genting Hong Kong's 2017 financial results revealed that Dream Cruises, launched slightly more than a year ago, is "performing well with improving occupancies and net yields in both the Hong Kong/Guangzhou and Singapore markets".

The *Norwegian Joy* too performed beyond expectations. Steve Odell, Norwe-

gian Cruise Line Holdings' senior vice president & managing director Asia-Pacific (including China), told *TTG Asia*: "Norwegian Joy was profitable in China and very well received by the local market in her first year of operation (ending June 27). She has the highest occupancy and guest satisfaction ratings of any ship in our fleet." But demand and yield are stronger in the rest of the world, and the cruise company said it was monetising it and driving higher shareholder returns by moving the ship.

NCL wasn't the first to stop homeporting a new made-for-China ship in China. Princess Cruises originally announced its China-centric *Majestic Princess* would be homeported in China, but that never happened.

"We found we could have more success if we complemented our peak summer season in China (July/August) with deployments from Taiwan (spring) and Australia (winter). "That's what we've done this year and that's what we plan to do again in 2019," said Stuart Allison, Princess Cruises' senior vice president, Asia-Pacific commercial & operations.

Ken Muskat, CEO of just-defunct Sky-Sea Cruise Line (<http://bit.ly/2MGenKX>), giving his personal opinion, said China is going through a period of "right sizing", which is needed, and will remain a key strategic development market for the cruise industry, perhaps just at a slower pace than in the past.

"The market will benefit greatly from the newer and larger ships being deployed in China, the focus on finding new destinations, and offering longer itinerary choices. The business practices of the evolving trade distribution needs time to catch up and make an impact which is beginning to take place. The support of government entities is more prevalent than ever across China which continues to provide confidence to the cruise lines. These are all positive signs to the market becoming more mature and understanding what needs to happen for long-term success."



**We must continue to educate and support our industry partners so they can help us grow our addressable cruise market in China.**

– Thatcher Brown  
president, Dream Cruises



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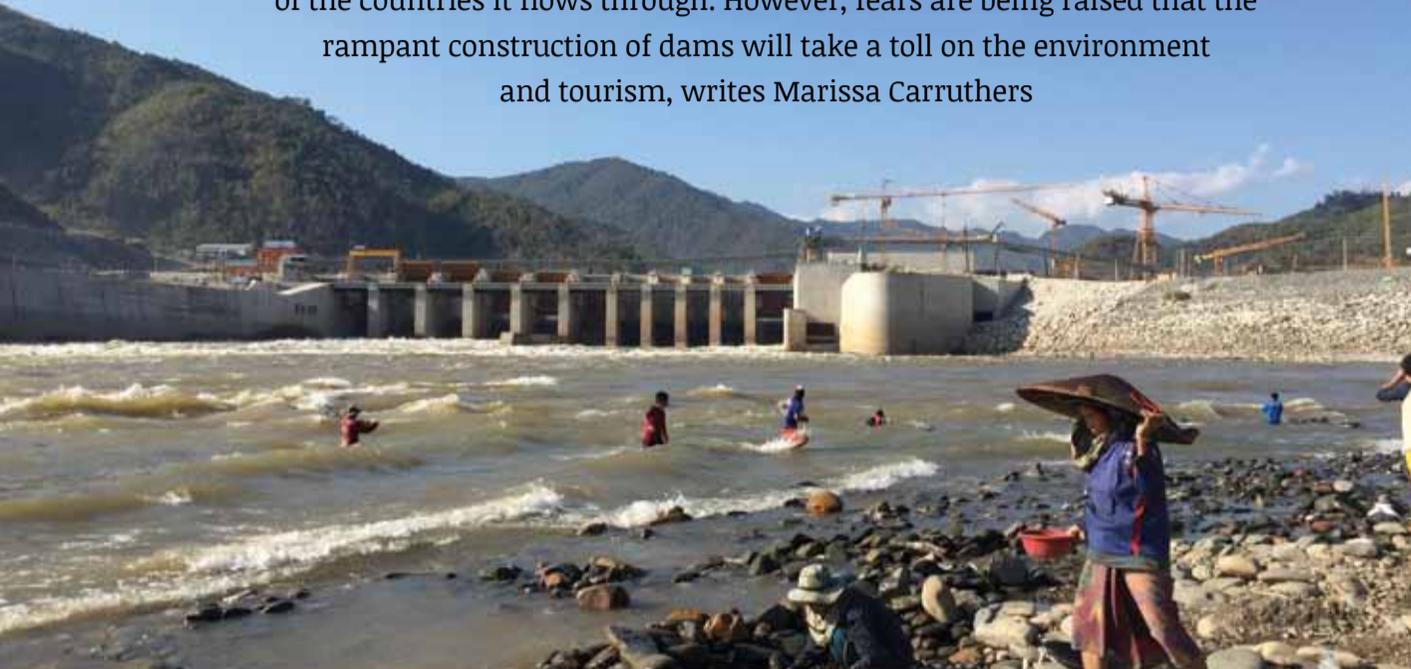
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# A damming issue

Serving as South-east Asia's most iconic waterway, the Mekong River is the lifeblood of the countries it flows through. However, fears are being raised that the rampant construction of dams will take a toll on the environment and tourism, writes Marissa Carruthers



Is Laos paying a hefty price for its dam investment? The Xayaburi dam, in northern Laos, pictured

Hen Chanda is enjoying the steadily growing trickle of tourists visiting his home province of Kratie in eastern Cambodia. Home to one of the world's only surviving pockets of Irrawaddy dolphins, endangered Cantor's softshell turtles and an idyllic Cambodian countryside that takes in the Mekong River, a growing collection of ecotourism initiatives have been launched in the area to create livelihood opportunities for some of the country's poorest communities.

Hen, who has been a tour guide for seven years, said: "Community-based tourism development is starting to become popular in Kratie and the Mekong River plays an important role, with boat tours to see the dolphins and staying with com-

munities along the river being the number one activities."

However, Hen fears the future of Kratie's nascent ecotourism sector hangs delicately in the balance, thanks to a swathe of hydropower plants that are being constructed along the Mekong River in Laos and Cambodia.

"There has been a lot of research that shows the negative effects these dams will have," he said. "And this will impact tourism along the Mekong."

As part of Laos' bid to be the "battery of Asia", the government has been constructing dozens of dams across the landlocked country to export to its power-hungry neighbours like Thailand.

In Cambodia, several more hydropower plants are under construction or being

planned, including the country's largest dam at Sambor in Kratie. A study commissioned by the Cambodian government and carried out by the US-based natural resources conservation NGO Natural Heritage Institute states that "a dam at this site could literally kill the river, unless sited, designed and operated sustainably. Sambor is the worst possible place to build a major dam."

Sinan Thourn, chairman of PATA Cambodia, predicts the dams will drastically affect areas, such as Kratie and Stung Treng in northern Cambodia, where ecotourism is mushrooming. He said: "The animals, fish and livelihoods of the people will disappear. These areas are already very different from what they were... The Mekong's rich resources, which also attract tourists, are being drained."

Miles Gravett, general manager of Khiri Travel Cambodia, agreed: "The Mekong is the lifeblood of Cambodia. The river is an identifiable landmark in the region and a name that everyone knows or has heard of prior to arriving in Cambodia."

Besides the effects felt in Kratie, the

dams blocking the flow of water downstream have the potential to impact on the Tonle Sap Lake and its delicate ecosystem that attracts tourists, he added. The Mekong converges with the Tonle Sap River in Phnom Penh, pushing water up to the "Great Lake" in Siem Reap. Boat trips are common on the UNESCO biosphere reserve, where many endangered wildlife and floating villages call home.

In Laos, the hydropower plants are already affecting the tourism sector, making operations more difficult and the journey more expensive for customers, Asian Trails' CEO Laurent Kuenzie told *TTG Asia*. The DMC now has to use one boat for the first part of the journey, move clients overland for a short part, then another boat for the final stretch.

Stefan Scheerer, general manager, Khiri Travel Laos, noted that the dam construction in Muang Noi in northern Laos has already had a negative impact on clients' experience. "Once one of the most stunning landscapes is now divided by a huge, ugly dam," he opined. "Not only is tourism suffering, the local communities (also) do not profit from these mega projects."

He shared: "The Mekong River plays a very important role for tourism in Laos. Not only is the Mekong very present in any marketing material, it is also essential for excursions and activities. The waterways are a great way to enjoy the beautiful natural landscapes of rural Laos, which is increasingly under danger through dams and other constructions."

The recent collapse of the Xe-Pian Xe-Namnoy dam in Attapeu province has revealed the ugly side of Laos' energy ambitions, with some 34 people killed, hundreds reported missing and more than 6,000 people displaced. Water also flooded into the Sekong River, sending floods downstream in Cambodia, and caused damage to agricultural land in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam.

The Laotian government has since announced that it will suspend all new hydropower projects. A task force has also been set up to inspect dams that are complete or under construction.

While this reprieve has been welcomed, fears over the future of the Mekong remain. "Sadly, it is locals who will feel the worst effects of damming the Mekong as fisheries deteriorate and tourist and shipping trade traffic dwindle," said Gravett.

