

## Soaring airfares hit demand

Indonesia's tourism sector buckles up for continued turbulence as domestic airfares remain high, hurting demand for air travel within the archipelagic country

## Rising star of Indian Ocean

Not content to be viewed as a sybaritic playground for Europeans, its traditional feeder market, Mauritius now wants to attract more Asian visitors to its shores

## Building lasting heritage

YTL Hotels' executive director Mark Yeoh Seok Kah tells why sustainability and conservation ethos are a natural fit for the firm



PPS 1885/02/2017 (025627)

# TTG 15G A S I A

No. 1769/August 2019

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# A thriving & contested marketplace

The symbiotic yet tenuous relationship that OTAs have with airlines and hotels is now shaping up in the hot emerging sector of in-destination experiences.

What does the future hold in this newfound alliance between tour operators and OTAs?

By **Xinyi Liang-Pholsena**



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# The art of not planning

## Is there a price to spontaneity in travel?



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Once upon a time, travelling involved planning, lots of it. From visiting your local travel agency to enquire about specific packages to checking the newsletters classifieds for promotions, travel was largely a premeditated experience.

But now, it appears, we are turning our back on premeditated travelling, as mobile technology makes it possible for travellers to book flights, rooms and trips at the last minute, as information – and increasingly bookings – are readily available on the go. More and more people fancy themselves as ‘spontaneous’ travellers.

Take our recent road trip as a family of four, for example. My husband and I did not do much planning for our 4D3N trip across the central Thai provinces of Suphanburi, Singburi and Anghthong, besides booking the hotels on Agoda a week prior to our trip. We looked up a few points of interest and marked them as ‘want to go’ places on Google Maps, but beyond that we did not have a firm itinerary even as we rolled out of the driveway.

Having a mobile navigation app made it possible for us to improvise our trip on the go. For instance, we arrived at Talat Nam Saphan Khong in Suphanburi on a Friday, only to discover that the floating market – which currently attracts hordes of Thai tourists with its giant fish-cage landmark – was closed on a weekday. What did we do next? We simply looked up the ‘near me’ feature on Google Maps and found a rustic but cute cafe nearby.

This reliance on Google Maps on sug-

gestions on where to go, what to do and where to eat was repeated many times over the subsequent days of my trip.

In the age of last-minute and increasingly in-destination mobile bookings, it is hence critical that destinations, attractions or any tourism-related businesses have a Google My Business listing, which will enable a business to appear when a user searches for related tours and activities in his/her area, together with information about a business’ location, hours of operation, popular times and photos, etc.

Why does this matter? Because Google has entered the hot emerging tours and activities space to enable operators to accept bookings and payments through Reserve with Google, and has recently announced a revamp of its Trips page. Eventually, Google Trips, Google Search and Google Maps are expected to function seamlessly together to simplify travel planning from start to finish.

In the on-demand world we live in today, the increased access to information – clearly accelerated by mobile – appears to encourage greater spontaneity in travel as planning and decisions can be made on the fly. Or does it?

If Google gets any more powerful than it is now (and signs are already pointing to that), the sheer amount of data the tech goliath has on users can easily influence the way travellers seek out information and plan their trips, as marketers look to influence travellers along their purchase journey. When that happens, do we discover places, or do places discover us?



**If Google gets any more powerful than it is now, the sheer amount of data the tech goliath has on users can easily influence the way travellers seek out information and plan their trips.**

### 05 A thriving and contested marketplace

OTAs are now shaping up to be a dominant force in the tours and activities sector. What does this mean for tour operators?

### 06 Soaring airfares, sinking demand

Indonesia’s tourism sector buckles up for continued turbulence as domestic airfares remain high and hurt demand for air travel

### 08 Building lasting heritage

YTL Hotels’ executive director Mark Yeoh Seok Kah says sustainability and business are a natural fit for the company

### 10 Keeping it fresh

It’s a game of constant rejuvenation and innovation for Asia’s integrated resorts. A look at the latest upcoming attractions



16

### 12 Taking responsibility

Industry players are realising that responsible tourism is as much about the environment as the socio-economic components

### 16 Indian Ocean’s rising star

As a favoured playground for Europeans, Mauritius now wants to lure Asian visitors with its fusion of culture, nature and history

### 21 Cultural awakening

A slew of revitalised and new cultural projects is stoking Hong Kong’s ambitions of becoming a global cultural destination

### 25 Venturing farther afield

South Korea’s Gyeonggi and Gyeongsangnam provinces stepping up offerings and connections with nearby gateway cities

### 26 Connect

Most read stories, and news that caught our eye this month



10

## Coming Up

SEPTEMBER 2019

**Malaysia** The Eastern Malaysia state of Sarawak has launched a charm offensive to draw tourists to discover its natural wonders and cultural riches

**Technology** A look at the evolving role of travel agents and planners amid changes in technology distribution

**Analysis** Cambodia’s aggressive pursuit of the Chinese tourist market has led to questions about the impact on its overall tourism landscape



Iban people perform a traditional dance at the Sarawak Cultural Village



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**BPA** TTG Asia is a product by TTG Travel Trade Publishing, a business group of TTG Asia Media. It is mailed free on written request to readers who meet predetermined criteria. Paid subscriptions are available to those who do not meet the criteria. Annual airmail subscriptions are US\$180 to Asia and US\$199 elsewhere. Cover price US\$5.  
 MCI (P) 026/09/2019 • PPS 1885/02/2017(025627)

Printed by Times Printers Pte Ltd  
 16 Tuas Avenue 5, Singapore 639340

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It's a booming time for the travel experiences market. Not only have the tours, activities and attractions sector attracted global leaders in online bookings like Expedia, Booking.com and TripAdvisor Experiences into the fray, recent entrants such as Klook, Traveloka and Airbnb Experiences are also bringing rapidly changing distribution dynamics to tour operators and suppliers in the region.

As the fourth largest tourism sector in the region after airlines, hotels and rail, gross bookings for tours and activities in Asia-Pacific is expected to reach US\$45 billion in 2019.

In Asia-Pacific, the tours and activities sector has been "significantly growing faster" than other regions, and is expected to post an average of seven per cent in the 2017-2022 period, versus four per cent in the US and three per cent in Europe for the same five-year period, according to Douglas Quinby, co-founder and CEO of Arival at its inaugural Asia conference in Bangkok in June.

Even the very staging of the Arival conference in Bangkok was itself testimonial to the coming of age of the tours and activities sector, a common refrain expressed by trade players at the event.

#### Unlocking new opportunities, revenue stream

As the tours, activities and attractions sector heats up, OTAs are fast emerging as key sales channel for many tour operators, particularly in Asia where a vast majority of traditional sellers and resellers are just beginning to distribute online.

BeMyGuest's co-founder and CEO Blanca Menchaca said: "We are just seeing the tip of the iceberg when it comes to online distribution. In Asia, a majority of tour operators are just starting to sell online, so a lot of activities are not even online yet."

This growing influence of OTAs is readily acknowledged by many tours, activity and attractions operators.

For Aquaria KLCC, executive director Daryl Foong sees a natural partnership for the oceanarium with OTAs, whose extensive marketing reach help to bring in bookings.

"We're a walk-through experience, therefore we want an OTA. I give them margins and they do marketing for us... OTAs bring a wide range of consumers to my aquarium," he said.

Meanwhile, a partnership with OTA often translates to better and effective outreach to targeted markets than an SEO campaign on Google, particularly for smaller tour outfits with limited funds for digital marketing investment.

Hidden Secret Tours' owner and co-founder Fiona Sweetman sees value in OTAs as a marketing platform. While the Melbourne-based boutique tour operator still relies on traditional agents to market its tours through their brochures, she said it's a "conscious decision" to pick TripAdvisor Experiences as an online distribution channel.

It's a similar sentiment shared by CityWonders' business development director Eduard Marti. He said: "With shorter booking window for activities and more travellers even booking in destination, it's important to work with OTAs as they have the funds to be listed among the top

# A thriving & contested marketplace



The symbiotic and tenuous relationship that OTAs have with airlines and hotels is now shaping up in the hot emerging sector of in-destination experiences. What does the future hold in this newfound alliance between tour operators and OTAs? By **Xinyi Liang-Pholsena**

few listings on Google."

With last-minute bookings becoming popular, OTAs actually provide "a way to maximise group sizes" and help fill up last few seats of a tour, said Grasshopper Adventures, CEO Adam Platt-Hepworth.

DMCs, many of which are making a push to become tech driven, are starting to explore OTAs as a new distribution channel too.

Nicola Scaramuzzino, Thailand country manager for Panorama Destination, views activities OTAs as "an extra distribution platform" and "new potential area", coming critical at a time when DMCs recognise the need to evolve with changing times and get a better handle on digital distribution.

Likewise, Go Vacation Thailand's director of business development Tobias Fischer also expressed an interest in online activities marketplaces.

He said: "Online tours platforms are definitely an interesting channel we're exploring. We see it as a B2B2C channel where we can control our selling rates, although hotels may not like it if we out contract rates online."

#### With wider access comes hefty commissions

As much as OTAs are driving new opportunities in the in-destination industry, challenges and issues like rampant discounting and hefty commissions (typically 20 per cent or higher) are among key concerns voiced out by sectoral players.

At present, Wahyu Mandiri Tour Bali's director of sales Romida Marbun views the typical 20-25 per cent commission rates charged by OTAs

as a "fair" treatment, in return for the "good volume" of bookings received through such online marketplaces than through the DMC's own website. "If you want the European market, you go to Expedia; for Asian markets you go to Klook, Kkday and Ctrip," she added.

On the other hand, Stephane Planchais, CEO and founder of Original Food Tours, has set a maximum commission fee he's willing to pay activities OTAs, and thinks the 30 per cent rate applied by some as "ridiculous".

With commission rates unlikely to go south anytime soon, Planchais foresees activities OTAs likely to gain more clout and push for increased rates in return for higher placements for tour operators.

But as OTAs scale up and become more competitive marketplaces, a challenge then is also finding the right products to sell on such platforms, shared Asian Trails' group director marketing and ecommerce Niels Steeman.

"A challenge lies in whether products and experiences are not already loaded and selling (on these sites). The products a DMC wants to sell are often already displayed on these OTA channels, sometimes in abundance," he remarked.

"It goes back then to finding niche products and novelty items that are not featured on these OTAs. This too depends heavily on the targeted market, as some products may not (yet) trigger booking tendencies because of the unfamiliarity of these new products."

CityWonder.com's Marti thinks it's possible that suppliers would soon have to work their listings just like on Google. "We used to be in the top few listings but that could change as more products and operators get listed, although for the moment I need OTAs and I'm happy with our partnership," he expressed.

#### Striking the right balance

As Asia's distribution landscape becomes more dynamic and complex, it's inevitable that travel operators have to develop strategies to manage their partnerships with OTAs, whose market share is still small. But it's changing fast as OTAs look to increase their share of the pie.

Ultimately, the relationship with OTAs is about "finding a balance", said Grasshopper Adventures' Platt-Hepworth, emphasising on the need for tour operators to ensure a healthy portion of direct bookings.

Backing this view is Original Food Tours' Planchais, who stressed the need to diversify distribution channels, as well as geographic and demographic markets to safeguard his business.