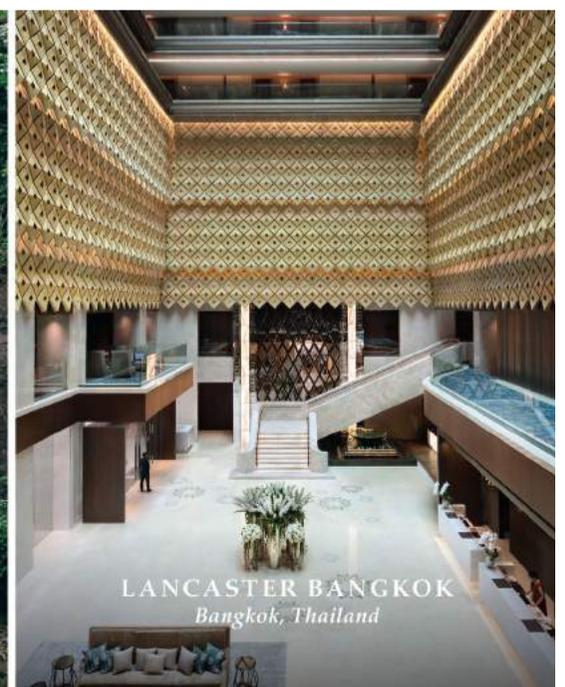
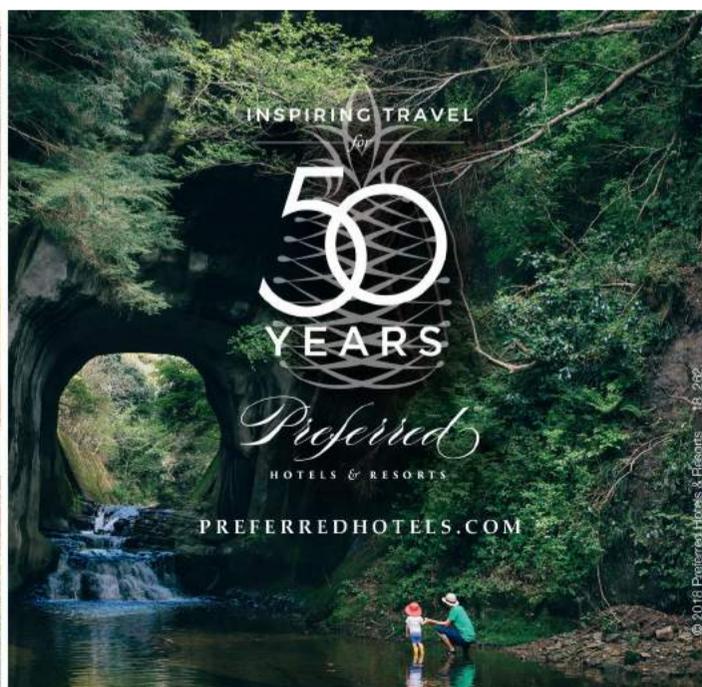
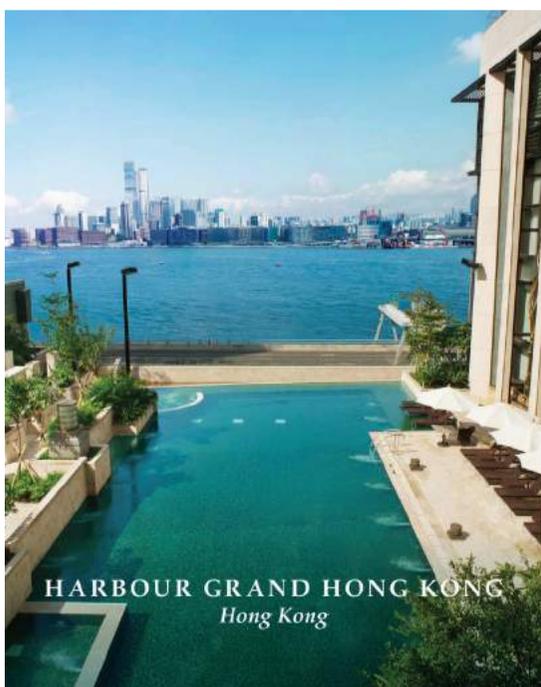
"A slightly cheaper electricity bill is not worth the long-term damage some of the dam proposals could cause."



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# Master of change

Numerous changes are afoot at Pan Pacific Hotels Group (PPHG), led by Lothar Nessmann who took over the reins as CEO in February 2017. He talks to Karen Yue about pushing for changes that take the organisation forward, adopting technology applications that make sense and keeping the critical dance with travel agents going

## Every new leadership opens a door to new ways of doing things. Are you looking at changing things now that you're at the helm?

New leadership does bring something different but there must be an objective for that. The difference must be a positive one, and we must be able to calm waters when there is change and get everybody involved and on board.

Everybody has to see the end-game, and understand that sometimes a different road needs to be taken in order for the organisation to move forward.

## You mentioned having to calm waters when there is change. Did you see churning waters when you arrived into this new position?

Oh no, not at all! It's just that when somebody new arrives, even a new general manager at a hotel, everybody wonders who (he is) and how (things will be). It is normal.

## What are some of the changes that you have set in motion?

We recognised that we needed to put more emphasis on our website and booking engine. We recognised that we needed our front-facing pages to be more customer-oriented and to portray ourselves to be more in line with what the customer is looking for. We also recognised that social media is an important channel, so we've stepped up our efforts there.

Digital is another important aspect of the game, so we've put more emphasis on that.

On the hardware front, together with our owners, we have and will continue to invest quite significantly in a number of our key properties for renovations and upgrades. We will even change some of our F&B concepts in some of our hotels.

These will take place over 18 months, three years and five years – one cannot make these changes immediately.

At the same time, we recognised that all of these changes would not pan out if we did not bring a definite change to our service, software and human capital.

The service offered by our hotels is very good. Can we do more? Of course! And that's what we aim to do. Together with a professional company and a lot of our own senior managers, we have built an employee service culture training manual that is specific to our needs. This took us several months to put together.

We have hotels in different parts of the globe, so the way we portray this service culture and the way we deliver this training to our employees need to be localised. We don't want to have a one-size-fits-all because our employees and customers are different in every hotel.

One of the key points about our training is that it is first given to our senior management. Not only did they build the course, they were the first to receive training when it was launched in June this year. The training course then cascades down to the employees, with training conducted by the senior team. This shows buy-in by the senior team. We wanted to create an emotional attachment to this course.

The other benefit of having our senior team conduct the training is that they can give relevant, real-life examples to emphasise a point.

## Does your social media effort include influencer engagements? It is common for such engagements to come with direct booking motivations, such as through a promo code. Doesn't that add to travel agents' ongoing fight with direct bookings?

Social media is a large part of life and we need to embrace it. Have we worked with influencers? Absolutely! Our marketing team identifies which influencers are a right fit with PPHG.

This has happened because of technology and the change in people's aspirations. They are looking to be inspired and influenced by others.

Influencers bring a new business opportunity but that does not mean we won't continue to use all the other channels familiar to us.

Travel agents need to embrace this shift. They could themselves see advantages in engaging influencers too.

## How about changes in innovation at the back- and front-end?

Our industry – any industry for that matter – has to keep innovating. But we need to understand if the technology is something the customer wants and understands.

We have seen hotels using robots. We have one too at Pan Pacific Beijing, and it's called Peter Pan. It is quite fun, and the young children like it. The robot is extremely efficient but I do not see it taking over all service roles.

In the meetings and events space, innovation is vital. The days of hotels packing out projector screens and a projector are long over.

## I love how PPHG's ongoing global



**I see both parties (hotels and travel agents) evolving together to keep in line with customer demands. Travel trends and habits are changing so rapidly that hotels and travel agents need to work together to do better business.**

## brand refresh includes a localised strategy and action plan for each market, built with local agency partners. Is this indicative of the continued importance of travel agents in the travel and tourism industry?

Travel agencies are our partners and we are clear about how very important they are. We are here to do business with them.

The relationship between hotels and travel agents have changed over the years because of technology and customer needs. I see both parties evolving together to keep in line with customer demands. Travel trends and habits are changing so rapidly that hotels and travel agents need to work together to do better business.

## You've been in the hospitality business for 30 years. What are the biggest changes to the regional hotel landscape, and how do you see it evolving next?

Here in Asia-Pacific, there have been very powerful hotel players 20 years ago that are no longer as powerful today. And in the past year, there have been two or three hotel companies that have become very big, very powerful. They will continue to grow where they can. There is no doubt that these very large players, because of their booking system, back-of-house infrastructure and sheer size of their customer base, will dominate the market.

Having said that, PPHG is part of the Global Hotel Alliance which is also a very powerful organisation made up of many other small and mid-sized hotel companies. That gives us some power to fight the giants.

While these large hotel companies are here to stay, they will also change their shape as time goes on. Look at the news today – one of them is looking to offload some of its Australian properties.

## What power does PPHG have over these mega hotel companies?

To get things done across the board for 40 properties, as opposed to several hundreds, will be faster, of course. Having said that, it is all about the people who are

## 10 NEED TO KNOW'S ABOUT LOTHAR NESSMAN

### ■ Who's in your family?

A daughter and a wife.

### ■ What do you do for fun?

I am a very keen fisherman and I enjoy fly fishing, deep sea fishing, all sorts. I do my very best to take a motorbike tour once or twice a year.

### ■ Your ideal vacation?

An African safari.

### ■ How do you book your own leisure trips?

My wife does it!

### ■ What are you reading right now?

*My Africa House*, a true story about an Englishman who went to Northern Rhodesia in 1914.

### ■ How do you stay healthy?

I don't but I aspire to one day.

### ■ Favourite food?

All Malaysian cuisine, particularly *laksa*.

### ■ A bad habit you cannot kick?

You'll have to ask my wife!

### ■ Your pet peeve, something that never fails to annoy you?

Bad manners.

### ■ Most people don't know that you... I was born and brought up in Africa.

executing programmes and changes on the ground.

I think another advantage of ours is that we can afford to be more personal.

## Have you also seen changes in the way hotels are built today compared to decades ago?

At PPHG, we work very closely with our contractors and architects on environmental impact. The new property that will take over what once was Pan Pacific Orchard (closed since April 2018 for a three-year redevelopment) will have a zero-waste capability.

Hotel companies need to be more conscious about the impact their properties have on the environment. Hotels consume a huge amount of water and energy, and generate a huge amount of waste.

Hotels today also are no longer being built with five or six restaurants. Now, one or two only. In the past, customers were happy to stay in the hotel, hence all the services were created to keep them occupied. Today, customers just want to go outside.





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# Courting China's wired travellers

Cindy Choo, regional account director of Reuter Communications, rounds up the top travel apps and platforms in use in China, and how best to target the Chinese luxury traveller



proximately 10,000 customers each year, who typically fly business or first class, spend an average of RMB100,000 (US\$14,639) per person, per trip on accommodation, and favour exotic destinations like the North and South Poles.

## 8 Continents

8 Continents Travel is one of the leading ultra-luxury travel agencies in China. Founded in 2012 and headquartered in Shanghai with offices in Beijing and Chengdu, 8 Continents provides customised worldwide travel for HNWI clients, from honeymoons and tours to adventurous destinations such as the Antarctica.

## TuNiu

TuNiu is the largest booking platform in China. While it's not luxury-specific, its sheer size means that all forms of travel bookings take place there. Founded in 2006, TuNiu's sheer size makes it one of the strongest places to be seen.

## REVIEW APPS

### XiaoHongShu (Little Red Book)

Launched in 2012 as a community for users to share recommendations of fashion and beauty products from overseas, XiaoHongShu shot to popularity to reach 70 million users at the end of 2017.

XiaoHongShu works very well as a place where sharing a love of products is the sole purpose. It is viewed as a 'safe place' for users, who do not like the 'open' nature of Weibo or want to refrain from appearing overly showy on WeChat.

The app now also includes travel reviews published by KOLs, angling at the user-base of females aged 18 to 35; i.e. millennials.

### MaFengWo

MaFengWo is a travel review app with over 120 million users, with its gross merchandising revenue valued at four billion renminbi according to analysis company Qianfan. Its success comes from a neat blend of KOL blogs, user-generated reviews and a Q&A section where tourism bureaus and businesses can get involved, as well as peer-to-peer responses.

The reviews and information go beyond hotel reviews, offering guidance on shopping, visas, insurance, with integrated booking into any form of travel service, ticket and so on.

In the blog section, Feng Show, there are approximately 5,000 contributors, with daily editorial picks highlighted. Users can comment on favourite posts. While not luxury specific, the opportunities for engagement on MaFengWo are vast and the savviest travel and hospitality people are wise to this – Tourism Australia just signed a strategic partnership agreement with MaFengWo in August.

### FeiZhu (Fliggy)

While it's categorically not a luxury app, the user base is high due to Fliggy being a booking and review-based app. Fliggy used to be called AliTravel, but it was rebranded a few years ago. The app's ownership under Alibaba gives it easy reference

to Taobao, prompting travel shopping.

With 10 million daily active users, the overall mass popularity is clear. While it's not specifically for luxury travel, Fliggy has been making waves in the travel world with a number of headlining partnerships. It is collaborating with Singapore Airlines on the carrier's Krisflyer mileage points programme, and has entered into several partnerships with NTOs such as Dubai Tourism. With support from the Alibaba Group, Fliggy is definitely one to watch as it continues to strengthen.

## WeChat

Comparing the various options for content and commerce, WeChat is still the leader of the China digital landscape.

Anyone who lives in China will understand that WeChat is still first – first for daily usage of your consumer, but also

first for any brand, destination or bureau to build a robust foundation. Think Google + Facebook + Instagram + your credit card = WeChat.

WeChat is the first place that travellers will share their holiday photos, experiences and reviews; the app that they will use to pay with and plug into your CRM and join your loyalty programme on; and the channel for them to speak to your customer service. All these are within WeChat, as should be your content via an official account to begin with, followed by a mini-program eventually. Build a rock-solid WeChat offering and the possibilities are endless for your luxury Chinese traveller.



When planning, booking and reviewing their travel, Chinese consumers seldom browse websites or the Internet, let alone print – they live on apps alone.



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With a completely unique digital playground, travel and hospitality brands need to engage with their affluent Chinese customers according to their app-based, mobile preference.

Players in the hospitality or travel sector should already realise the importance of Chinese travellers – Chinese tourists made 130 million overseas trips in 2017, with total spending amounting to US\$115 billion, according to a report from China Tourism Academy, and the number is projected to jump to 390 million in the next decade.

Life in China is digital, and it's mobile. If you've visited China then you would have noticed that everything is paid for via mobile phones. WeChat Pay logos are popping up in many airports around the world. Research from Neilson shows 65 per cent of Chinese tourists use mobile payments while travelling overseas, compared with only 11 per cent of non-Chinese tourists; 90 per cent of Chinese tourists use mobile payment overseas when given the option.

A survey in 2017 revealed that 95 per cent of millennials had not bought print media in the last year. China is the global leader in proximity mobile payment adoption, accounting for 61.2 per cent of the worldwide user base in 2018.

When planning, booking and reviewing their travel, Chinese consumers seldom browse websites or the Internet, let alone print – they live on apps alone. And in China's singular world of travel apps, who are the key players engaging Chinese luxury travellers in sales, marketing, reviews and content platforms?

## BOOKING PLATFORMS

### Ctrip and HH Travel (High to Heart)

As China's biggest OTA, Ctrip not only offers the most choices at the best prices, but also produces content in collaboration with travel key opinion leaders (KOLs). HH Travel, a luxury travel agency owned by Ctrip, books packages for wealthy clients via their own app and WeChat mini-programme. It serves ap-



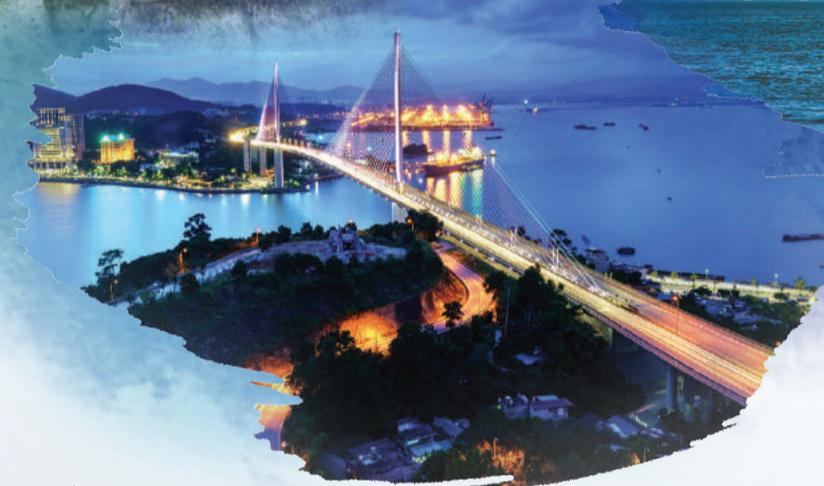
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# The value of feedback

Alex Tan, vice-president sales & operations Asia-Pacific of TrustYou, stresses why customer feedback is important to a hotel, and offers ideas on how to motivate guests to give them

**W**hen a hotel gets reviews, it increases the visibility of that hotel and increases the chance of more bookings. For that reason, it is important that hotels encourage their guests to write reviews.

Our research shows that guests are 3.6 times more likely to write a review when a hotel reaches out to seek feedback.

Some of the ways in which you can encourage guests to review are to ask for

their feedback on-site, use a customised guest survey, or perhaps offer them a perk to give a review.

To ask for feedback while a guest is on your property, we recommend using a guest messaging tool. Let guests know that you provide a messaging feature for them to come to you if they need to ask questions, get directions, request toiletries or for any other enquiries you may have. At this point, it will be easy for you to check in with the guest to see if they are enjoying their experience at the hotel. If you keep the lines of communication open, feedback will follow.

When your guests check out of the hotel, a friendly reminder of how much you value their feedback and letting them know that it helps you to improve your service, will serve as a handy reminder to them to review the hotel. A post-stay survey, for example, also allows them to express their honest opinion about their stay.

A customisable guest survey is a great way to ask for feedback, because it puts you in the control seat. You can ask the questions that you really want answers to, such as how the guest is responding to a new hotel feature or service. You can also

ask open ended questions, offering a scale response, of say 1-10, to determine how they feel about a certain aspect of your service.

A survey is a clear, direct way of asking for feedback and it typically gets a response. Collecting such reviews positively influences hotel rankings and ultimately increases revenue.

If budget permits, offering a perk helps prompt guests to submit a review. A spa pass, a free dinner or cocktail would often spur the guest into action. This is a great way to steer guests into learning more about your services as it adds to an excellent stay and experience.

Another way to choose a perk is to assess past reviews to see what guests appreciate the most about your hotel, and then offer those features or services as perks for future guests to obtain their feedback.

Asking for honest feedback indicates to the guest that you really care about their opinion.

*TrustYou is a guest feedback platform used worldwide by suppliers in the tourism and hospitality sector for reputation management purposes.*

## SAY THAT AGAIN

### Hospitality in the world's most hellish place

A client wanted to visit Ethiopia's Danakil Depression (below) at a time when no one else would sell it to him, but we have the right contacts on the ground who could make the trip take place safely and show him an off-the-beaten-track area where few tourists go. He was able to walk with the salt miners and their camel caravans, and spend a night with the Hamar tribe the evening before their bull jumping ceremony which was pretty amazing. No one does that!

**Lucy Jackson, co-founder & director, Lightfoot Travel**



**“ If you keep the lines of communication open, feedback will follow. ”**

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**Budget**

# Going for the long haul

From launching longhaul LCC to pushing the limits of ultra-longhaul flights, Asia's full-service airlines are now riding the new generation of fuel-efficient aircraft and robust passenger demand to fly longer and farther than before



## SINGAPORE

Singapore Airlines (SIA) has embarked on a three-year transformation programme, with a strong focus on scaling up its digital capabilities and capacity amid stiff competition.

A significant step in its transformation is the upcoming integration of SilkAir into SIA, after the regional arm undergoes significant upgrades of more than S\$100 million (US\$73 million) to its cabins, including new lie-flat seats in business class and the installation of seat-back in-flight entertainment systems in both business class and economy class.

These upgrades are expected to start in 2020, which will ensure greater product and service consistency across SIA Group's full-service network.

SIA plans to open up ultra-long-range (ULR) services with its upcoming fleet of A350-900ULR aircraft, starting with non-stop flights between Singapore and Los Angeles on November 2.

Meanwhile, the existing service to Los Angeles via Seoul will cease after November 30, but the daily service to Los Angeles via Tokyo will remain. Los Angeles will be served 17 times per week by the airline.

SIA will also launch the world's longest non-stop flights between Singapore and New York from October 11. The thrice-weekly service will take almost 19 hours on the new A350-900ULR, which will have no economy class seating.

In addition, SIA will increase its existing daily non-stop Singapore-San Francisco services to 10 flights per week from November 28. Its route to San Francisco via Hong Kong will remain in operation.

These new developments will raise SIA's number of weekly non-stop flights between Singapore and the US to 27 by end-2018.

The latest destinations added to SIA's longhaul network from Singapore include non-stop services to San Francisco, Dusseldorf and Stockholm via Moscow. On the medium-haul, SIA now serves Canberra and Wellington. – **Pamela Chow**

## THAILAND

Recent years have proven to be rather tumultuous for Thai Airways International, as the carrier continues its plan launched in April 2015 as part of cost restructuring effort while battling Thailand's aviation upgrades that limited its expansion plans.

Things started looking up for Thai Airways with ICAO's removal of Thailand's red flag status last October, giving the carrier "more flexibility on route planning for both longhaul and regional routes", commented the airline's executive vice president, commercial, Wiwat Piyawiroj.

Thai Airways expects the US Federal Aviation Administration to upgrade Thailand to Category 1 within this year, which would pave the way for the launch of US routes. The airline has not operated services to the US since suspending its Bangkok-Los Angeles service in October 2015.

"Our plans for the US market are to enhance codeshare cooperation with our Star Alliance partners in order to offer an expanded network for customers," said Wiwat.

Thai Airways passengers currently can fly to 14 destinations in North America through the airline's codeshare agreements.

**Above: Singapore Airlines will begin its Singapore to Los Angeles service in November using A350-900ULR aircraft.**

Europe, a key market for Thai Airways, is meanwhile showing improved performance as the European economy picks up growth.

"European travellers visiting Thailand in 2018 already showed an increase of 7.5 per cent while in 2017 it was at 5.4 per cent," Wiwat shared. "Our European routes performed very well for the first five months this year, especially to Germany for both Frankfurt and Munich, and to the three Scandinavian destinations as well as Zurich."

He added: "No new destinations (in Europe) are planned at the moment, as we do not have sufficient aircraft for expansion. Our strategy for now is to grow the non-daily flights to daily for routes such as Brussels, Vienna and the two Italian destinations – Milan and Rome."

Thai Airways' longhaul fleet number will be maintained for now, as its aircraft acquisition plan is pending

**Below: Los Angeles is on the radar for Philippine Airlines and Garuda Indonesia.**

government approval, Wiwat told *TTG Asia*. THAI took delivery of seven aircraft in 2017, comprising five Airbus A350-900s and two Boeing 787-9 Dreamliners.

Earlier this month, the Thai flag carrier has proposed a revised turnaround plan to the State Enterprises Policy Commission. – **Xinyi Liang-Pholensa**

## PHILIPPINES

Philippine Airlines' (PAL) longhaul network – comprising only six destinations across the US, Canada and the UK – is getting a much-needed boost with its current fleet modernisation.

The carrier has six firm orders for Airbus A350-900 XWB, four of which are up for delivery starting June this year and two in mid-2019, with options for an additional six.

The A350-900s will be deployed on the new non-stop flight from Manila to JFK Airport in New York beginning October and on the daily Manila-London (Heathrow) service by end-October this year.

The US is one of the Philippines' biggest inbound markets served by PAL through non-stop flights from Manila to Los Angeles, San Francisco and soon New York.