In the longer run, however, Planchais does not see OTAs a viable platform to build up a brand presence. Some OTAs have approached him to white-label tours from his boutique outfit, but he has turned down such requests. "We don't offer white-label as well, as customers have to sign liability. We're here to build the brand," he remarked.

Also, Planchais thinks it's necessary and prudent for tour operators to develop their own reservations technology systems and APIs to drive direct bookings – "which still make the most money" – in order to own their own data than relying on business insights from OTAs or external channel management sites.

Perhaps tours, activities and attractions players don't have to look too far on how to handle their relationships with OTAs. The symbiotic yet tenuous relationships that hotels have with OTAs are reminders of how in-destination players should approach and manage their relationship with OTAs.

Meanwhile, Steeman firmly believes that the DMC remains and can become a strong player in the OTA segment, simply because of its "vertical integration of services to run and operate tours and activities".

He remarked: "We're still tailoring most of our requests to the specific wishes of our customers. We haven't seen any major disruptor yet that offers the dynamics online to do this in Asia. The B2B customer demands a partner that can handle multi-day itineraries, cross-country travel options, rate negotiations where needed and so forth," he said.

Travel consumers are currently buying day trips or experiences lasting a few hours on OTAs. Bringing multi-day tours online could very well be the "next phrase but we're still a few years out", Menchaca remarked.

What is clear is that Asia's tours and activities marketplace is now heating up, and disruption is not far off. Watch this space.

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– Niels Steeman, group director marketing and ecommerce, Asian Trails





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Local travel businesses in Indonesia are suffering from airfare hikes (pictured: Ngurah Rai International Airport in Denpasar, Bali)

# Soaring airfares, sinking demand

Indonesia's tourism sector buckles up for continued turbulence as domestic airfares remain high, hurting demand for air travel within the country. By **Mimi Hudoyo**

**T**ravellers are grappling with high airfares in Indonesia, as the duopolistic market structure of the country's aviation sector – dominated by national flag carrier Garuda Indonesia and budget airline Lion Air – appears to keep domestic air ticket prices punitively high.

The domestic travel sector has borne the brunt of higher ticket prices, with domestic air traffic plunging 21.3 per cent between January and May 2019 from the same period last year, Statistics Indonesia showed.

Businesses are hit hard as the sky-high domestic airfares cut across travel sectors, with hotels reporting a drop in occupancy, and the home souvenir industry seeing lower revenues as travellers limit their check-in baggage.

Indonesia Hotels & Restaurants Association has already registered a 20-40 per cent drop in hotel occupancy for 1Q2019, which translates into “a decline in rooms and F&B revenue”, chairman Haryadi Sukamdani said.

Indonesian sellers that TTG Asia spoke with at the recent Bali and Beyond Travel Fair in June also had similar grouses.

Martinus Wawanda, general manager of boutique dive resort Cocotinos Manado, said: “The airfare between Manado and Bali used to be around Rp1.6 million (US\$114), including 20kg baggage. Today, it is Rp2.4 million, including 15kg baggage.”

“With limited direct international flights to Manado, we rely on arrivals from other parts of Indonesia, such

as Bali, Jakarta or Makassar. As such, we have lost around 40 per cent of business this year,” she lamented.

Surging domestic airfares have also affected some inbound operators offering Indonesia round-trips.

“Our European clients are adventurers who travel to remote places like Kalimantan and Sulawesi, so we use many domestic flights to get from one point to another,” said Nawasier Tralala, travel consultant at Classic Tours, which sells tour packages and air tickets separately.

“Out of 12 bookings we have received, eight have cancelled or postponed because they needed to pay extra cost for their domestic flights and baggage fee – many of the secondary and third cities in the country are served by the Lion Air Group,” he said.

While Aneka Kartika Tours & Travel Services Surabaya has yet to experience any cancellations, the company had to fork out the balance for airfares as air tickets are incorporated into its tour packages.

Illustrating the impact, Adjie Wahjono, operation manager, said: “We have a confirmed booking from a 10-member French group for a Java-Sulawesi-Bali trip. Last year, when we calculated the trip for Surabaya (East Java)-Makassar (South Sulawesi) by Citilink, it was around Rp700,000. Now it costs Rp1.2 million.

“Baggage is free on Citilink, but from Palopo (South Sulawesi) to Bali, they can only fly Wings Air (an LCC under Lion Air Group), which now charges a luggage fee of Rp20,000 per kg. Just for the bag-

gage, we need to cover four million rupiah, on top of the balance of the ticket price – and that is only one sector,” he added.

Furthermore, with Garuda recently cutting flights in secondary cities like Maumere and Ende (East Nusa Tenggara) from Denpasar, Adjie said the travel company had no choice but to change the flights to Wings Air, incurring additional baggage fees – previously there was no baggage charge with the Garuda Group.

For Sedona Holidays Medan, whose clients mostly arrive in Medan on direct flights and travel within North Sumatra, managing director Willy Sihombing said that his inbound business into Indonesia was not as badly hit as the domestic sector.

“But for some clients who combine with other destinations in the country, they opt to back-track to Singapore or Kuala Lumpur with non-Indonesian carriers and then onwards to, say, Jakarta, Bali or Yogyakarta, rather than flying direct from Medan, because it is cheaper that way,” Willy said.

Hasiyanna Ashadi, chairman of ASITA (Association of the Indonesian Tours and Travel Agencies) Jakarta Chapter, said: “All this (turmoil) would not have happened if Garuda had not followed the LCCs in dropping rates in the first place. I had warned Garuda's management five

“All this (turmoil) would not have happened if Garuda had not followed the LCCs in dropping rates in the first place... as a premium carrier, the airline should maintain its premium pricing instead of joining the price wars among the LCCs.”

– Hasiyanna Ashadi, chairman of ASITA Jakarta Chapter



years ago that as a premium carrier, the airline should maintain its premium pricing instead of joining the price wars among the LCCs.”

The Indonesian government has attempted to rein in high airfares through a number of measures, including a proposal to allow foreign airlines to operate domestic routes.

On its part, the Ministry of Transportation (MOT) has reduced the airfare ceiling by 11 to 15 per cent.

Meanwhile, airlines and authorities have since July 11 started introducing discounted fares of up to 50 per cent off the ceiling price for flights departing between 10.00 and 14.00 on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. The price excludes taxes and other service charges.

Susiwijono, secretary of the Coordinating Ministry for Economic Affairs, said the discounted fares were made viable with cost-sharing among the airlines, airport authorities and fuel suppliers.

However, the travel trade still deems those efforts insufficient and seeks a better pricing model.

Nunung Rusmiati, chairman, ASITA, said: “Airlines should reopen the subclasses. Even if they only have a limited-time promotion with few seats, it will help clients psychologically. But with a high, single Y class price now, travellers back off.”

It's unlikely the price ceiling can be lowered further, said Gede Pasek Suardika, MOT's expert staff on economic, territorial and partnership affairs. Speaking at the recent ASITA National Dialogue, he said: “Reducing the ceiling price by 11 to 15 per cent is the maximum. Otherwise, it will violate the minimum safety standard. Putting cheap prices over safety isn't an option – the stakes are too high.”

He added that during the meetings to discuss airfares with stakeholders, some airlines revealed that they were facing due dates for leasing payments.

“We must also realise that the Indonesian airlines are performing ‘national duties’ to support remote places in the country. Some airlines have said they were ready to drop the price if they ground their propeller fleet (which means flying to remote areas will cease),” Gede said.

While cheap domestic airfares had previously attracted hordes of domestic travellers to favour air over land and sea travel, the airfare hike has conversely prompted many to reconsider traditional modes of transport again, especially as Java and Sumatra now boast improved road connections with new toll roads.

State-owned shipping company Pelni has been improving its intra-island passenger and cruise ships, while state railway company Kereta Api Indonesia has introduced luxury sleeper cars on its Java routes.

“Buses, ships and trains have reported increasing businesses since the airfare hikes,” said Gede.

It is, however, unlikely that the travelling public would see airfares return to the level they enjoyed earlier as higher air ticket prices seem to have become the new norm.

Unfortunately, this airfare surge also comes at a time when Indonesia's fast-growing tourism industry is already facing various headwinds such as the recent string of natural disasters in 2017 and 2018.

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# Building lasting heritage

Under his leadership, YTL Corporation's hotels and resorts division has grown beyond its Malaysia base to across Asia and the UK. Executive director of YTL Hotels, Mark Yeoh Seok Kah, tells **S Puvaneswary** why sustainability and conservation ethos remain a natural fit for the company as the family corporation's hospitality arm scales up

## Sustainability is a key theme at YTL Corporation. How is this ethos translated to your hotel projects?

We started sustainability in the 1980s before it became fashionable. The green story is something we are really passionate about and it is part of our DNA. As the resorts operate in the proximity of protected areas or primary forests, and some of the resorts' attractions also rely on the (health of) the ecosystems, extra care has been taken to assess and monitor any habitat changes and trends.

We also strongly encourage our guests to participate in activities with an environmental focus. We had a resident naturalist in Pangkor Laut Resort to show guests the nature and the two-million-year-old jungle on the island. Later, when we opened Gaya Island Resort in Sabah in 2012, we employed a marine biologist and resident naturalist. At Tanjong Jara Resort, we have a turtle hatchery.

## YTL has preserved the heritage of luxury properties took on, from The Majestic Hotel Kuala Lumpur, The Majestic Malacca and Tanjong Jara Resort, to the latest Monkey Island Estate. What drives your passion for heritage conservation?

I like history. Classic properties have its own unique DNAs which we are keen to preserve, while at the same time, modernise the facilities to provide comfort for today's guests. The Majestic Hotel Kuala Lumpur was once the Hotel Majestic, and later housed the National Art Gallery. I told then minister of culture, arts and tourism, Sabbaruddin Chik, that Kuala Lumpur did not have a classic hotel and he brought up the idea of converting the building into a hotel, which I thought was a brilliant idea.

After we took over the management and ownership of the Tanjong Jara Resort in Terengganu, we renovated it and enhanced its Malay cultural heritage. Its ethos and experiences are centred around the tagline "Unmistakably Malay" because that was what Terengganu was at the time. We are proud that it was awarded the

Aga Khan award for architecture.

Monkey Island Estate, Bray-on-Thames (in the UK), which has a rich history dating back centuries, was recently relaunched after we did an extensive restoration to the Grade I listed building. The Monkey Room is particularly special, with its ceilings slathered in *singerie*, depictions of monkeys punting, fishing and hunting by French specialist, Andie de Clermont.

The most satisfying thing to me is when customers love our award-winning properties. This is the success of YTL Hotels.

## How do you intend to grow business through the sustainability investments made?

It is about giving guests a complete experience. I think our guests like to be in an environment where they can also participate in our conservation efforts.

At the turtle hatchery in Tanjong Jara for example, guests can adopt nests. Through participation, people feel they are socially responsible and they have played a part in conserving nature, and this trend is growing. To grow the business, we have to tell the story of what we do and how guests can also be part of these efforts.

## How do you see the hotel industry evolving?

The hotel business is a bit like the fashion business – you have to be relevant and understand the trends and your customers. In the 1980s, our clientele in Pangkor Laut Resort was predominantly western. As I had the benefit of a western education, I was able to understand their needs and how to satisfy them. For

westerners, living in a wooden house is exotic to them because they had lost the history of living in a wooden house for the last 300 years.