The nonstop flight from Cebu to Los Angeles, which was temporarily shelved due to the lack of bigger aircraft, is expected to be resumed with the delivery of the A350-900s.

PAL president and COO Jaime Bautista said that "services to other points in North America and/or Europe are expected to follow as more aircraft join the fleet over the next 12 months, including possible routes to Seattle, Chicago and a point in western Europe".

The reflecting with "more innovations and product refinements" is aligned with (PAL's) goal to be rated five-star on Skytrax from the current four-star, Bautista said.





Bautista said that PAL “will take in 27 new aircraft” starting with the new A350-900s and the six A321neos for delivery this year until next, two of which have already arrived in Manila.

The A321neo is now in use for the Manila-Brisbane service launched in May and has increased its weekly services from three to five since July.

PAL has also configured its A330-343 aircraft to increase the overall capacity by 22 per cent to stimulate leisure and business travel. The 414 seats were reduced to 309 for wider legroom and fewer seats on each row, and cabin amenities enhanced.

Since June, the thrice-weekly Manila-Auckland service is using the tri-class A330-343 with 18 business class, 24 premium economy and 267 economy seats. Other medium-haul destinations using the reconfigured A330 include Honolulu, Sydney and Melbourne. – **Rosa Ocampo**

## INDONESIA

Following the lifting of the EU’s ban on Indonesian airlines in June, Europe is now coming into greater focus for Garuda Indonesia as the carrier plots its longhaul expansion strategy.

The airline has started to assess several destinations in Europe, with the Jakarta-Paris route scheduled for launch in winter 2019, while it will increase the Jakarta-Amsterdam service from six-times weekly to daily in November 2018.

Sigit Muhartono, director of international cargo & commerce at Garuda Indonesia, said Paris is chosen for its hub status in Europe.

“The market potential in France is the highest among others (in Europe), for both business and leisure markets,” he explained.

Sigit added that France is Indonesia’s biggest source market in Europe. Data from the Visit Indonesia Tourism Office in France show that 162,288 Parisians visited Bali in 2017, rising 10.1 per cent from 147,413 visitors in 2016.

He added: “We also look at the patterns of Indonesians travelling to Europe. Most of them start from Amsterdam, then travel around Europe by land and end the journey in Paris and fly out from there.”

At press time, Garuda Indonesia is also in the midst of signing a code-share agreement with Air France to offer customers daily connections between Jakarta and Paris, adding to the carrier’s codeshare partnership with KLM to fly in 19 destinations.

“We are also working on a code-share agreement with Aeroflot, (not only for the Russian market but) for East Europe in general, (as part of our) focus to strengthen our network in Europe,” said Sigit.

Next on Garuda’s radar is to add Turkey onto its flight network to position it as a hub for both East Europe and the Middle East.

Sigit added: “Turkey is very strategic, close to Eastern Europe (and Aeroflot has many flights here). We want to connect Indonesia with Eastern Europe this way.”

Meanwhile, Garuda is looking connect to Los Angeles via Tokyo. Said Sigit: “We are still waiting for the route permission from the government of Japan to enable the service to transit in Tokyo. Once this is done, we will fly the Jakarta-Los Angeles route.” – **Tiara Maharani**

## HONG KONG

Barely two years since the airline began its transformation campaign, Cathay Pacific (CX) has launched non-stop routes to a slew of longhaul destinations served by the Airbus A350 fleet, including Barcelona, Brussels, Christchurch, Copenhagen, London-Gatwick, Tel Aviv, and, most recently, Dublin.

Frequencies on a number of the airline’s most popular routes, including Barcelona and Tel Aviv, are also boosted in 2018.

A spokesperson said: “One of the goals of (CX’s) transformation is to find new sources of revenue by flying to destinations that people want to visit and connecting Hong Kong directly to new places for the first time. Examples include Tel Aviv, Barcelona, Christchurch, Brussels, Copenhagen, Washington DC, Cape Town, Nanning and Jinan, Medan and Davao, etc.

“We are opening a record nine new destinations this year. In addition to the destinations already launched so far this year, i.e. Brussels (March), Copenhagen (May) and Dublin (June), we will be commencing flights to Washington DC (September) and Cape Town (November) this year.”

As of June 2018, CX and Cathay Dragon have a combined fleet of 195 aircraft. Of the 78 new aircraft expected to be delivered by 2024, the airline received its first A350-1000 aircraft in June, with a total of eight A350-1000s set for delivery in 2018.

CX chief customer and commercial officer, Paul Loo, said: “We al-

**Above, from left: Economy class in Cathay Pacific; the Airbus A350-900 is among the newest planes on Thai Airways’ longhaul fleet**

ready have one of the youngest longhaul fleets in the sky, and with the arrival of the Airbus A350-1000, our fleet is only going to get younger. The aircraft follows the successful entry of the -900 variant which has enabled us to expand our longhaul network at a near unprecedented rate, providing our customers with a wider range of non-stop travel choices.”

The remaining 12 A350-1000 order will arrive by 2021. After initial rounds of regional services, starting with Taipei on July 1, 2018, the new Washington DC service will be launched on September 25 on the A350-1000, which at 8,153 miles (13,121km) makes it the longest on the airline’s network.

This aircraft will also serve Madrid, Tel Aviv, Amsterdam, Manchester and Zurich from the coming winter. – **Prudence Lui**

## JAPAN

Japan Airlines (JAL), the nation’s flag carrier, has announced a dramatic departure from its long-held aversion to operating a LCC and will commence commercial operations with a new budget airline from Tokyo’s Narita International Airport from summer 2020, ultimately targeting longhaul travellers.

“The company decided to establish a new carrier to accommodate a new generation of visitors who are expected to visit Japan heading into 2020 and beyond,” Tetsuya Onuki, managing executive officer of JAL’s international route marketing division, told *TTG Asia*.

“JAL currently has a LCC investment in Jetstar Japan, which is an airline built on a business plan featuring shorthaul routes,” said Onuki. “On the other hand, the new LCC business will focus on medium- to longhaul international routes.

The as yet unnamed airline will initially operate Boeing 787-8 aircraft in order to rival similar LCCs on regional routes before spreading its wings into Europe and the Americas, Onuki added.

During this summer season, JAL is operating 140 flights a week between the Americas and Japan, as well as 42 from European destinations and a further 14 from Australasian cities, giving a total of 392 round-trips per week between Japan and longhaul destinations.

The latest addition to the company’s longhaul repertoire was the September 2017 launch of daily flights to Melbourne, a result of growing

demand on the route thanks to the Japan-Australia Economic Partnership Agreement of 2015.

In FY2019, JAL will seasonally increase flights between Tokyo (Narita) and Chicago (O’Hare) from June 8 to September 3, 2019, featuring 11 flights per week.

On flights between Osaka (Kansai) and Los Angeles, JAL will now feature full-flat seats in business class, in addition to the introduction of premium economy class service with the JAL Sky Suite 787-9 aircraft.

On its existing longhaul routes, JAL operates the Boeing 777-300ER, 777-200ER, 787-8 or 787-9 aircraft for the “technical advantages” available on the aircraft.

The carrier began rolling out the JAL Sky Suite in 2013 to enhance the passenger experience, featuring top-of-the-range options including wider seats in economy class. – **Julian Ryall**

## MALAYSIA

Amid concerns of escalating fuel prices, Malaysia Airlines does not have plans to introduce any new longhaul routes or add capacity on existing routes, but will instead focus on marketing the premium segment to cushion the airline from rising costs, *TTG Asia* understands.

On January 15, the airline replaced its Airbus A380 operations with the more fuel-efficient A350-900 on the twice-daily Kuala Lumpur-London sector.

The 486-seat A380 was deemed too large for optimal efficiency on the London route and hence the airline made a decision to reduce capacity by over 40 per cent with the smaller A350-900 aircraft fitted with 286 seats.

London is currently the only destination in Europe the airline flies to, while it depends on the One-world alliance airlines to connect to the rest of Europe and North America.

The airline had suspended flights to Los Angeles since April 2014 as part of a route rationalisation exercise to stem losses.

Malaysia Airlines has relaunched four-times weekly flights from Kuala Lumpur to Brisbane on June 1. This route had previously been axed from the network in 2015 amid a network rationalisation exercise.

Loads since the reinstatement has been described by Malaysia Airlines as “encouraging” in an email reply end-June. – **S Puvanewary**



**The market potential in France is the highest among others (in Europe), for both business and leisure markets.**

– **Sigit Muhartono, director of international cargo & commerce, Garuda Indonesia**

## Destination

# Grand ambitions on the plate

Macau is eager to milk its UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy status, but to succeed as a foodie haven it has to look beyond prestige and consider the survival of small food businesses. Prudence Lui reports



**N**o longer content with being a gaming haven, the 'Las Vegas of Asia' is now working towards transforming itself into a foodie destination after clinching recognition as a UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy last October.

At the annual marketing meeting held in June 2018, Macao Government Tourism Office (MGTO) revealed that gastronomy and festivals will be a key focus of its marketing plan going forward.

An MGTO spokesperson said: "Following Macau's designation, the government unfolded a four-year action plan (2018-2021) which includes various initiatives in six categories, and (identified) the 2018 Macao Year of Gastronomy as one of the key highlights of the four-year action plan.

MGTO plans to promote Macau's "cultural image", as well as organise or support international events in line with the gastronomy theme.

The tourism body will work towards integrating gastronomy in existing events including the Parade for Celebration of Chinese New Year in February and the Macau Light Festival in December, the spokesperson shared.

In 2019, MGTO will organise the International Gastronomy Forum for the third year, while also pushing for the Asia's 50 Best Restaurant Awards Ceremony to be hosted in Macau again in 2019.

Moreover, MGTO intends to continue to support local associations and private sector organisations, as well as work with other government departments on gastronomy-related festivals and events. Some recently

concluded examples include the Malaysian Food Festival 2018 (August 16-31) and the Southeast Asia Food Carnival (mid-August).

On the ground, MGTO is rolling out different promotional activities through its representatives in various source markets, working with travel agencies to promote the destination's travel products.

Pamela Chan, associate director – head of marketing, Taipa Village Destination, remarked: "With the territory's growing recognition (among foodies), Taipa Village continues to receive an increasing number of visitors."

Taipa Village has been hosting regular tours for media, industry partners and teambuilding clients who are keen to explore the destination's mix of art, cultural and dining experiences.

"Gastronomy is the main highlight. We once hosted a teambuilding company for a treasure hunt activity in Taipa Village, with eight spots assigned as check points. The treasure hunt concluded with a Macanese *cha gordo* (fat tea) at Macanese restaurant La Famiglia," Chan continued.

While lauding MGTO's new direction, Manuel Wu, managing director of Macau Explorer Cultural Travel, which runs gourmet/food tours, sees room in developing food tourism offerings in Macau beyond large-scale events.

Wu said: "I haven't seen any surge of similar tours from other operators in the market; what they offer mostly echo MGTO's promotions promotions such as those focusing on food festivals.

"This is really due to the limitation of the local infrastructure. Many family-run outlets, for instance, are small and simply can't manage big groups," he added.

To develop Macau's food tourism, Wu wants more to be done to help small food businesses survive.

He said: "In the long run, it'd be helpful if the government could lend support to these small outlets because escalating rentals are driving the successors of ageing restaurant owners' to close business and rent out the premises."

Another issue Wu pinpointed, is the difficulty of experienced chefs in finding successors to pass on their skills due to a lack of interest among the younger generation.

"It's vital for the government to incentivise the younger generation to pick up the cooking profession and preserve this traditional local neighbourhood food culture."

On top of cooking classes, Wu's company offers tours that visit traditional family-run food outlets, some with over 50 years of history in old districts like the Inner Harbour of Macau Peninsula.

"So far, enquiries are mostly from South-east Asia agents asking if I can organise street food tours for groups to venture into local market areas," Wu said.

MGTO says it is taking steps to give visibility to food businesses on the ground. It has been collecting information from local associations about eateries and restaurants along its eight recommended walking routes (Step Out, Experience Macao's Communities - Walking Tour Routes), and plotting these food haunts along the routes.

"Currently, MGTO is compiling additional information including opening hours, type of cuisines and locations by district in order to fully promote the dining scene and attract visitors and residents to different districts," the MGTO spokesperson shared.

**Above: A traditional shop on the streets of Macau**



**What (local tour operators) offer mostly echo MGTO's promotions such as those focusing on food festivals.**

– Manuel Wu, managing director of Macau Explorer Cultural Travel

### WHAT'S HOT

## Tours & Activities

### Unwind and dine in style

The Ritz-Carlton, Macau has launched the Revitalizing and Gourmet Journey programme.

Guests can unwind in ESPA vitality pools, steam and sauna rooms, ice fountain and other amenities before the 50-minute aromatherapy treatment. This is then followed by a gastronomic journey at Lai Heen with a bottle of Perrier-Jouët Champagne.

### Multiplayer VR experience

Zero Latency was rolled out in Broadway Macau in June to become the city's first free-roam, multiplayer VR experience. The

## The many faces of Macau

200m<sup>2</sup> VR game arena features brings to life scenarios for up to eight players at a go.

Experiences include Engineerium, a puzzle game suitable for first-timers; Zombie Survival, a VR shooter game; and Singularity, a space-themed shooter game. The experiences are for participants 16 years and up.

### Delve into art and culture

The day-long Art and Culture Journey, organised by CoForte Organisation Development, is a guided tour of Macau's attractions that also aims to celebrate

the conservation of traditional trades. During the programme, participants will visit museums, exhibitions, galleries, historical buildings and a shipyard.

At the shipyard, docents will talk participants through how the shipyard and shipping industry have been kept over the years. Also included is a craftsmanship workshop, where participants will make their own wooden paddle and keychain with the wood from shipyards.

Tours are available by reservations at least one month in advance, for a minimum group of 10 people.



**Above: Qipao experience from Klook**

### A feel for the traditional

Immerse yourself in the Macau of yesteryear with this traditional experience offered on the Klook platform.

Visitors can complete the traditional look with rented *qipao*, traditional handbag, fan and hair accessories, before hitting the streets of Macau with a route map of Klook's recommended stops.

A special package including a photoshoot and copies of professionally edited shots is also available.

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Hotels

# Greater fortunes

Hoteliers are optimistic that new hotel supply will be absorbed by growing visitor demand. By Prudence Lui

Despite a new swathe of rooms coming on-stream this year, hoteliers in Macau remain confident that demand will continue to outpace supply and prop up business.

This could be attributed in part to the rebound of visitor arrivals. For 1H2018, Macau's Statistics and Census Service (DSEC) indicated that visitor arrivals totalled over 2.6 million in June 2018, up 9.4 per cent year-on-year.

Overnight visitors in 2017 grew by 7.2 per-cent year-on-year to pass 1.4 million, according to DSEC figures.

Meanwhile, occupancy rates for all hotel types reached 89.8 per cent, an increase of 4.3 per cent. Room rates grew 7.1 per cent from MOP\$1,252 (US\$154) to MOP\$1,342 during the same period.

Occupancy wise, five-star hotels performed well to record a 7.8 per cent uptick, while the three-star category was the only one to have experienced a decline

(-2.1 per cent).

Crowne Plaza Macau, for instance, continued seeing high occupancy in 1H2018, and a double-digit growth in average rates.

General manager Dominique Berhouet explained: "Although Macau is questioning the issue of oversupply, (new openings such as) Morpheus and MGM Cotai are targeting the casino market, a different market from what Crowne Plaza Macau (is going after).

According to Macau Government Tourism Office, mainland China is still the top visitor market to Macau, and most of the new rooms have found utilisation with casino goers or junkets.

Moreover, the Hong Kong-Macau-Zhuhai Bridge, which is approaching completion, represents an important new gateway to Macau and "should help to further develop the Hong Kong and Guangdong area market," said Berhouet.

Sharing similar views, vice president of operations at JW Marriott Hotel and The



Above: Melco Resorts' Morpheus is a new entrant to Macau's luxury scene

Ritz-Carlton, Rauf Malik, said both properties have not had to adjust rates despite the new openings as demand for rooms remains high.

"If visitors from these other cities grow two to three per cent each year, then already there won't be enough rooms to accommodate the influx of visitors," said Malik.

"We continue to see tremendous demand from China, Hong Kong, South Korea and Japan, all of whom are interested in the newly developed Cotai area. Even with the addition of new hotels, we remain optimistic about occupancy rates," he added.

Mandarin Oriental, Macau, as the only

non-gaming international hotel located on Macau Peninsula, has seen significant increases in its performance indicators since January 2018 compared to 2017.

Director of commercial strategy, David Lam, said the luxury hotel's target market is different from others located in Cotai, drawing guests seeking pampering experiences and personalised services.

Like Berhouet, Lam expects the soon-to-be-operational Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge to be one of the key developments for Macau's tourism.

"This is expected to (bring in more) double and multiple-destination tourists arriving at Hong Kong International Airport."



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## Destination

# Towards European comeback

Malaysia inches closer to restoring its European markets, with partnerships to gain visibility with the continent's travel buyers lined up and longer-term plans to rebuild connectivity, reports S Puvaneswary

Attracting more European tourists is now a top agenda for Tourism Malaysia



Abdul Rezak Latiff/Shutterstock

After national flag carrier Malaysia Airlines axed most of its routes to Europe, the Ministry of Tourism, Arts & Culture and Tourism Malaysia is eager to rebuild its European feeder markets by working with overseas partners.

European arrivals to Malaysia took a hit when Malaysia Airlines pulled the plug of its Frankfurt route in April 2015, followed by Amsterdam and Paris in January 2016. European carriers Air France and Lufthansa had also cancelled services to Kuala Lumpur in October 2015 and February 2016 respectively.

With hubs that service both Europe and Malaysia, Thai Airways, Singapore Airlines, Turkish Airlines, Emirates, Qatar Airways and KLM

Royal Dutch Airlines are coming onto Tourism Malaysia's radar as choice partners to grow arrivals from Europe in the long term, noted Tourism Malaysia's director-general, Mirza Mohammad Taiyab.

Mirza shared that Tourism Malaysia and Malaysia Airports Holdings have set up a joint fund to attract more European airlines to fly to Malaysia.

Currently, airlines offering connections from Europe to Malaysia are KLM and Turkish Airlines. Condor, the leisure airline of Thomas Cook, will commence new flights between Frankfurt and Kuala Lumpur from November 5.

While Tourism Malaysia works towards rebuilding connectivity as a long-term solution, in the shorter

term it is focused on building awareness about the country's offerings among European travel agents.

This year, Tourism Malaysia is targeting 1.5 million tourists from Europe, up from 1.1 million arrivals in 2017.

It recently signed an MoU with the European Travel Agents and Tour Operators Association (ECTAA) to become the association's preferred destination partner for the year.

The partnership led to ECTAA organising its semi-annual meeting in Kuala Lumpur, the first to be held outside of Europe, which hosted 46 delegates from 25 tourism associations in Europe.

The European delegates, some visiting Malaysia for the first time, were given the option of attending four-day post tours covering Selangor, Langkawi and Sabah.

At the meeting, delegates were also given an overview on what the country has to offer for leisure and business visitors by Tourism Malaysia and Malaysia Convention & Exhibition Bureau.

Through the MoU, ECTAA would highlight diverse travel and tourism products in Malaysia to its members across European countries, shared Mirza.

In another strategic partnership to step up promotions in Europe, Malaysia has been named the official partner country of ITB Berlin 2019.

Mirza said: "Malaysia's official partner country title at ITB 2019 will entail publicity opportunities globally as well as the potential to reach out to key decision makers and top industry players."

Travel suppliers in Malaysia welcome the NTO's intensified efforts in Europe, while also rolling out marketing activities of their own to

attract outbound travellers from the continent.

Fiona Hagan, general manager at Shangri-La's Rasa Ria Resort & Spa in Kota Kinabalu, said: "Exposure at ITB Berlin will get the country in front of many key decision makers in Europe and keep the destination top of mind. We support all initiatives that knock on doors of agents in Europe."

Hanley Chew, CEO of Berjaya Hotels & Resorts, said: "We are confident that with promotions by Tourism Malaysia, there will be an increase in European arrivals to Malaysia."

"In 2017, guests from Europe only (made up) seven per cent of room nights at our property, a three per cent decrease compared with 2016. For this year, we are targeting a 10 per cent increase over 2017 for total room nights contributed by European guests."

The hotel is also participating in tradeshow, performing sales calls and continuing direct contracting with travel agents in Europe through its London sales office.

Jai Kishan, general manager, New World Petaling Jaya, suggested that further destination awareness of Malaysia in Europe could be created by directly reaching out to travel consumers on the ground through social media campaigns and by inviting media and film crew on fam trips to Malaysia.

"Malaysia is not lacking in (business and leisure) offerings when compared to our neighbouring countries," said Kishan.

"What's lacking is awareness of our offerings in the European markets and with Tourism Malaysia's efforts, it is just a matter of time before this changes."



We support all initiatives that knock on doors of agents in Europe.

– Fiona Hagan, general manager, Shangri-La's Rasa Ria Resort & Spa

### WHAT'S HOT

## Tours & Activities

## Discovering local wildlife, cuisine and culture

### Hidden culinary gems in KL

Adventoro has devised a food trail along the Sungei Buloh-Kajang MRT line in Kuala Lumpur, guiding guests to an average of six food stops serving local fare such as banana fritters, *chendol*, *asam laksa*, *nasi lemak* and *satay*. The tour price is inclusive of an English speaking guide, MRT tickets and food and drinks.

### Irrawaddy dolphin watching

The Santubong area in Sarawak is said to be one of the best areas to spot the Irrawaddy (or

snubfin) dolphin. Guests will also also traverse a mangrove swamp, habitat to creatures such as mudskippers, crabs, monkeys and reptiles.

### On the nature trail in Sabah

Borneo Trails Tours & Travel offers a 12- to 14-day programme for nature lovers. The tour starts in Kota Kinabalu, and moves on to Lahad Datu, Sandakan, Danum Valley and Sukau. During the cruise on Kinabatangan River, the nature guide will help guests spot animals such as crocodiles,

macaques, proboscis monkeys, and the Bornean crested fire-back.