I always tell my team, at the end of the day, we are purveyors of peoples' dreams and fantasies.

## Do you see YTL going into other categories of hotels as the group is currently focused on the luxury and business class segments?

Yes, we are always interested in good investments and getting into new segments where we can add value, especially if it fits into our demographic profiling of the segment of the market and investment philosophy. If there is a demand from millennials, then we would probably do a hotel for millennials.

The reason why we are in hotels is because we always believe we can build and design buildings 30 per

cent cheaper, thus we have a 30 per cent head start over our competitors.

## In Malaysia, how many YTL properties are there now and what kind of new hotel investments are you looking at?

We have 36 properties in 10 countries, and in Malaysia, we have 12 properties. We are looking at developing an Edition in Kuala Lumpur, an upmarket lifestyle hotel by Marriott International which will be the first in Malaysia. It will be located within Kuala Lumpur's Golden Triangle, close to the Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre. We are also looking at having a second JW Marriott property in Kuala Lumpur and converting an office building to a hotel near Petaling Street. All these are currently in the planning stages.

## As the second-generation chief of a family business, what's different about your leadership?

There is not much difference between my leadership and that of my late father, Yeoh Tiong Lay. Leadership is about getting your fellow co-workers or whomever is with you to be in one complete alignment. It is the ability to get people to go in the direction you want them to. Leadership is also about making decisions, and engaging, motivating and educating the younger generation. This was what I learnt from my father. Young people, then and now, have to buy into the vision and the challenge; and if they are, they become goal-driven.

A little bit of history – my father encouraged me to go into the family business and start the hotel arm of the business. This was a new sector for us three decades ago. I learnt leadership from my father from my early childhood days when I used to follow him on site visits. At the time, we were strong in the construction industry.

## What do you want to achieve next through your job?

I'd love to develop the next generation of employees. YTL Corporation has a hospitality school called YTL International College of Hotel Management, which has close to 1,000 students. We provide diploma and degree courses that are recognised. I spend a lot of time with our management developing talent development programmes for our trainees. Our hotel school has international standards, and I am so confident about the programmes that I guarantee every graduate a job within YTL Hotels.

I always like to tell the younger generation my story. At seven years old, I was walking barefoot in Kuala Selangor. Now, we are global leaders. The moral of the story is that you can be whatever you want to be provided you work hard.



**The hotel business is a bit like the fashion business – you have to be relevant and understand the trends and your customers... I always tell my team, at the end of the day, we are purveyors of people's dreams and fantasies.**



## 10 NEED TO KNOW'S ABOUT MARK YEOH SEOK KAH

■ **Who's in your family?** I have a daughter, aged 18, and my wife is a partner in a law firm

■ **What are you passionate about?** I am passionate about food and cultural experiences. I like to embrace the local culture wherever I am

■ **Your ideal vacation** I like to go on sailing holidays where I can completely switch off

■ **How do you book your leisure trips?** There is an in-house travel agent at YTL Corporation who does my bookings

■ **What are you reading right now?** Newspapers and journals

■ **Who do you look up to and why?** My late father for all the noble values he stood for

■ **What is your favourite food?** *Nasi lemak*

■ **What is important to you?** Integrity and hard work

■ **What is your leadership style?** Leading from the front

■ **The best advice you have been given?** My father once told me a bad decision is better than no decision, so one has to be decisive

# Keeping it fresh

It's a game of constant rejuvenation and innovation for Asia's integrated resorts (IR). Here, we take a look at the latest attractions coming up at existing as well as upcoming IRs in the region



From left: Artist's impression of the evolution & extinction zone at Singapore Oceanarium, part of Resorts World Sentosa; a rendering of the upcoming Londoner Hotel at Sands Resorts Macao

## SINGAPORE

By Pamela Chow

### Resorts World Sentosa

Resorts World Sentosa (RWS) has unveiled major transformation plans touted to “create a new wave of tourism growth for the next decade”.

With a total development investment of S\$4.5 billion (US\$3.3 billion), RWS 2.0 will see an increase in gross floor area of about 50 per cent. The added 164,000m<sup>2</sup> will be largely achieved through intensification of existing land, and new experiences will be delivered in phases from 2020. Completion is projected for 2025.

Slated to open end-2020 will be a new pirate-themed “adventure dining playhouse”, which will replace the Resorts World Theatre. Next up will be a public seafront attraction with free evening light shows, as well as expansions of Universal Studios Singapore (USS) and S.E.A. Aquarium.

With the expansion, USS will feature two new sections – Minion Park and Super Nintendo World – filled with family-friendly attractions, themed shops and restaurants.

Meanwhile, S.E.A. Aquarium's size will more than triple as it gets rebranded as the proposed Singapore Oceanarium. The new centre will showcase marine life; additional exhibits of prehistoric marine life and deep-sea creatures; and tell a story of evolution, exploration and conservation.

Along with the expansion of hotels in the Central Zone, RWS 2.0 will also introduce a new waterfront lifestyle complex complete with two new hotels which will add about 1,100 more rooms to RWS.

Capping off the redevelopment are plans to introduce a new driverless transport system that provides connectivity between the mainland and Sentosa.

Tan Hee Teck, CEO of RWS, said: “RWS will form an integral part of the fu-

ture Greater Southern Waterfront and become a centrepiece of the transformative journey to enliven the southern corridor.”

### Marina Bay Sands

Marina Bay Sands (MBS) will be investing S\$4.5 billion to build a fourth tower, designed by the property's original architect Moshe Safdie.

The new tower will be built on 3.2ha of land beside the current resort, and will feature a suites-only luxury hotel with some 1,000 keys, a sky roof with a swimming pool, signature restaurant, ballrooms, exhibition halls and F&B offerings.

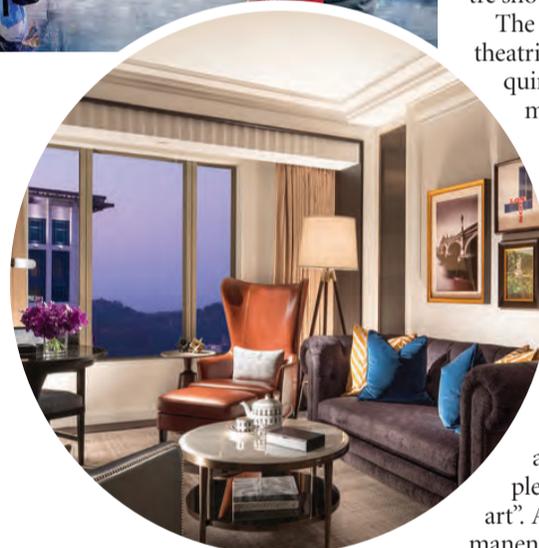
Also part of the plans is a 15,000-seat indoor entertainment arena centrepiece, “with leading design and cutting-edge technology (to) attract top entertainers from Asia and around the world”, announced the owner of MBS, Las Vegas Sands. A timeline for completion has not been set at press time.

Mike Lee, vice president of sales, MBS, shared: “Today's tourism landscape requires hospitality players to be even more nimble-footed and adaptable than ever. MBS is keenly aware of the evolving landscape and demands (of visitors), and has always been focused in innovating and planning for the future.”

Aside from the new hotel tower setting “a new standard of luxury in South-east Asia”, Lee also expressed that dining expectations have also intensified, as guests “now want to be entertained while they dine, and be simulated by visual and aural senses”.

“Think DJs taking centre stage in a restaurant, theatrical show kitchens and a playlist that sets the mood of a venue and the ensuing conversations of its guests,” he described.

This has inspired MBS to continue looking out for opportunities to “morph entertainment and food”, evident from their partnership with Tao Group to open



cocktail lounge Avenue, nightclub Marquee and the upcoming Japanese restaurant KOMA.

### What's coming to Singapore

- Universal Studios Singapore to welcome Minion Park and Super Nintendo World
- A new waterfront complex will be added to Resorts World Sentosa
- Marina Bay Sands to construct fourth tower with luxury hotel and a 15,000-seat indoor entertainment area

## MACAU

By Prudence Lui

### Sands Resorts Macao

To woo new and repeated visitors, Sands Resorts Macao continues to push the experiential envelope hard to attract increasingly savvy visitors.

According to Sands China's vice president of sales, Stephanie Tanpure, connecting with guests and offering varied experiences and events that resonate on a deeper and emotional level is key to remaining successful in the IR space.

Aside from ensuring a varied selection of 850 retail brands at the Sands Resorts Macao, new experiential offerings include the Parisian Privé Styling Suite, exclusive to the Shoppes. The bespoke space allows guests to enjoy a personalised styling con-

sultation with a fashion stylist for the latest looks, trends and fashion tips, as well as make-up and gift recommendations.

Sands Resorts Macao's “F&B and event areas are also all about the experience”, Tanpure pointed out. For instance, the IR welcomed Chicado, a contemporary Portuguese restaurant by Portuguese celebrity chef Henrique Sá Pessoa; along with the Crystal Jade Group's opening of restaurants at Sands Cotai Central and The Parisian Macao.

Earlier in June, Sands China announced that The Venetian Macao and The Parisian Macao have become InterContinental Alliance Resorts. The Londoner Macao – with suites designed in collaboration with famed football star David Beckham – will join the alliance when it opens in 2020, following the renovation of the current Holiday Inn Macao Cotai Central.

## MGM

By Prudence Lui

MGM is putting innovative art and entertainment experiences at the heart of its two resorts, MGM Cotai and MGM Macao.

With the help of the MGM Theater, the resort has continuously brought in a lineup of varying shows and concerts, such as the Jabbawockeez hip-hop dance crew, The Harry Potter Film Concert Series and Fuerza Bruta Wayra, a post-modern theatre show that originated in Buenos Aires.

The latter is a 360-degree immersive theatrical performance that does not require a rigid stage or seating arrangement, and instead revolves around the audience, according to a MGM spokesperson.

“MGM will continue to use this space and technology to create even more immersive experiences for visitors and make people part of the art,” the spokesperson added.

Aside from theatre experiences, the MGM spokesperson revealed the IR wanted to create an environment that allowed people to “create and interact with the art”. As such, MGM Cotai boasts a permanent art collection – numbering over 300 pieces ranging from Qing Dynasty carpets to Asian sculptures – on display throughout the resort.

Recently, both MGM properties also launched a series of exclusive F&B experiences. For instance, the renowned Wagyumafia from Tokyo unveiled a pop-up at Grill 58 of MGM Cotai, and brought in their first-ever Wagyumafia Progressive Kaiseki Dinner, the first to be served outside of Japan.

Over at MGM Macao, visual-gastronomical experience Le Petit Chef will be available until September 13, 2019, as the character retraces the steps of Marco Polo and presents gastronomic highlights from the Silk Road to diners.

An exclusive sushi pop-up bar will also run at Rossio until September 29, 2019, where Hiroyuki Sato, the chef-owner of the one-Michelin-star Hakkoku in Tokyo's Ginza district will elevate the crafting of sushi into an art form.

### What's coming to Macao

- Construction of the Grand Lisboa Palace will be completed this year, boasting fashion designer-branded hotels – Palazzo Versace Macao and Karl Lagerfeld Hotel.
- Studio City Macao will welcome two new entertainment attractions – The Flip-Out, Macao's first indoor trampoline centre; and Legend Heroes Park, the city's first VR theme park.

**MALAYSIA**

By S Puvaneswary

**Resorts World Genting**

This Malaysian IR on the peak of Mount Ulu Kali has been welcoming new developments since 2016, as part of its 10-year, RM10 billion (US\$2.4 billion) Genting Integrated Transformation Plan that was announced in December 2013.

These investments were deemed necessary in order for Resorts World Genting (RWG) to stay competitive in the face of newer IRs in Asia, where the aim was to offer its guests world-class entertainment combined with a holiday experience that encompasses both shopping and dining.

In 2017, the SkyAvenue mall opened first with 250 shops offering dining, entertainment and shopping options, followed by the launch of Genting Highlands Premium Outlets with 150 shops offering steep discounts on branded items.

More recent openings include Skytropolis Funland, which soft-opened in December 2018 with a 37,100m<sup>2</sup> indoor theme park boasting more than 20 rides; and the 3,250m<sup>2</sup> Zouk Genting, which comprises hip-hop club Empire by Zouk, gaming bar Red-Tail by Zouk, RedTail Karaoke and upcoming Fuhu Restaurant & Bar.

Rocky Too, senior vice president,

sales and marketing, RWG, said: “We regularly create exciting events to keep interests high and the momentum going. One such attraction is Imaginatricks, a stunning show of dance and acrobatics.” The multimillion-dollar international production will run until May 24, 2020.

Although RWG is also promoted as a family-friendly destination, the IR has taken “great pains” to attract every market segment, said Too.

As such, the Jungle Gym was also added to its offering early last year to provide age-appropriate activities for children, while F&B prices are kept reasonable to cater to this segment.

Currently, the domestic market makes up 80 per cent of arrivals to the resort, and Too revealed that “our existing customers are taking a lively interest in the new

Currently, two international hotels – the 275-key Westin Desaru Coast Resort and the 365-room Hard Rock Hotel Desaru Coast – have started operations, which Vikram Mujumdar, general manager of The Westin Desaru Coast Resort believes will “elevate the profile of the tourist destination” and “deliver a brand promise that was lacking in Desaru”.

Two more internationally-branded properties, Anantara Desaru Coast Resort & Villas and One&Only Desaru Coast, are on track to open at the end of this year.

Also already open is the Desaru Coast Conference Centre, managed by Westin, and the anchor attraction Desaru Coast Adventure Waterpark.

In conjunction with the official launch ceremony, Desaru Development Holdings One also hosted the inaugural edition of the three-day Ombak Festival with specially curated activities including culture, music and food which highlighted home-grown talents, products and creativity.

Roslina Arbak, CEO, Desaru Development Holdings One, shared that response towards the waterpark has been “encouraging”, while the golf courses are “attracting growing interest from Singaporeans and regional travellers”. Key markets for the IR include Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, China, Hong Kong and India.

“We are in the midst of curating more outdoor activities at Desaru Coast to complement the Adventure Waterpark, such as ATV rides, mountain biking, a climbing tower and ziplines, among others,” she elaborated.

Although Roslina has indicated that the IR’s primary focus is on “holidaymakers”, the IR is mindful that the MICE sector is also growing.

“We are in the midst of adding team-building activities and facilitation, as well as curating lifestyle and entertainment events that will appeal to both the business event and bleisure traveller,” she noted.

To further improve access from Singapore, a ferry terminal at Desaru Coast is scheduled to be completed by end 2020.

**What’s new in Malaysia**

- Resorts World Genting and The Void have introduced the first-of-its-kind hyper-reality experience Star Wars: Secrets of the Empire created in collaboration with ILMxLAB.
- Desaru Coast Adventure Waterpark has five thematic zones, offering unique rides such as Kraken’s Revenge and the Tidal Wave Beach.



From above: MGM’s Fuerza Bruta theatre experience; Resorts World Genting’s Imaginatricks live-action show

developments”. He also added that RWG is “gaining more interest among millennials, with the opening of Zouk Genting, as well as international dining options” such as UK-based restaurants Burger & Lobster and Harry Ramsden’s.

**Desaru Coast**

Desaru Coast, a coastal getaway in the southern state of Johor with a 17km-long beachfront, was officially opened by the sultan of Johor on July 5, 2019.

Desaru Coast is home to four hotels and resorts, two world-class golf courses, a themed water park, a retail village as well as a conference centre.



**IR operators place bets on Japan**

Almost one year after the Japanese government approved legislation that permitted the creation of the nation’s first IR, potential operators are beginning to jostle for the limited number of licenses that will be released.

Aside from Tomakomai in southern Hokkaido, local authorities in the city of Osaka; Marina City in Wakayama Prefecture; and Sasebo City in Nagasaki Prefecture have all expressed a firm interest in hosting IR.

For Osaka, the city has set aside the reclaimed island of Yumeshima in Osaka Bay for its IR.

Earlier this year, Genting Singapore announced that it is bidding for one of the hotly contested Japan licences, and has its eyes set on Osaka. The company revealed in May that it is preparing a concept plan ahead of the August deadline. Seven companies are understood to be in the running, including MGM Resorts, Wynn Resorts and Las Vegas Sands.

Then in late June, US casino operator Mohegan Gaming & Entertainment unveiled plans for a US\$4.5 billion IR in Tomakomai city.

The proposal envisages three hotel buildings, a conference hall and an arena

in a forested part of the community, while outdoor activities will include cross-country skiing, riding and farming. The plan also includes a casino, where the whole development could lead to the creation of as many as 7,000 new jobs.

Hard Rock International also has its eye on Tomakomai, proposing a guitar-shaped hotel, an event venue, Broadway-style theatres, wellness facilities, a Four Seasons-branded resort and nearly 20,000m<sup>2</sup> of retail and dining space.

Other casino operators that have expressed an interest in the Hokkaido IR include Rush Street Gaming, Macau-based Melco Resorts and Entertainment, and SJM Holdings.

Under the Integrated Resort Act,

**VIETNAM**

By Marissa Carruthers

**Hoiana**

The opening of Hoiana in Central Vietnam is set to be a game-changer for the country’s tourism landscape.

The joint venture between VinaCapital, Suncity and VMS, comprises a sprawling US\$4 billion IR set along a four-kilometre-long beach south of Hoi An and Danang. Once complete, the waterfront development will include hospitality, gaming, leisure, entertainment and retail facilities.

The first phase is slated to open in September, and will include golf architect Robert Trent Jones Jr’s first course in Vietnam, the Hoiana Shores Golf Club, and Rosewood Hotels & Resort’s Vietnam debut, Rosewood Hoi An.

Hoiana Casino, Suncity’s first casino, and other accommodation, including New World Hoiana Hotel and Residences, will open later in the year. This will be followed by a string of other developments that will be rolled out in phases.

Grace Hoang, Hoiana’s vice president of resort marketing, said the IR is backed by a portfolio of esteemed brands and expertise, which are expected to “bring exciting entertainment and hospitality experiences and raise the benchmark of IR in Vietnam”.

With tourism in the area growing at a rapid pace, the Central Vietnam destination was the most attractive to Hoiana. A total of 4.3 million people visited in the first six months, representing a 15.1 per cent year-on-year increase.

With the dominance of the Asian market, Hoiana is aggressively targeting players from South Korea, China, Hong Kong, Macau and South-east Asia, as well as the domestic market.

Added Hoang: “Hoiana is lucky to work with some of the best international brands to establish our destination. Furthermore, we have a beautiful site at a fantastic location – pristine beachfront and proximity to Hoi An old town. Not many IRs in the region can boast these advantages. It is an exciting time ahead for us.”

Aiming to raise hospitality standards, Hoiana has also partnered with the Arts, Culture and Tourism College to launch Hoiana – Quang Nam Tourism Vocational Training Centre.

The not-for-profit initiative provides free hospitality training to local students, and graduates will be guaranteed employment with Hoiana. Courses include Asia’s first accredited golf training programme.

**What’s coming to Vietnam**

- A 198-room Ramada hotel is slated to

passed on July 20, 2018, three licenses will initially be provided for operators that meet the requirements for any facility to have a conference hall, an exhibition site



Osaka’s IR will be sited on Yumeshima Island in Osaka Bay (pictured above)



From left: Kraken's Revenge ride in Desaru Coast Malaysia's Adventure Waterpark; an aerial rendering of the upcoming Hoiana in Vietnam

open at Ho Tram Strip as part of the IR's second phase, which include other amenities such as a waterpark, an outdoor auditorium for 2,000 pax, and movie theatres, among others.

- Slated to open by 2022 is the US\$2 billion Van Don project in Quang Ninh. The 2,500ha development is expected to receive a 50-year license, on top of multiple entertainment options, hotels and F&B venues.

## PHILIPPINES

By Rosa Ocampo

### Resorts World Manila

The fourth and last phase of Resorts World Manila's (RWM) expansion is currently more than halfway through, as it attempts to retain its edge as the country's largest and most diversified IR.

The expansion covers both gaming and non-gaming facilities, and while its gaming capacity has almost doubled, the same holds true for its number of hotels, retail stores, F&B outlets and entertainment centres.

The 357-key Hilton Manila was the first to open end-2018, while the Sheraton Manila opened earlier this year with 390 rooms. The 188-key Hotel Okura Manila is expected to open soon, bringing with it several dining options including Japanese, a pool, and fitness centre. The three properties will add 940 keys to the IR, bringing the total to over 2,000 keys.

RWM also announced plans to renovate Maxims Hotel into a Ritz-Carlton, a first in the Philippines.

To appeal to more family-friendly travellers and non-gaming clientele, a roster of theatre plays, musicals and recitals will be held at the Newport Performing Arts Theater; while new attractions have also been unveiled, such as Lumina, a 110m-long walkway with 100,000 multi-coloured LED bulbs that links RWM's second level to Newport Mall.

To make it more convenient for guests, RWM has taken advantage of its proximity to Ninoy Aquino International Airport Terminal 3, to which the IR is linked via an air-conditioned walkway. Shuttle buses also regularly ply routes to other terminals and a number of points in metro Manila.

"suitable for global level exhibitions and fairs", a theatre to promote Japanese history and culture, a travel facilitation office, and hotel accommodation.

Under the terms of the law, the size of the casino cannot exceed three per cent of the size of the entire IR. Licenses will be valid for three years and can be renewed for additional three-year terms, while a range of restrictions on Japanese visitors will be designed to ease concerns over an increase in gambling addiction.

Firm bids are expected to be invited after Tokyo host the Olympic Games in 2020, with the first licenses approved in the early part of 2021. The first resorts are expected to open their doors in 2026. — Julian Ryall

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\*All of the above information is correct at time of print, subject to availability and change without prior notice.



In the face of an overtourism crisis, a growing number of industry players are becoming more attuned to manage tourism in a responsible manner. But it's not just about the environment, as the human side of the equation should not be neglected, writes

Rosa Ocampo

# Making sustainable tourism work

While there is no dearth of sustainable tourism initiatives, the overarching question is whether travel consumers and industry players are engaged enough to meet responsible travel in this age of mass tourism.