### A day with the Orang Asli

Happy Trails! Asia's Selangor itinerary includes a visit to the Orang Asli (indigenous people) Museum in Gombak and an Orang Asli village. The village chief will show guests to local activities such as farming, carving and smoking a wild pig hunted the night before. The tour ends with a visit to Batu Caves before heading back to the city.



Don Mammose/Shutterstock

Above: Proboscis monkeys on a tree in Borneo

## Hotels

# Room for more luxury

A new crop of high-end hotel openings has transformed Kuala Lumpur into a strong contender as a luxury destination, discovers S Puvaneswary



W Hotel Kuala Lumpur

Three new luxury properties have opened in Kuala Lumpur to add 441 rooms in recent months, but surplus in the luxury tier is not a concern for tourism stakeholders.

The new properties, Banyan Tree Kuala Lumpur, Four Seasons Hotel Kuala

Lumpur and W Kuala Lumpur join existing international luxury brands such as The St Regis Kuala Lumpur, Mandarin Oriental Kuala Lumpur, The Ritz-Carlton Kuala Lumpur, Grand Hyatt Kuala Lumpur and InterContinental Kuala Lumpur.

InterContinental Kuala Lumpur area director of sales & marketing, Peter Turner-Smith, said: "There may be some short-term pressure on occupancy and rates with the increased availability, but in the long term these new hotels will help to stimulate demand for the city as well as raise the hospitality standards."

Likewise, Aariana Hospitality International president & CEO, Reginald Pereira, said: "The additional inventory enhances the image of the destination and (shows) investors are confident of the destination."

"This is long overdue. We need these international brands to attract more high-yield tourists to the city."

Moreover, the new openings are in tandem with developments in Kuala Lumpur's overall luxury scene.

Arokia Das, director, Luxury Tours Malaysia, said new high-end brands serve to complement the new product developments the city has seen in recent years.

"It is now possible to hire a Ferrari car or a stretch limousine for clients, which we could not do four years back. (These developments have made it) so much easier to sell the city to the luxury segment."

Manfred Kurz, managing director at Diethelm Travel Malaysia, further pointed out that the new inventory could ease the bottlenecks the city experiences when hosting big conventions or exhibitions.

Tom Roelens, general manager, Four Seasons Hotel Kuala Lumpur, agreed: "When there are large conferences and events, Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre is always in need of additional supply of rooms and hotels of different tiers."

### NEW HOTELS

#### The Westin Desaru Coast Resort

Scheduled to open in October, the hotel forms part of an integrated complex in Johor with a water park and two golf courses. It features 275 sea-facing rooms and suites, four dining options, a conference centre with a ballroom for up to 1,000 pax. The nearest airport, Senai International airport, is 82km away.

#### DoubleTree by Hilton Melaka

The hotel boasts 273 guestrooms, including 27 suites and a Presidential Suite. Family-friendly features include a kids' club and the option to connect up to four guestrooms. The hotel has an outdoor infinity pool, a fitness centre and three F&B outlets.

#### Kota Kinabalu Marriott Hotel

The waterfront Kota Kinabalu Marriott Hotel is a 15-minute drive from the international airport. It features 332 guestrooms and suites; six dining outlets, including two speciality restaurants, a rooftop bar, an all-day dining bistro and a lobby lounge; meeting and conference venues;



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#### Junior Suite at Crockfords, Resorts World Genting

a club lounge; a 24-hour gym; and an infinity pool.

#### Dash Resort, Langkawi

The resort opened in April, offering 108 rooms and one villa. Features include two restaurants, a poolside bar, an outdoor pool, a fitness centre and spa, as well as the Dash Beach Club. The property also has a ballroom and two meeting rooms.

#### Crockfords, Resorts World Genting

Crockfords offers 140 rooms and suites, complete with in-room climate control, 24-hour room and butler service, car jockey service and executive club access.

## Fresh Eyes

# Go big in travel

Octraves' big data solutions and patented reservations platform pave a more effective path for the industry. By S Puvaneswary

Octraves Technology spent six years developing TravelCompute, a platform providing a big data solution for travel and tourism, and one-stop travel reservation platform.

The big data solution integrates data from various public, proprietary, governmental and non-governmental sources, processes the information and renders insights for tourism organisations, TMCs, tour operators and airlines.

It includes more than 10,000 industry reports on travel and tourism across the globe, including destination insights sourced from social media tracking, historical data on tourism arrivals and receipts over the past 15 years, top 10 outbound destinations from main international airports, and global social media tracking of the top 25 visited attractions in a destination.

Syed Mohd Razif Al-Yahya, group managing director/group CEO of Sutra

Group of Companies, which Octraves Technology is part of, shared: "We started marketing it in 2017 and have one client so far, which is Tourism Malaysia. We are also marketing this to state tourism organisations in Malaysia and foreign NTOs. We offer them a convenient tool to build a profile of potential travellers, understand the destination and make immediate informed decisions."

Separately, the travel reservation platform is used by its associate company, Sri Sutra Travel for both B2B and B2C bookings.

It went live in 2016 and provides end-to-end solutions in areas such as customer relationship management, back office system, tour management system and inventory management system. It has the ability to perform real-time booking of flights, hotels, homestays, transfers, car hire, tours, travel, buses (tour and express buses) insurance and cruises.

The platform connects directly with

various kinds of travel suppliers via the patented Dynamic Integration Technology. Partners include GDSs and wholesale travel suppliers.

Currently Octraves Technology has two joint venture overseas partners who will market the platform within their countries, while Octraves provides the technical and knowledge support. The partners are Wupi.id, a B2B outbound agent in Indonesia operated by Panorama JTB, and Tour Booking Network in Vietnam which services both B2B and B2C.

Octraves and partners earn a transaction fee for every online booking made.

"By this year end, we hope to get a third partner in Saudi Arabia," shared Syed Mohd Razif, who is targeting at least 20 foreign partners by 2023.

The platform saw around 300 bookings monthly in its first year, and this has grown to over 3,000.

Syed Mohd Razif: seeking overseas partners



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## Tried & Tested Hidden Culinary Gems of the Sungai Buloh-Kajang MRT Line



From left: Auntie Lora Kopitiam; streetside eats

*S Puvaneswary follows local tour operator Adventoro along the MRT line to uncover tantalising culinary gems in Kuala Lumpur*

**WHY** Malaysian food presents a true culinary adventure, a reflection of the diverse origin of its multi-ethnic population.

To let guests have a taste of hidden culinary gems in Kuala Lumpur, local tour operator Adventoro has rolled out a unique food trail around the Sungai Buloh-Kajang MRT line. Participants visit local restaurants and hawkers serving some of the best of Malaysian classics, such as banana fritters, *chendol*, prawn mee, *asam laksa*, beef noodles, *nasi lemak* and *satay*, to name a few.

**WHAT** All food stops are within walking distance from MRT stations along the Sungai Buloh-Kajang line.

The tour starts at Brickfields and ends at the famous Sate Kajang Hj Samuri. During the walk from the MRT station to the food outlet, my guide, Ken Lau, shared snippets of history and interesting facts about each location.

What impressed me was his commitment to ensure I had a good time, even if it meant taking me to food places that were not on the list.

For example, at Shin Kee coffee shop near Central Market, which served the best beef noodles I had ever tasted, we started talking about durian and I mentioned that I hadn't eaten one for a long time. To my surprise and delight, Lau de-

cidated we should drop by Petaling Street for a durian feast by the roadside – Malaysian style!

The coffee shops we visited were not fancy, but don't let their appearance fool you. On closer look, you will see numerous awards the shop has collected over the years hanging on the walls.

Similarly, an entire wall at the eponymous Auntie Lora Kopitiam was filled with pictures of Auntie Lora with Malaysian politicians and local celebrities who had dined there in the past, as well as newspaper articles of food reviews and awards. Auntie Lora Kopitiam has been operating in Kuala Lumpur since 1981, after moving from Penang.

Lau said it served the best prawn mee and *asam laksa* in the city, and it only took a sampling of these dishes for me to be utterly convinced.

I was lucky to have picked Wednesday for this tour, which also happens to be the day Taman Connaught night market comes to life. This is the longest night market in Malaysia with more than 700 stalls, half of which sell food, including fresh vegetables and meat.

By the time we arrived at Sate Kajang Hj Samuri nearly eight hours after the tour started at 12.30, I was almost full.

But I had to taste Sate Kajang to find out why people travel here from Penang and Johor just for the *satay*. The secret lies in the thick, fragrant peanut sauce, which comes with a separate plate of chilli paste. The chicken sticks are also almost twice as large as you would find elsewhere.

**HOW** The tour is sold online on the Adventoro.com website. The tour price is inclusive of an English-speaking guide, MRT tickets to various locations, plus food and drinks. On average, there are six food stops. Portions are kept small so guests are able to sample different types of food.

A day or two prior to the food tour, guests be notified via email or WhatsApp of the food stops. At this point, they may request to change some of the outlets.

**VERDICT** The food outlets in this tour have been well researched and almost all have won food awards of some kind. I would recommend this to foodies visiting Kuala Lumpur.

**Duration** Full-day tour departing at 12.30

**Rates** RM190 (US\$46) per person

**Contact details**

Website: [www.adventoro.com](http://www.adventoro.com)

### WHAT'S NEW

## Airlines

### AirAsia X heads to Amritsar

AirAsia has inaugurated flights to Amritsar in India, operated by its longhaul arm, AirAsia X. On Tuesdays, Thursdays, Saturdays and Sundays, flight D7188 departs Kuala Lumpur at 19.20 to arrive in Amritsar at 22.30. The return flight, D7189, is scheduled to leave Amritsar at 23.45 and land in Kuala Lumpur at 08.05.

### AirAsia connects KK to Bangkok, Penang to Phuket

AirAsia has commenced thrice-weekly flights from Kota Kinabalu to Bangkok since August 16. On Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays, FD471 departs Kota Kinabalu at 15.00 and arrives at Bangkok's Don Muang Airport at 17.05. The return flight FD470 departs Bangkok at 09.30 and arrives in Kota Kinabalu at 13.35.

The LCC has also inaugurated daily flights between Penang and Phuket. Flight AK1911 leaves Phuket at 21.00, arriving in Penang at 23.05. AK1910 then leaves Penang at 20.25, arriving in Phuket at 20.30.

### Malindo Air flies to Melbourne via Denpasar

Malindo Air commenced daily flights to Melbourne via Denpasar on June 7. OD177 departs Kuala Lumpur at 17.10 to arrive in Denpasar at 20.10, before taking off at 21.00 for arrival in Melbourne at 04.40. On the return, flight OD178 leaves Melbourne at 07.00 to arrive in Denpasar at 11.25, before taking off at 12.25 for arrival in Kuala Lumpur at 15.25.

### Malaysia Airlines rolls out bookings on Facebook

Malaysia Airlines now allows travellers to book flights and process payments through Facebook Messenger, part of its digitisation initiative launched in April.



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## Destination

# 'Sin city' no more

Pattaya is cleaning up its act to become a family-friendly destination, and local stakeholders are imploring visitors to look beyond its sleazy association, reports Xinyi Liang-Pholensa

No stranger to transformation, Pattaya started out as a sleepy village which became a popular R'n'R destination for Vietnam War servicemen in the 1960s and subsequently a beach resort destination catering to Bangkok residents escaping from the Thai capital on weekends, although its fame – or notoriety – was largely founded on the back of sex tourism.