After all, awareness about responsible tourism, while growing, is still at a nascent stage. "We're far from achieving the goals. A lot of work needs to be done," PATA CEO Mario Hardy said at the sidelines of the PATA Annual Summit 2019 in Cebu.

"We have to get together and get this fixed once and for all. We cannot continue to damage this beautiful planet," Hardy pointed out.

Various organisations have been rolling out initiatives to address sustainability, one of the biggest challenges in travel and tourism. The UN has Sustainable Development Goals (SDG); WTTC recognises best tourism practices, among other projects; and last May, PATA published a report on how food waste and excess in tourism can be halved as part of its BUFFET Campaign.

American nonprofit Planet Happiness has initiated an online survey metric that measures the wellbeing of residents and communities in world heritage sites, including Ayutthaya and Sukhothai in Thailand; Bali, Borobudur and Komodo National Park in Indonesia; Hoi An in Vietnam; and Luang Prabang in Laos.

Planet Happiness co-founder and director Paul Rogers told TTG Asia that the objectives are to raise awareness about the need to identify alternative measures of development – apart from GDP – and to address overtourism through responsible and sustainable forms.

As more destinations worldwide grapple with overtourism, an industry refocus on destination management – rather than destination promotion – has emerged. This move is exemplified by Slovenia which is aligning its tourism branding along dimensions of sustainable development.

Brands should have a strong, authentic story hinged on the values of the destination, and be able to communicate the story well by creating products that are in line with the brand vision. "Branding is all about perception, which is something that will continue to change overtime," emphasised Maja Pak, director general, Slovenian Tourist Board.

Arnel Yaptinchay, Kirschner Travel Manila general manager and Marine Wildlife Watch founder, said: "There are ways to manage a destination to achieve sustainability goals, starting with a sustainability frame work and criteria (e.g. Global Sustainable Tourism Standards), the appropriate policy and then its implementation.

"It becomes a bit tricky in sensitive natural sites, but that can be fully addressed with proper regulations to meet the goals of a conservation site, e.g. by limiting the visitor numbers."

Curtailling visitor numbers and closing destinations to let them breathe from mass tourism are being carried out in certain key attractions in Thailand and the Philippines.

However, there are still quarters that equate sustainability only to the natural environment, neglecting other equally important aspects such as the locals' wellbeing, sourcing of water and food, investing in learning, exploitation, etc.

Yaptinchay emphasised: "Sustainability in tourism is not only for natural sites – now mostly referred to as ecotourism – but is also much needed and relevant across all destinations or facilities, be it large cities, hotel chains, or cultural sites.

"Sustainability has to be built and grown from within so it inherently makes investments in local communities, the environment, people's wellbeing, education of tourists, etc. relevant," he stressed.

In fact, Asia Pacific Projects founder Narzalina Lim said that the SDGs are "very comprehensive and complex and not just focused on environmental sustainability, but also on ending poverty and inequality, reducing food waste, promoting re-



**While the environment is important, people are equally important too. As long as they remain poor and ignorant, excluded from the profits that big tourism players earn, they will continue to damage the environment and create social problems.**

– Narzalina Lim, founder, Asia Pacific Projects

**Sustainable tourism is as much as the environment as it is about people. Above: swimming with a whale shark; below: a Vietnamese artisan at work**

sponsible consumption and creating partnerships to achieve the SDGs, to name a few".

"Hotels, resorts and other tourist facilities should be retrofitted to use renewable energy and rain water catchment facilities should be installed as water is getting scarcer. These may be expensive now but it will save owners a lot in energy and water consumption. New laws that require new buildings to conform with sustainable principles should be enacted," Lim added.

She lamented the impact of neglecting other aspects of sustainability.

"While the environment is important, people are equally important too. As long as they remain poor and ignorant, excluded from the profits that big tourism players earn, they will continue to damage the environment and create social problems."

Boracay is a clear example, said Lim. While the island's 2017 tourism revenues hit 56.2 billion pesos (US\$1.1 billion), 22.9 per cent of its residents and 21.2 per cent of residents in mainland Malay were poor. "This is unacceptable," she stressed.

Lim is also unimpressed by Boracay's six-month closure last year for rehabilitation, calling the move "just for show" and "not sustainable".

Alluding to certain jerrybuilt structures and flooding in certain parts of Boracay after a four-hour downpour last May, Lim said: "One can see the results now. When the life of the inter-agency task force ends next year, what next? The re-elected mayor has vowed to go back to business as usual."

PATA's Hardy underscored the importance of educating both residents and tourists alike. Recalling his visit to western Samoa last year, he noted during a 45-minute ride from the airport that the country was "extremely clean, with not even a cigarette butt" on the streets.

The taxi driver told Hardy that over 20 years ago, an elderly widow took it upon herself to pick up the trash on the streets during her daily morning walks. Other adults and children in the village soon followed suit. The practice swiftly spread to other villages and this trash-picking tradition is still followed today.

It's the same story with Yap Island, Hardy said. "It's about educating the people to do this. People are proud of their land and environment so they clean up," Hardy explained, adding that there's no reason why that habit cannot be replicated in congested cities. "It is your responsibility to clean up your own mess. If you see someone throwing trash, tell him off. Others will follow your lead, and eventually, it will spread," he said.

Lim wants due punishment for misbehaving tourists: "We should strictly enforce our rules and regulations. Those who don't comply should be fined, arrested, or imposed with whatever sanctions so they know we mean business."

Education is key for Yaptinchay. "It is important for tourists to understand what they are visiting. This can be reinforced by making information available online in different languages, orienting and arming tour operators with the understanding, and putting up signages at the site itself."

He added: "Most visitors want to make better choices when they travel. They just need to be presented with the 'what' and 'how' information. Of course, strict regulations that are enforced in an attraction or site (e.g. penalties for littering, proper attire in religious sites, 'do not touch' policy for wildlife) are part of the awareness raising process. Demand respect!"

Lim warned though that too many tourists in a fragile environment will never be sustainable, citing as an example the Philippines whose "attractions are in fragile islands or forests which cannot stand the impact of mass tourism."

What can be done, Lim said, is to develop more beach destinations in mainland, as opposed to islands, to cater to mass tourism.

"The beaches may not be as beautiful as Boracay, etc. but the resorts can be designed in such a way that there are several pools, entertainment areas, shopping and dining that tourists need not look for a Boracay, Panglao, or Northern Palawan experience. These island destinations should have more upmarket, luxury accommodations – low volume, high yield."

Tourism sustainability is a challenge in any sector and it still has a long way to go. But hopefully, it will become the norm in the near future.



# Keeping the Tiaki promise

The private and public sectors in New Zealand have pledged to the Tiaki Promise – a commitment to care for the land, its people and upholding the sustainability of the country as they conduct their tourism-related businesses.

To achieve that, they bestow the responsibility not only upon the local communities and tourism businesses, but also their international business partners and travellers.

Air New Zealand – one of the seven organisations who founded the Tiaki Promise last year – for instance, has worked together with Tairāwhiti Gisborne stakeholders, including local tribe Māori tribe Ngāti Porou to support the region’s tourism proposition and drive demand for travel, which would translate into more job opportunities for the locals.

Cam Wallace, Air New Zealand’s chief revenue officer, said: “Ngāti Porou shares our belief that Tairāwhiti Gisborne has huge untapped potential. In April 2018, we formalised an agreement to work together toward a stronger region.

“We have purchased carbon credits from the *iwi*’s (tribe in Maori) forest estates on the East Coast and are committed to supporting Ngāti Porou to promote its Mount Hikurangi tourism venture offshore. We’re also

bringing some *iwi* primary sector products into our customer offering – with Ahia smoked fish among the first of these to be served on board.”

The airline is also working with charitable organisations and colleges to help youth in the regions reach their potential by fostering clear pathways into study and employment through strategic programmes and partnerships, and help build the country’s tourism talent pipeline.

Tourism Holdings (THL), another Tiaki Promise co-founder, whose business ventures include self-drive experiences, motorhome holidays and guided tour programmes, launched electric motorhomes this year.

Saskia Varraes, THL responsible management general manager, said: “We released our first 10 electric motorhomes this year in our fleet. This is exciting as we can now offer customers options to drive around our country without releasing emissions.

“We released this with two targeted responsible travel itineraries to show people that they can drive around beautiful parts of New Zealand, as we have chargers installed. They can also drive slower around places that they normally would have driven past, and enjoy the local opportunities and beautiful photo

spots (along the way).”

This is merely one of many steps that THL is taking to achieve its goal to become a zero-emission operator.

Since 2014, Varraes said, THL has been integrating sustainability into its way of working, including introducing “lower footprint activities like glamping, beach clean-ups and giving back to community events”.

Some suppliers rope travellers in to actively participate in the sustainability movement.

At this year’s TRENZ, for instance, Rotorua Canopy Tours partnered with Tourism Industry Aotearoa and the Department of Conservation to bring delegates to set and bait pest traps in a native, untouched patch of forest near Rotorua.

Canopy Tours general manager, Paul Button, said: “We’re really pleased with the trapping results, and that more of the Dansey Reserve is on the way to being predator-free.”

Rotorua Canopy Tours continues to administer the trap line by integrating it into its regular conservation programme in the Dansey Road Scenic Reserve.

“We’re finding that the rats are eating all the possum baits. So we’re going to keep clearing the traps every day until the number of rats caught daily drops,” Button said.



The Tiaki Promise is a commitment to care for New Zealand while travelling (pictured: Rotorua forest walk)

“Once the rat numbers settle down, we’ll be able to get the possums out and have a better sense of the forest’s overall health.”

Napier Maori Tour incorporates into its tours the native wisdom that men must leave this world a better state than when they came into it.

Hinewai Hawalkinangi, owner of Napier Maori Tour, said: “The essence of *kaitiaki* (Maori term for guardianship) is a person who protects those who are yet to be born. We believe our business is a vehicle for sharing our Maori way of life to the world.

“We aim to connect with visitors to our land by sharing our traditions, history and culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Aotearoa (the Maori name for New Zealand). We invite visitors to plant native plants on our sacred mountain. They can watch them grow over satellite feed and come back to visit them again. The trees will bear legacy in Aotearoa.

He added: “After they return home, we continue our role. Each year, we grow 2,000 native trees and, with the help of our community, plant them alongside our waters.”

This way, both the local community and visitors work hand-in-hand to fulfil the Tiaki Promise. – Mimi Hudoyo



The essence of *kaitiaki* is a person who protects those who are yet to be born. We believe our business is a vehicle for sharing our Maori way of life to the world.

– Hinewai Hawalkinangi, owner, Napier Maori Tour



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# The rising star of Indian Ocean

Not content to be viewed as a sybaritic playground for holidaymakers from Europe, its traditional feeder market, Mauritius now wants to lure more Asian visitors with its rich fusion of culture, nature and history. By **Xinyi Liang-Pholsena**



**A**tropical island off the east coast of Madagascar in the Indian Ocean, Mauritius is perhaps better known worldwide as a beach and honeymoon destination, but industry players want to show that the country offers cultural and natural riches beyond upmarket beaches.

Dubbed the gateway to Africa, the island nation of 2,040km<sup>2</sup> is rich in scenic beauty with a dramatic coastline fringed by white-sand beaches and turquoise waters, alongside a whole bucket-list of activities both on land and in water to provide once-in-lifetime experiences to visitors.