Its sleazy image is what the Thai authorities and tourism industry stakeholders are keen to change, as the city metamorphoses into a family-friendly destination, having welcomed a new swathe of five-star hotels, theme parks and lifestyle attractions in recent years.

Pattaya was given the spotlight as the host destination for Thailand Travel Mart Plus (TTM+) in June this year, with organiser Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) placing an emphasis on romance and luxury under the theme *Million Shades of Romance* at its annual tradeshow.

Commenting on the choice of Pattaya for TTM+ 2018, which was held at Ocean Marina Yacht Club, Tanes Petsuwan, TAT's deputy governor for marketing communications, said: "After two years of positive response in Chiang Mai, we wanted to show the new image of Pattaya and overthrow old perceptions of the city. Pattaya has reinvented itself for upscale travellers, with the Ocean Marine Yacht Club, Cartoon Network Amazon, F&B venues, Ramayana Water Park, international golf courses, etc."

As well, Pattaya is expected to benefit from the Thai government's "multimillion infrastructure investment" currently underway as part of the Eastern Economic Corridor development plan, Tanes added.

Key projects include the high-speed railway connecting Suvarn-



abhumi, Don Mueang and U-Tapao airports and the upgrade of the Sattahip commercial port, all of which will help to position the city as a high-end travel destination, he said.

Despite the progress made in its image overhaul, Pattaya still faces an uphill battle to improve its reputation, with opinions split among agents if they would promote and sell the destination to their clients.

Philippe Roussel, tour operator at Asia Voyages France, opined that the greater array of hotels, restaurants and activities has made Pattaya a "better" destination choice that can be paired with other parts of eastern Thailand for tour programmes.

David Kevan, partner and product person at Chic Locations UK, on the other hand, thinks Pattaya's seedy reputation still lingers and its mass tourism appeal unlikely to find favour especially among Western high-end travellers.

Likewise, Asia DMC's managing director Thailand Andre van der Marck said that Pattaya is "for sure" not for families, a key market segment for his company.

But Pattaya is not just for vice-seeking tourists, the city's tourism players insisted. "They say, 'Good boys go to heaven, bad boys go to Pattaya'. That is no longer true," said NongNooch Garden & Resort's sales and events manager Thanadit Chitaroon.

Urging the trade to give the city a chance, Pathira Nakngam Riley, director of sales & marketing at InterContinental Pattaya Resort, said: "We cannot change the history of Pattaya but we can certainly change travellers' impression. Granted that the unsavoury part of Pattaya still exists, but most visitors won't see it unless they specifically go looking for it – just like in most cities in the world."

Nong Nooch Tropical Botanical Garden, a long-standing attraction in Pattaya that opened in 1980, is now pulling out the stops to enhance its appeal by adding villa accommodation, spas and restaurants in recent years.

The latest Dinosaur Valley exhibition, featuring life-size recreations of the prehistoric beasts, come on top of new facilities like a convention centre, boxing stadium, indoor theatre, dinosaur rally, cooking class with herbal garden, among others, Thanadit shared.

Meanwhile, prominent festivals and sporting events like the Wonderfruit festival, LPGA golf tournament

and International Fireworks Festival are also helping "to change travellers' perceptions of Pattaya", remarked Jan Jeerapat, managing director of J Corp, which manages a trio of hotels in Pattaya.

As well, a growing crop of international five-star hotels brand such as Hilton, Renaissance, InterContinental and Movenpick is changing the face of Pattaya's hospitality sector, driven by the influx of Chinese, Indian and Russian tourists.

"Over the past few years, Pattaya has seen a significant shift towards becoming more family-friendly, and there are plenty of examples of this. Most of the branded hotels in the city now offer family facilities, including family rooms with bunk beds, children's pools and kids' clubs with a vast choice of activities," observed Olivier Berrivin, Best Western's managing director of international operations – Asia.

As the destination takes on a more family-targeted sheen, Pattaya is receiving interest from wider market segments and geographic markets.

"For Royal Cliff, we are receiving a significant increase in Chinese guests coming for both leisure and MICE purposes," said Vitanart Vathanakul, CEO, Royal Cliff Hotels Group. "Interestingly, it is the middle-age market and not the millennials that we see an increase in numbers with regards to those staying with us."

"Aside from the Chinese, other markets that show growth are India, South Korea, South-east Asia and Europe, especially Germany and Switzerland. We are also getting more senior travellers who stay with us more and longer. We see a potential for growth for millennials from China, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong and Korea," Vitanart shared.



They say, 'Good boys go to heaven, bad boys go to Pattaya'. That is no longer true.

– Thanadit Chitaroon, sales and events manager, NongNooch Garden & Resort

### WHAT'S HOT

## Tours & Activities

### Snoop around Bangkok

Combine fun and sightseeing with this out-of-the-box game that get travellers to explore Bangkok's hidden gems while picking up clues à la Sherlock Holmes along a specific route to unravel a mystery. Played in the Old Bangkok area, teams of two to six people will go around on foot with a real map to search for particular items and pick up clues that will enable them to solve the mystery at the end. [contact@gosnoop.co](mailto:contact@gosnoop.co)

### Cooking among flowers

The Market Experience, the cooking school and workshop of Bangkok-based tour operator Expique, offers cooking challenges right in the riverside Yodpiman Flower Market. Ranging from short 20-minute activities to four-hour team challenges, participants will learn to prepare a Thai feast or complete food-related tasks – all the while surrounded by the flower trade in full swing. [www.marketexperiences.com](http://www.marketexperiences.com)

### Self-drive tuk tuk adventures

Diethelm Travel Group's 11-day Northern Thailand Self-Drive Tuk Tuk Adventure programme takes travellers on the three-seater rickshaws through northern Thailand's jungle-covered hills and rice fields, with stops in rural villages and an ethical elephant sanctuary. Drivers are required to be 18 years old or older and hold a valid manual driving licence from their home country, as well as attend a safety briefing and tuk tuk driving lesson.



Self-drive tuk tuk tours in northern Thailand

## Hotels

# From strength to strength

Bangkok's hotel sector is entering a period of sustained growth, buoyed by strong inbound travel demand and political stability. By Xinyi Liang-Pholensa

Political stability and surging international visitors arrivals are proving a potent mix for Bangkok, as the Thai capital is poised to achieve its strongest performance in recent years in 2018 with no disruptive events anticipated.

"Thailand has seen a lot of ups and downs over the past 10 years but it's on a clear path of growth (in the hotel sector)," STR's area director Asia-Pacific Jesper Palmqvist projected at Thailand Tourism Forum earlier this year.

Bangkok's hotel sector is "finding its strides", reflected in the steady rise of its ADR and occupancy rates in the past three years. RevPAR, for instance, broke 10-year records for 10 months out of 12 in 2017, Palmqvist shared.

The growth momentum recorded for Bangkok's hotels in the last two years is likely to be repeated in 2018, said Horwath HTL's director Nikhom Jensiratanakorn.

According to a recent *HVS Market Pulse* report, the overall stability in the market has contributed to the strong performance of hotels during the first two quarters of 2018. The outlook for the remaining months of 2018 is optimistic, driven by expected strong demand levels in international visitor arrivals, coupled with the political stability in the market with elections being postponed to 2019.

The positive outlook of Bangkok lodging sector is also apparent at Centara Grand and Bangkok Convention Centre at CentralWorld, which has enjoyed continued growth in all major metrics so far, Robert Maurer Loeffler, the hotel's general manager and corporate director of operations told *TTG Asia*.

## Fresh Eyes

# Taking the curated path

An industry expert strikes it out on her own to start a bespoke agency

For Soonie Wattanahongsiri, who counts 15 years of experience in major DMCs in Thailand – including Exo Travel, Khiri Travel and Abercrombie & Kent – a trusted reputation and word of mouth referrals are the most valuable tools to attract business for Blackrice Travel, a boutique travel agency she founded in early 2018.

The Bangkok-based startup offers customised trips to Thailand and South-east Asia for both travellers and corporate agents alike. "We have no fixed tariffs or modules. It's all about customisation," said Soonie.

Designing each holiday around a client's needs and preferences, Soonie is adamant that she gives "a personal touch" to each booking, whether it's welcoming clients upon their arrival at hotels or giv-

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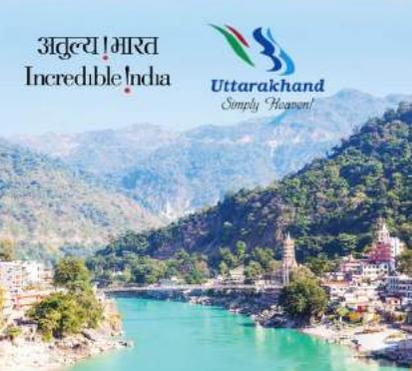
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Business optimism runs high for Centara Grand at CentralWorld (pictured)



Thailand has seen a lot of ups and downs over the past 10 years but it's on a clear path of growth...

- Jesper Palmqvist, area director, Asia-Pacific, STR

"Our Bangkok properties are enjoying a positive 2018. The first quarter was particularly strong and we have seen year-on-year growth in both occupancy and rates. Transient business has driven two-thirds of the growth while growth in the group segment has been led by double-digit increases from wholesale group business," Loeffler commented.

"The remainder of 2018 is looking equally positive and while the transient

growth will continue its trend from the first half of the year, the groups' growth will be driven by increased MICE business, with other group segments remaining constant with last year. We hope to enter 2019 pacing ahead of prior years too," he elaborated.

There is still considerable amount of new branded supply entering the Bangkok market in the foreseeable future, including much-anticipated brands like Capella, Edition and Four Seasons added to the city's luxury segment.

Hilton maintains "an extremely bullish outlook" on Thailand, including the luxury segment, said vice president, operations, luxury Asia-Pacific Daniel Welk.

If there's anything that growing competition has brought, it's greater clarity for Hilton's hotel brands, Welk stated. "The swim lanes are more defined now," he said.



I want to be the missing link between clients and tour guides.

Soonie Wattanahongsiri  
Founder  
Blackrice Travel

ing personalised souvenirs – think wicker placemats and fans embroidered with their names.

In an era where competition is intense and the travel market rife with OTAs, Soonie firmly believes there remains a clear market demand for bespoke travel agents like her.

Her extensive product knowledge and operations experience accumulated dur-

ing her years with the region's leading DMCs give her access to a ready pool of industry friends and business contacts eager to seek out her expertise, as well as a curated network of freelance guides whom she relies on to run tours.

Small is beautiful for this one-person agency, as Soonie handles every aspect of the trip, from tour conception to execution, enabling her to communicate clients' exact travel style and requests to tour guides on the ground without losing the essence along the way – which is not uncommon for bigger outfits as a client passes through several hands.

"I want to be the missing link between clients and tour guides," the travel guru stressed.

Blackrice Travel has its sights set on targeting families and LGBT, segments where highly personalised service and recommendations for travel programmes are sought after.

And with experiential, authentic travel wave on the rise, food tourism is a tantalising focus sector in Soonie's eyes.

"Food tourism has become a big thing. Visitors often come with requests wanting to try certain food," she shared.

Her formidable knowledge of the local dining scene and food culture has already won her a spot on the Tourism Authority of Thailand's upcoming *Hello Taste* campaign, where Blackrice Travel is among the operators picked to design food-themed itineraries showcasing the Thai culinary scene.

- Xinyi Liang-Pholensa

NEW HOTELS

Waldorf Astoria Bangkok

The highly anticipated Waldorf Astoria Bangkok, a first for South-east Asia, finally opened its doors on August 30. Rising above the upscale Ratchadamri area in the shape of a magnolia flower, the hotel's 171 rooms and suites (from levels six to 16) are the brainchild of Hong Kong architect Andre Fu. Amenities include a trio of distinctively curated dining outlets at the topmost levels 55 to 57, a wellness spa, an outdoor swimming pool and meeting spaces.

Bangkok Marriott Hotel The Surawongse

Located on Surawong Road, Bangkok Marriott Hotel The Surawongse comprises 197 guestrooms and 106 deluxe suites across 32 storeys. Facilities include four dining options, the Quan Spa, fitness centre, as well as an outdoor infinity pool. The property's 1,555m<sup>2</sup> of versatile event space is spread



Waldorf Astoria Bangkok

across two ballrooms, nine meeting rooms, a colonial-style courtyard and an outdoor garden.

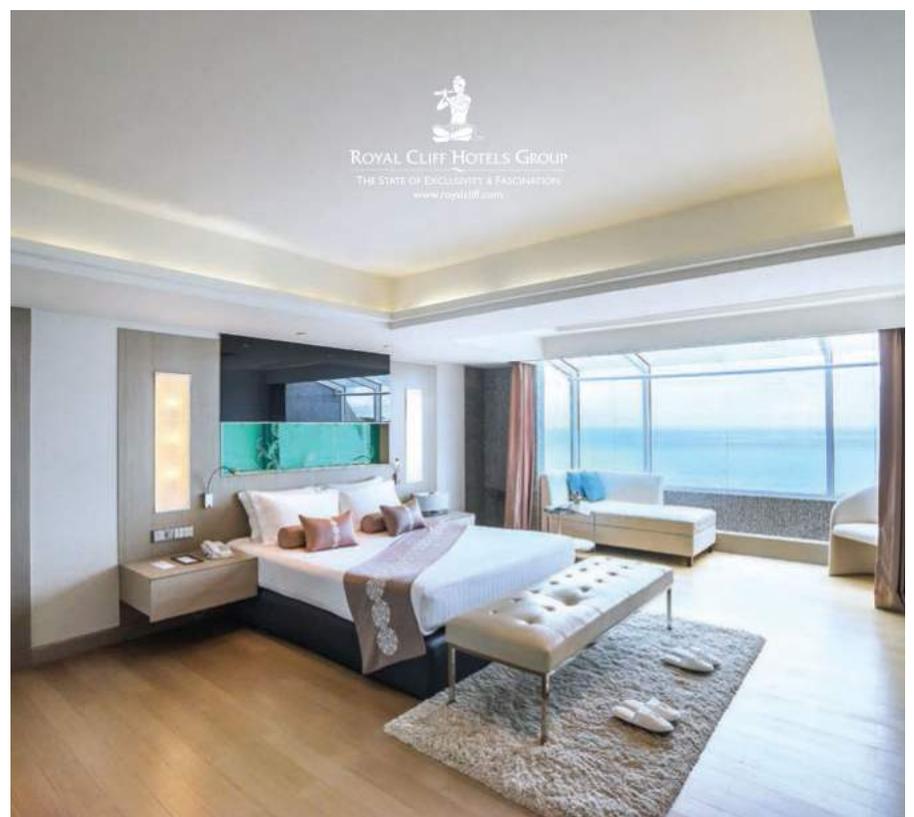
akya TAS Sukhumvit Bangkok

To avoid single-use plastic in its rooms and F&B outlets, guests at this 50-key hotel are given stainless steel water bottles on arrival, which they can refill throughout their stay using dispensers on every floor. In addition, bathroom amenities are presented in locally manufactured celadon pottery containers, bio-degradable bin bags are used in all rooms and shopping bags are available to encourage guests to refuse plastic bags when out shopping.



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# CONNECT

## Attention grabbers

### TESTIMONIALS

TTG Asia Media publisher Michael Chow (right) has stepped into an advisory role as publisher emeritus following 30 years of service with the company. His announcement on July 31 garnered much attention from industry leaders, many of whom wrote in to recognise the positive contributions, valuable friendship and wonderful memories made during Michael's decades-long contribution to TTG:

**Kent Zhu**  
President, *Genting Cruise Lines*

Many congratulations to you on the fantastic achievements of TTG under your 30 years' leadership. I have been fortunate enough to have your personal support in my various assignments and established our friendship since we got to know each other in the early 90's.



**Melissa Ow**  
Acting chief, *Singapore Tourism Board*

Congratulations to you on a long and successful career in travel media. You have played a significant role in bearing witness to so many momentous milestones in the evolution of this sector. I thank you for the support that TTG has rendered to the growth of tourism in Singapore and to the work of the Singapore Tourism Board over the past 30 years.

**Supatra Chirathivat**  
Senior vice president, *development, Centara Hotels & Resorts*

Time really flies! Just realised that we have known each other for 30 years already! Wishing you all the best in your retirement, and soon I will follow. Please do keep in touch, as always. Our friendship will, of course, remain forever. All the best to you and your family.

**Patrick Fiat**  
General manager, *Royal Plaza on Scotts*

You are so much part of TTG, Michael, Darren, Raini, the three mousqueteers! TTG will never be the same. As well, I am very happy to for you. A new journey is starting. Wishing you all the best. Friendship as always!

**Aloysius Lee**  
Former CEO, *South Beach Hotel Development*

You should be proud of your achievements and I am also proud to have a friend like you. Your publication enlightens us and you warm us with your friendship.

**Chan Kar Heng**  
CEO, *Chan Brothers*

Well done, Michael! You are the envy of many. Not only did you have a successful and distinguished career, you are also a popular character that everyone likes to befriend. Congratulations! All the best going forward!

### MOST COMMENTED

#### Is Thailand's tourism ready to tackle crime and safety?

In the wake of the Phuket boat tragedy, Thailand says it is ready to undertake "a sweeping overhaul of all the country's safety and security measures relevant to the travel and tourism industry", and hopes to reduce threats to tourists including crime.



Above: The recent Phuket boat capsizes has put Thailand's safety record under spotlight

**Walter Breymann:** Boats carrying passengers should also be equipped with GPS location device, state-of-the-art life vests (those which keep your head above the water) for all passengers, as well as proper insurance. Boat operators should attend and pass a comprehensive instruction in boat safety. I have not heard or read that anything of the above is mandatory or even being suggested by the local authorities.

**Lawrence Westfall:** The Thai government is doing nothing to fix the problems. This is just a show to woo back the Chinese tourists.

**Marie P:** Learn from mistakes and improve travel security because it will benefit Thailand's travel industry in the long run.

**David Bankes-Milner:** Thailand is one of the most beautiful countries in the world but in the chase for the fast buck, there is minimal control of anything that harms the environment together with any

true concern about safety. If the Tourism Authority of Thailand and Association of Thai Travel Agents spend more time ensuring that safety and environment regulations were adhered to as opposed to going on roadshows, there might be less unfortunate events that they would have to react to, together with a better chance of maintaining the beauty of Thailand.

The adage of "Where there's a will, there's a way", sadly, seems to be something that the Thai government and its adjuncts only pay lip-service to. It is so tragic.

#### Airbnb pushes into Sri Lanka's Experiences scene with tourism board

Potentially paving the way for regulation in the non-hotel accommodation space in Sri Lanka, Airbnb and the state-owned Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority have announced a strategic partnership to launch Airbnb Experiences in the country.

**Hans Perlee:** Airbnb, so bad (sic). Sri Lanka, please don't start with that.

### WE LIKE

#### Travel trade in solidarity for Lombok recovery

Many industry players in the region were galvanised into action to offer assistance for communities affected by the recent string of devastating earthquakes in Lombok.

Destination Asia raised over US\$11,673 in funds, enabling the DMC and its partner TUGU Hotels to purchase portable generators (below) and water tanks, among others, for local communities in need.

Having raised over US\$27,000, Mövenpick Resort & Spa Jimbaran Bali and owners donated items including rice, instant noodles, blankets, baby essentials and medical equipment to the worst-hit areas in Lombok. The group also mobilised medical personnel from Dr Romy Associates.

Meanwhile, Infinity Holidays and Buffalo Tours joined forces to build shelters for at-risk locals affected by the Lombok quakes.



Generators from Destination Asia

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### Travel Hall of Fame

Since 2002, TTG Asia Media has honoured luminaries that have won the prestigious TTG Travel Award for at least 10 consecutive times for the same award title in the Travel Hall of Fame.

At present, these exceptional organisations and their years of induction are:

- Singapore Airlines (2002)
- Singapore Changi Airport (2002)
- Hertz Asia Pacific (2005)
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- Sabre Travel Network Asia-Pacific (2009)
- SilkAir (2010)
- Lotte Tour (2011)
- Hong Kong International Airport (2013)
- Raffles Hotel Singapore (2013)
- Regal Airport Hotel (2015)
- Banyan Tree Spa (2015)
- Qatar Airways (2016)
- Thai Airways International Public Company Limited (2016)
- Thailand Convention & Exhibition Bureau (2016)

TTG Asia Media is pleased to announce that it has set up a virtual TTG Travel Hall of Fame (www.ttgtravelfhof.com), which will enable us to showcase the accolades, artefacts and memorabilia of the region's most exceptional travel organisations in a far more effective way and to a global audience.



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# THE TECHNOLOGY EXPERIENCE

The article The Technology Experience in TTGmice June 2017 by Karen Yue has been awarded a PATA Gold Award 2018 in Travel Journalism - Business Article category.



# Business Meetings, More Fun in the Philippines

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With Palawan, Boracay and Cebu topping Conde Nast's Best Islands in the World and Travel + Leisure Magazine's The World's Top 10 Islands 2017, there is no doubt the Philippines embodies everyone's dream of a tropical paradise.

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## MICE on the Rise

As more five-star properties, world-class entertainment centers and convention venues are built in strategic locations all over the country, the Philippines' MICE sector continues its exponential growth.

In 2017, nine MICE properties were launched in Manila, Palawan and Boracay. This year, eight MICE venues are scheduled to open its doors in the country; along with 3,400 hotel rooms, significantly increasing the number of new accommodations in hospitality by more than double compared to the previous year.

## Uniquely Filipino

Set apart from the rest of the nations in its region, the Philippines is a breath of fresh air when travelling to Southeast Asia. Colonized by Spain for 350 years and later by America for almost 50 years, the Western culture has ingrained itself in the lives of the Filipinos, providing visitors a unique blend of East and West with the distinctly Filipino hospitality.

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Learn more about MICE in the Philippines. Visit [tpb.gov.ph](http://tpb.gov.ph).

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