Mauritius is also a melting pot of Asian, African and European influences, the result of centuries of immigration that created diverse traditions and a richly mixed cuisine on a previously uninhabited island barely five centuries ago.

Now, the country's top tourism leaders and industry players are putting a stronger focus on attracting Asian travellers to its shores, expanding from its traditional core visitor markets of Europe and Africa.

Anil Kumarsingh Gayan, Mauri-

tius' minister of tourism, said: "We believe that Mauritius needs a share of the global tourism market. We want to promote Mauritius as a quality destination, and peg the country as a high-end destination."

Asia's superpowers India and China are key target markets for Mauritius, where historical and cultural ties to both countries run deep. "We share a natural affinity with India, while the Chinese in Mauritius date back some 200 years," said Gayan.

About 70 per cent of the country's population is descended from indentured Indian labourers taken there after the abolition of slavery during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The small but sizeable Chinese community, meanwhile, were descendants of traders and artisans who migrated to Mauritius under French and British rule.

Arvind Bundhun, director of Mauritius Tourism Promotion Authority (MTPA), revealed that the NTO has also rolled out "big visibility campaigns" in both India and China to shore up destination awareness of Mauritius among travel operators and consumers alike, with OTAs and social media also making

a key part of its marketing offensive.

In China, MTPA already has appointed marketing reps to focus on Shanghai – where Air Mauritius has a direct service to – and surrounding cities.

As well, Bundhun sees potential in "developing the golf market from Asia" for Mauritius, where the country's ample greens are set against

**Mauritius offers plenty of attractions on land and in water (pictured: Le Morne peninsula seen from above)**



**We are targeting big visibility campaigns in China and India, and secondly, we are working with lots of operators on B2B campaigns; thirdly, we're launching online and social media campaigns in all Asian markets.**

– Arvind Bundhun, director, Mauritius Tourism Promotion Authority



breathtaking Indian Ocean backdrops.

On the island, more local travel players are also tapping the potential of the up-and-rising Asian markets.

Pont Naturel Quad, which was established last year by industry veteran Sweetie Moheeputh, the ATV tour company has made inroads into the Chinese leisure market, riding on the connectivity gains made with Air Mauritius' connection to Shanghai, as well as seasonal charter flights from other parts of China.

However, in order to make Mauritius a much more attractive and top-of-mind destination for Asian travellers, Moheeputh would like the airfares and connections to Mauritius to improve.

MTPA's Bundhun admits that "affordability and visibility" are key challenges for Mauritius, especially when it comes to marketing Mauritius to the Asian markets, amid intensifying competition from other resort destinations like the Maldives and the Seychelles.

Air Mauritius obviously has a vital role to play in the country's ambitions of luring more Asian visitors, a point that CEO Somas Appavou is only too aware of as the carrier seeks to build better connectivity with major air hubs around the world.

One key effort was the Africa-Asia Air Corridor, which was launched in 2016 to position Mauritius as a cross-continent hub by developing air traffic through Singapore, reviving Mauritius' ancient role as an Indian Ocean transit role in the skies, said the airline chief.

"Singapore is an island among people. Mauritius is an island surrounded by fish. The thing is if you're a small gateway – and we want to be a gateway between Asia and Africa – you have to build connections with the hubs," said Appavou.

This air corridor initiative, according to the tourism minister, has also helped to market Mauritius as part of the "Blue and Green Safari" joint campaign, which sees the island nation promoted as attractive tourism destinations alongside Kenya and South Africa.

Furthermore, the recent delivery of the first two Airbus A330-900neo planes to Air Mauritius in April this year – an "fuel-efficient aircraft model" which offers better cost per seat than predecessors A330 classic or A319 – could help the airline achieve greater competitiveness in a costly operating environment and step up service frequencies to China and elsewhere in Asia in the near future, Appavou shared.

In Asia-Pacific, the national carrier currently flies to Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai and Bengaluru in India, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Shanghai, Hong Kong and Perth.

Meanwhile, Air Mauritius is also trying to seal more alliances with Chinese carriers. Said Appavou: "We are working on (securing) partnerships with Chinese carriers in the pipeline, and we have started discussion with China Eastern Airlines."

He remarked that Air Mauritius was climbing in Chinese traffic three years back, but the ongoing Sino-US trade war as well as an eroding yuan has caused the destination to lose momentum in courting the Chinese market.

Destination

# Rolling out the welcome mat

For a sector more used to western guest preferences, hospitality players in Mauritius are working hard to adjust their offerings and roll out efforts to woo the up-and-coming Asian market. By **Yixin Ng**

With Mauritius increasingly seeking out diverse visitor markets, tourist accommodations are starting to roll out the carpet for Asian guests, determined to make them feel at home while priming them to discover the island beyond hotel grounds.

Hotel Riu Creole has in recent years been polishing its tools to penetrate Asia's promising group tours and corporate incentive segments.

Up until recently, the Asian market was nearly non-existent for the hotel, which is part of Spain-based Riu Hotels & Resorts that is 49 per cent owned by European tour giant TUI.

"A few years ago, we only saw European guests at the hotel. Now we are working in collaboration with the Mauritius Tourism Promotion Authority and Air Mauritius to promote in Asian markets. We are investing a lot in Asia," said Géraldine Bajee, regional sales and marketing manager at Riu Hotels & Resorts.

Hotel Riu Creole witnessed the potentials of Asian markets when charter flights began arriving in the destination from China. Now, armed with a sales and marketing presence in China, Riu Hotels has been marketing its global portfolio in the country through an office in Beijing and another in Shanghai.

With language a considerable barrier in the early days of selling to Asia, the hotel has hired Chinese staff and studied the profiles of Asian guests, shared Bajee.

Apart from China, Hotel Riu Creole also sees potential in India, although there are some difficulties including the seasonality of Indian travel demand (driven by weddings and honeymooners).

An all-inclusive stay is not a familiar concept with Indian travellers, but this opens up, rather than limits, selling opportunities, opined Moussa Lahlali, cluster general manager for Hotel Riu Creole and the adults-only Hotel Riu Le Morne next door.

"Indians are used to particular styles of holidays from their travels to Dubai and the Middle East. We introduce the full-board concept, (which is) something quite new to many of them, and they like it."

Because Chinese and Indian leisure travellers tend to spend their days outside the resort, Lahlali feels most of the property infrastructure is already in place to start catering to these guests, with only the areas such F&B requiring tweaks.

For example, it has been adding Asia nights to the roster of Spanish and Italian themed nights in its restaurants.

Lahlali elaborated: "The concept is when you enter the restaurant you feel like you're travelling through different parts of the world with different areas dedicated to different Asian cuisines. We introduced Asian cuisine and hired Asian chefs in recent years, and have since been fine-tuning the F&B offer. Rather than simply eating, we are now creating an experience of (discovery) for guests."

Meanwhile, the two Riu properties in Mauritius are gearing up for more corporate incentive groups, which represent important new segments for the properties.

The expansive grounds give both Riu properties "all the potential" to accommodate group activities, Lahlali remarked, but there is work to be done to equip them with the required tools and expertise.

"We are huge and have different spaces that can be used, from our restaurants to the beach. Now, we're creating a manual on how to cater to business events groups particularly teambuilding and incentives, and not just weddings.

"We are looking into what our clients' needs are and how we can propose to them. We also have to bring together departments including sales, operation and F&B to become business events ready."

Bleisure is a big part of the equation too. Lahlali said there are plans to equip the properties to take care of accompanying family members, including children.

It is not just big groups that are spur-

ring the Asian ambitions of hospitality players in Mauritius. For more boutique tourist accommodation like MJ Holidays' 13-villa Marguery Villas and its upcoming Mythic Suites & Villas, Asian FITs are flashing bright on the radar.

MJ Holidays, one of the few residential-style villa accommodation operators in Mauritius, has already developed an online reputation in China, having seen results and positive feedback through listing on OTAs.

As MJ Holidays expands – Mythic Suites & Villa is set to open in November 2019 in Grand-Gaube on the north-eastern coast – it now wants to continue building a name in Asia and penetrate new markets.

It is doing so by stepping up trade efforts while working to convert OTA demand to direct bookings on its own website, shared managing director Isabelle Descroizilles.

On the travel trade front, it recently partnered a South Korean tour operator to sell Marguery Villas, marking its foray into the market.

For now, Descroizilles sees multigenerational families as the ideal target in Asia, although other segments like couples and honeymooners are also taking a liking to the villa concept.

"Most families conduct their day-to-day lives apart from one another. Holidays are a time for children, parents, grandparents to come together. When travelling, they want to spend as much time as possible in one place so they can reconnect," she elaborated.



Marguery Villas

"Since January, we have been selling through a Korean tour operator, which has been sending (honeymoon) couples to the villas. I was surprised that this worked as we're not a typical product for couples. But we're realising that couples enjoy having a whole villa to themselves, despite the pricing for two pax not being very competitive."

With the opening of Mythic Suites & Villas, it seems the horizons are widening for MJ Holidays. On top of three- or four-room villas, the new property also offers guests one-, two- or three-room junior suites, as well as three-room penthouse suites.

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Asian restaurant at Riu Hotel Creole



**A few years ago, we only saw European guests at the hotel. Now we're working in collaboration with the Mauritius Tourism Promotion Authority and Air Mauritius to promote in Asian markets.**

– **Géraldine Bajee**, regional sales and marketing manager, Riu Hotels & Resorts

Tried & tested

# Air Mauritius' Airbus A330-900neo

Xinyi Liang-Pholsena takes a seat on board Air Mauritius' brand-new aircraft and discovers an exciting addition to the Airbus family



**WHY** Air Mauritius took delivery of its two Airbus A330-900neo order on April 18, becoming the first operator of the new aircraft type in the Southern Hemisphere and the world's first airline to operate a combination of both the A330neo and A350XWB.

The A330neo is powered by Rolls-Royce's latest Trent 7000 engines and features a new wing with increased

**From top: Air Mauritius' A330-900neo at take-off; A330neo economy class**



span, and new A350XWB-inspired sharklets. Air Mauritius' A330neo is currently deployed on routes connecting Port Louis to London Heathrow, Paris, Mumbai and Singapore, among others.

**WHAT** Air Mauritius flies to Singapore thrice weekly on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays, with a fourth weekly flight to be added during peak season between November 10, 2019 and January 12, 2020.

After stopping in Singapore, the service continues to Kuala Lumpur before turning back to Singapore for the onward journey to Mauritius. The overall journey between Singapore and Port Louis span a distance of 3,261km and nearly seven hours.

**HOW** I was excited to experience the A330neo, as Air Mauritius is one of the earliest adopters of this new aircraft type at time of flying – with other operators being TAP Air Portugal and Air Senegal with no passenger services in South-east Asia.

As I prepared to board the new plane, named Aapravasi Ghat after the UNESCO World Heritage Site near Port Louis

in Mauritius, I noted the 'sunglasses' effect around the cockpit windows, not unlike its A350 cousin.

The A330neo plane has 260 seats in economy class with a 2-4-2 configuration and 28 seats in business class in a 1-2-1 configuration. My economy-class seat offers pretty generous legroom at 18 inches with a six-inch recline, and despite occupying a central seat I did not feel cramped during the entire journey. On my return trip to Singapore, I had an aisle seat and was even able to catch a couple of hours' of sleep during the seven-hour flight.

The take-off and landing on the new aircraft was visibly smooth, and I could track the progress as the plane flew over the Indian Ocean on the full HD screen. The inflight entertainment also featured an interesting selection of songs and movies, with Wi-Fi on board.

The inflight meal was my first introduction to Mauritian cuisine, with options such as black lentils and fish curry. The overall flight was quiet and the LED mood lighting changed as the flight progressed, and the flight crew was friendly and professional.

**VERDICT**

The A330neo definitely offers similar levels of comfort as the A350XWB. Safe, comfortable and professional, I definitely look forward to flying with Air Mauritius again.

What's hot

## Mauritius' bounty of attractions



**1 Rhumerie de Chamarel**

Tucked among lush hillside plantations in south-western Mauritius, this rhumerie is a working distillery that doubles as a museum showcasing the rum-making process.

Experienced guides are on hand to take visitors behind the scenes and explain how the distillery cultivates its own sugar canes and turns the fresh, fermented juice into unique agricultural flavours such as vanilla, coffee and coconut. [www.rhumeriedechamarel.com](http://www.rhumeriedechamarel.com)

**2 Casela World of Adventures**

Situated on the island's south-west with the Rempart Mountain as a backdrop, this scenic nature park is spread across 250ha of rugged terrain, lush forest, safari and gorges.

Visitors can explore the four thematic areas on safari tours to discover the plethora of indigenous and exotic wildlife and plant species – think giant tortoises, white rhinos, lynxes and more. Other exhilarating activities like



quad-biking, ziplining and toboggan rides can also be arranged. Popular activities at the reserve are giraffe feeding and walking with lions. [www.caselapark.com](http://www.caselapark.com)

**3 Seven Coloured Earth and Chamarel Waterfall**

A geological curiosity, the Seven Coloured Earth is an exposed hilltop with

clay earth featuring the rainbow hues of purple, red, violet, green, blue and yellow, forming a beautiful juxtaposition against the surrounding lush vegetation.

Nearby, the Chamarel Waterfall is a stunning sight made up of three distinct streams plunging nearly 100m into a gorge. [www.chamarel-7colouredearth.com](http://www.chamarel-7colouredearth.com)



**4 Underwater waterfall**

Just off the shores of Mauritius' famed Le Morne mountain in the south-west lies a spectacular underwater waterfall. The sight is actually an optical illusion, the result of sand and silt shaped by underwater currents on the ocean floor to create the dramatic image of a cascading waterfall, as if the entire island is being sucked down a vast drain. The best way to view this breathtaking phenomenon is from the air, and there are plenty of helicopter tours set up for this purpose.

**5 Pont Naturel Quad**

Pont Naturel Quad offers ATV rides as well as teambuilding and private group tours to its namesake Pont Naturel (Natural Bridge) – an iconic volcanic rock formation that looks like a man-made bridge – in southern Mauritius. Quad rides go around Pont Naturel as well as nearby sights like Old Sugar Mill. [pnquad@gmail.com](mailto:pnquad@gmail.com)



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Xiqu Centre, one of the West Kowloon Cultural District's landmark buildings, is a new home for traditional Chinese opera

Destination

# Cultural awakening

A slew of revitalised and new cultural projects opening across the city is stoking Hong Kong's ambitions of becoming a global cultural destination. By **Prudence Lui**

An increasingly vibrant and flourishing cultural and artistic scene currently unfolding in Hong Kong is stirring up greater interest among foreign visitors to seek out lesser-known facets of the city.

The growing arts and cultural scene is in part bolstered by active support pledged by the Hong Kong government to the sector's development, with recent initiatives including HK\$20 billion (US\$2.6 billion) set aside for upgrading existing cultural hardware and building new facilities, and HK\$500 million allocated to the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD) to acquire museum collections and organise exhibitions.

Having positioned itself as an art city in Asia through events like Art Basel and numerous openings of blue-chip galleries, a fresh crop of mega cultural projects launching over the next few years is set to inject a new buzz to Hong Kong's arts and culture scene.

For instance, the 57-year-old Hong Kong Museum of Art will reopen in November this year on the Tsim Sha Tsui waterfront following a major makeover with

an eye-catching glass façade. Not only will the institution see its total exhibition area expand by 40 per cent from 7,000m<sup>2</sup> to 10,000m<sup>2</sup> and the number of galleries increase from seven to 12, it has also received 350 Chinese painting and calligraphy masterpieces from Chih Lo Lou Art Promotion for its permanent collection.

West Kowloon Cultural District (WKCD), a government-funded development project that seeks to create a hub of arts and cultural venues in a 40ha waterfront area west of Yau Ma Tei, will house numerous facilities. This includes the Xiqu Centre, a venue for Cantonese opera; Freespace, presenting contemporary arts performances; Lyric Theatre Complex, focusing on international dance and theatre; M+, a museum of visual culture; and the Hong Kong Palace Museum, which will display Chinese art and culture from the imperial period.

Hong Kong's flourishing cultural scene has given a visible marketing push for tour operators, say industry players.

For instance, Hong Kong A La Carte's managing director Alexandra Malandain has added tours of Tai Kwun, a contemporary art and heritage centre housed in the restored and revitalised Central Police Station compound.

She explained: "The western market, especially FITs and corporates, is definitely interested in hosting events and meetings at the brand-new Tai Kwun.

They like the way the compound mixes contemporary buildings with old ones. They are also keen on the art exhibitions and the numerous F&B offers there. The Museum for Contemporary Art, M+ and K11 should interest them as well."

Likewise, Via Vai Travel, director, Sef Lam, also offers architecture and heritage tours of key and revitalised landmarks like the new University of Chicago campus in the old Victoria Detention Centre; the Haw Par Mansion, which has been given a new lease of life as Haw Par Music Farm; Xiqu Chinese opera, which gives "an excellent introduction to an art form many are not familiar with"; and twinning a visit to Tai Kwun with H Queen's, a building

dedicated to art and lifestyle.

"Based on our experience, these are popular destinations, each with its own attraction," Lam remarked.

Nadia Quinn, lead guide at Hong Kong Greeters, told TTG Asia that such attractions not only add breadth to Hong Kong's portfolio of tours, but also helps to cultivate a lasting impression of a destination offering "diversity and variety".

She added: "We observed travellers attending Art Basel are mainly business people or those who have a direct connection to art and culture, whether through work or personal interest. I hope more staff training would help tourists receive friendly guidance upon their arrival at these new cultural attractions and make it easier for them to navigate."

However, art and culture is often not the sole attraction for tourists visiting Hong Kong, noted Paul Chan, co-founder, Walk in Hong Kong.

He explained: "Except for Hong Kong Arts Month and Art Basel, there is no defining feature that stands out for the city's cultural tourism push at this stage. Still, we need these kind of new attractions to build up the (momentum) with (multi-faceted support) to boost tourism.

"Factors like quality of curated exhibitions, access to performances and events, as well as availability of a systematic information channel are crucial software to draw visitor interest. In fact, there isn't any integrated system that shows what the city offers in a day, and ticketing is tied up with two ticketing agents that often have a lot of glitches during purchasing."

It's still early days for Hong Kong's culture tourism development, Chan elaborated, as the under-construction WKCD is not yet anchored on the cultural hub ecosystem while existing institutions like Xiqu Centre needs supporting attractions in its vicinity to become a staple stop on tour itineraries.

The management of cultural venues is also a key link, Chan pointed out, stressing the importance of having a roster of "creative promotions and new themed exhibitions" for tour operators to incorporate them into walking tour programmes to attract international visitors.

Lam also noted: "In the long term, education is important to get tourism school students interested in arts and culture. I believe strongly in students acquiring hands-on experience and getting involved with an art form, so that they will develop a growing appreciation for the art form as they mature and share this knowledge and passion with the people being guided."



Except for Hong Kong Arts Month and Art Basel, there is no defining feature that stands out for the destination's cultural tourism push at this stage.

— Paul Chan, co-founder, Walk in Hong Kong



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## Hotels

# Making smart moves

Hong Kong's smaller hotels and boutique properties are catching up on digital transformation, rolling out automated solutions in areas from operations to smart rooms to enhance the guest experience. By **Prudence Lui**

While major hotel chains are leading the charge in the adoption of smart technology in the hospitality sector, boutique and small independent hotels in Hong Kong are also making efforts to ride on the digital wave.

Hotel Icon, opened by Hong Kong Polytechnic University, has been a testbed for the latest innovation and technologies in hospitality since its inception. It debuted two robotic butlers to assist F&B and housekeeping for about six weeks in 2017, and will roll out a series of tech-enabled solutions (e.g. smart light switches) to bring enhanced comfort and convenience for guests.

General manager Richard Hatter said: "With the increasing application of smart items in various industries, the international travellers' expectation of a smarter lodging experience is unprecedentedly growing. Guests have expressed an undeniable demand for more digital experience (in hospitality), (amid) a culture of convenience and instant gratification.

"Though certain popular destinations and international hotel chains are aggressively promoting their smart image, Hong Kong's hospitality industry, however, is still lagging behind other destinations in terms of offering a smarter hotel experience," he observed.

"A majority of hotel operators or



owners in Hong Kong may have focused heavily on the ROI of the application of smart elements and are often resistant to the implementation of new hotel technologies," added Hatter, citing some challenges that prevent the greater adoption of smart solutions in the sector.

"Some less tech-savvy hotel staff are also less receptive to the launch of new smart infrastructure and new standard operating procedures which may affect their day-to-day routine."

Under Madera Hospitality Management, Hotel Madera Hollywood has been an early adopter of hospitality innovation among the city's boutique hotels. The property has since its launch installed a smart living

system in its 38 one-bedroom suites to offer guests personalised in-room experiences through controlling the TV, blinds and lighting moods with the touch of a finger.

Madera's head Lucas Lai said: "The initiatives enable us to deliver a speedy guest experience instead of traditional person-to-person service, leading to higher loyalty and satisfaction... Most travellers at the moment are not familiar with the operations of this new technology because it is not popularly implemented in the market."

But Lai believes that digital transformation of hotels is a necessity. "We believe that leveraging technology from digitisation to artificial

**Hotel Icon has rolled out tech-enabled solutions since its inception**

**It's about creating an experience beyond what they have in their own homes and far greater than what they would expect.**

**– Amanda Cottome, group director of brand experience and culture, Ovolo Hotels**

intelligence is not just a trend but gives us competitive advantages in the market in delivering a fresh guest experience," he added.

For Ovolo Hotels, the provision of smart technology solutions is one way it can tangibly incorporate effortless living ethos across every aspect of the hotel experience for guests, according to group director of brand experience and culture, Amanda Cottome.

The group has implemented Amazon Alexa across all its properties to offer personalised in-room experiences, whether it's greeting guests with a *Happy Birthday* upon their arrival or playing their favourite songs based on customer intel.

In the deployment of ideas, Cottome said picking the right technology that not only has longevity, but ready implementation without significant development investment, are major considerations.

She elaborated: "We're not looking for 'fads' but instead something that is ahead of the curve in terms of predicting what our future guests will need and desire. It's about creating an experience beyond what they have in their own homes and far greater than what they would expect.

"We also like to focus on technology that enhances guests experience and does not detract or replace human engagement or the high levels of customer service we guarantee," added Cottome.

## Fresh Eyes

## On track with creativity

A vintage tram takes on a new life as a roving arts and social venue, thanks to a collaboration of local expertise. By **Prudence Lui**



Since September 2018, an eye-catching tram can often be spotted plying the streets between Western Market and Happy Valley Terminus Stations.

But unlike the aluminium double-decker seen plying the streets of Hong Kong, this bespoke teakwood model is a mobile social club and premium event venue rolled into one, with a regular roster of performances by young talents on board.

The Circus Tram, as it is named, is the brainchild of Alvin Yip, partner and curator-in-chief of local creative startup Circus. He initiated the idea to Hong Kong Tramways and brought this concept to life by engaging a team of emerging designers, architects, artists and curators to jointly build a nostalgic vehicle with the tram company from scratch.

Yip said: "We (thought of Hong Kong's) iconic 115-year tramways as more than a

transportation means, and first brought this notion to life in 2013 at a design festival called Detour. Fortunately, we successfully obtained a subsidy to produce four prototype trams and reimaged them as various mobile spaces i.e. a library, restaurant and performing theatre.

"Evolving from an academic research to a cultural and art experiment and now a new operation, the (most rewarding part) was being able to engage young designers and artists to work with experienced tram technicians, engineers and craftsmen. I am proud to say that our first Circus Tram is 100 per cent made in Hong Kong and by hand," he stressed.

From the outset, Yip wants to inject a new breath of life into a much-loved transport icon of Hong Kong by engaging local people and their support. He has also opened up the initiative to tourists by partnering with The Peninsula Hotels' Peninsula Academy.

Yip explained: "Hotel guests interested in cultural experiences may charter the whole tram or join the two-hour ride through the Peninsula Hotels. Unlike ordinary sightseeing tram tours, we combine a unique range of on-board experience like fortune telling, music and a magic performance. Even if a tour guide is deployed, we stress interactive conversations rather than mundane presentations."

The posh tram interior boasts three lounges: Chatham House on the lower deck, and The Freudians and Darwin Gardens on the upper deck. The tram also boasts first-of-its-kind features, such as a modern electrical and mechanical system that can support lighting and sound systems for events, as well as a restroom.

The Circus Tram is also designed to accommodate artistic salons, concerts, cultural exchange, small business meetings as well as private functions and receptions.

The launch of a unique product as Circus Tram has added to Hong Kong's growing array of iconic venues, opined Yip, offering inbound visitors and locals different possibilities to enjoy and appreciate the local culture.

"Our second and third trams are in the pipeline with more interesting ideas; they are not going to be the same," he shared.



**Our first Circus Tram is 100 per cent made in Hong Kong and by hand.**

**Alvin Yip** Partner and curator-in-chief, Circus

**New hotels**

**1 Minimal Hotel Avenue**

In July, Tang's Living Group launched Minimal Hotel Avenue as the group's 15<sup>th</sup> property and fourth under the Minimal Hotels brand. Located between Jordan and Tsim Sha Tsui, the hotel comprises 51 rooms ranging from 17m<sup>2</sup> to 38m<sup>2</sup>.

Formerly known as Sunny Day Hotel, the rebranded property has partnered with Butler, a Singapore-based hospitality and real estate service, in its delivery of service to guests. Families and groups can avail the family rooms with connecting doors.

**2 Page 148**

The 197-room hotel threw open its doors in January to mark Page Hotels'

debut in Hong Kong. Located on 148 Austin Road, this boutique hotel is ideal for urban explorers given its proximity to the culturally rich neighborhood of Tsim Sha Tsui.

All rooms boast floor-to-ceiling windows framing the heritage-rich Kowloon Cricket Club, a 43-inch LED flat-screen TV, Page Common blend coffee drip-bags, and air purifiers. A 4G Pocket Wi-Fi Device is also included for selected room types.

**3 Rosewood Hong Kong**

Following the launch of its 413-room hotel section in March, Rosewood Hong Kong has recently introduced 186 ultra-luxury studios, apartments and duplexes for extended stays.

The Residences feature a dedicated lounge, indoor swimming pool and fitness centre along with special services and amenities.

As part of redevelopment of the former New World Centre on Salisbury Road in Tsim Sha Tsui, this ultra-luxury property will welcome Asaya, a wellness concept, in autumn.

**4 Hotel Purple Hong Kong**

The newest addition to the city's boutique hotel scene, Hotel Purple is nestled in Tin Hau district of Hong Kong Island.

The chic hotel is home to 83 stylishly designed ensuite rooms across 24 floors, and offers room types varying from Studio Rooms for couples or friends to one-bedroom deluxe for families. Every room offers wireless chargers, with ChargeSpotpower banks and adapters throughout the hotel.

**5 St Regis Hong Kong**

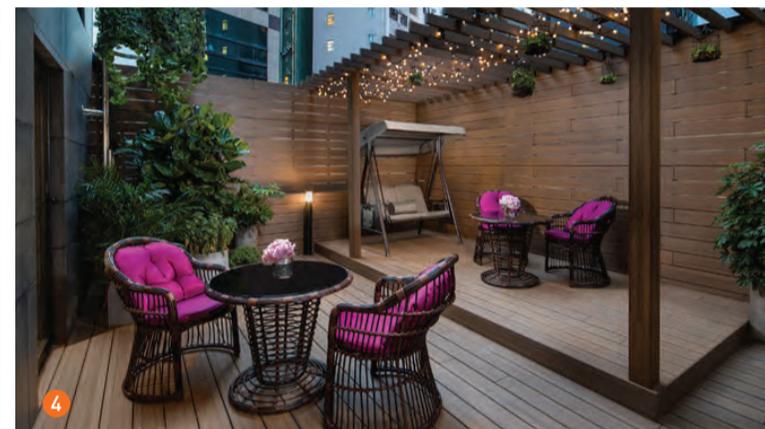
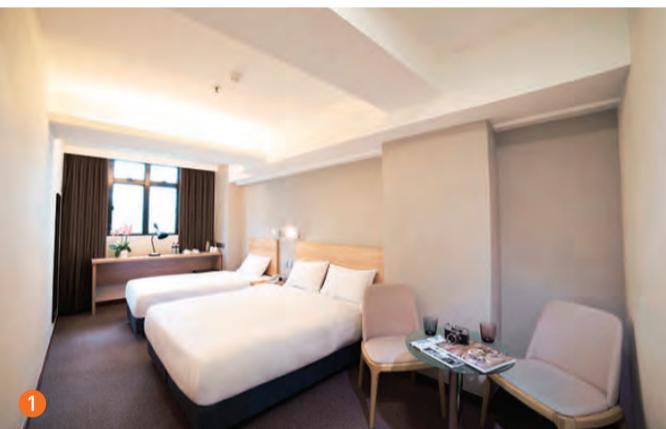
The St Regis Hong Kong opened its doors in June with 129 guestrooms

and suites featuring East-meets-West elements, complimented with the personalised St Regis Butler Service. Both the L'Envol French restaurant and Rün Chinese restaurant are led by Michelin-starred chefs, and afternoon tea is available at The Drawing Room.

**6 K11 Artus**

The iconic Victoria Dockside in Tsim Sha Tsui waterfront recently welcomed a new luxury hotel residence concept in K11 Artus.

Comprising 287 residences across 14 storeys, the extension of the K11 brand seeks to distinguish itself from the mainstream concept of most serviced apartments with a focus on craftsmanship, bespoke experiences, attention to detail, and present unparalleled views of the Victoria Harbour. The property offers rental plans from short- to long-term stays.



**Tours & activities**

**Discover hidden gems**

**1 The Mills**

Situated in Tsuen Wan, The Mills is a revitalised textile mill launched in December 2018 as an exhibition and events space, including an outdoor rooftop park. Free guided walks take visitors through the history of the former cotton mills, which were central to Hong Kong's manufacturing heyday in the 1960s. Tours are conducted every Saturday and Sunday in Cantonese, English or Mandarin.

**2 Jetboat tour of wild Hong Kong**

Explore wild Hong Kong in Sai Kung with certified nature guides on jet boat tours. The 16-seat ecojet boat tour takes visitors around Old Tin Hau Temple, Bell-shaped Arch, Ung Kong islands, Po Pin Chau, High Island Reservoir, and Nine Pins Islands before returning to Tsim Sha Tsui.

Along the way, visitors will pass through sea cliffs and sea stacks and see magnificent hexagonal volcanic rock columns and coastal erosion landforms located in the Hong Kong UNESCO Global Geopark. This three-hour tour departs at 09.30 and 13.30 every Tuesday and Thursday from Central No. 9 Public Pier in Victoria

Harbour. Tours have to be booked at least two days in advance. [derektse@ecotravel.hk](mailto:derektse@ecotravel.hk); [www.ecotravel.hk](http://www.ecotravel.hk)

**3 Float along Victoria Harbour**

Enjoy an hour-long Victoria Harbour cruise on the 24m-long *Float*, a custom-designed luxury yacht which boasts more than 280m<sup>2</sup> of entertainment space. The al-fresco bar at the deck also offers unlimited beer, signature cocktails, soft drinks and snacks.

The cruise sails every Thursday between 16.30-23.00, with the hottest session being the 19.30-20.30 slot when the daily light and sound show, *A Symphony of Light*, lights up the skyline. [jennyuen@seayou.hk](mailto:jennyuen@seayou.hk); (852) 5235 0106

**4 Wisdom Path at Ngong Ping**

Ngong Ping's Wisdom Path was recently upgraded to boast new facilities such as a commemorative plaque for the late professor Jao Tsung-I, a site map, benches, QR codes that allow easy access to the updated site information online, as well as improved trails and directional signage to enhance the park experience for members of the public and tourists.



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Petite France, a French-style theme park in Gyeonggi Province

## Destination

# Venturing farther afield

To stimulate greater international visitor traffic, the provinces of Gyeonggi and Gyeongsangnam are beefing up offerings and stepping up transportation connections with nearby gateway cities. **Pamela Chow** reports

As the major destinations of Seoul, Busan and Jeju enjoy a growing roster of flight and cruise connections, surrounding provinces in South Korea are dangling new attractions and various promotions to lure travellers beyond the popular trio.

These provinces are also making efforts to improve transportation links from the gateway hubs, as industry players recognise that access is the biggest factor restricting visitors from venturing beyond the key cities.

Gyeongsangnam-do Provincial Government's marketing project manager, Shin Min Young, expressed: "Transportation is still the most important issue in local tourism, and it should be improved so that foreign FITs can (travel) conveniently."

She explained that although information on public transportation is available on social media and online, it is largely in Korean and remains "inconvenient" for travellers. The current alternative for visitors hoping to explore the Gyeongsangnam countryside would be renting a car at the airport.

Todd Seo, overseas marketing team assistant manager of Gyeonggi Tourism Organization, shares similar observations: "Gyeonggi is located very near Seoul and Incheon International Airport, but many foreign tourists stay only in Seoul. We figured that the biggest factor preventing independent tourists from visiting Gyeonggi is transportation."

As such, the tourism organisation has launched EG Tour Bus, a service that plies seven themed routes covering different attractions around the province, seeking to solve the lack of transportation that travellers often

face when venturing beyond Seoul. Gyeonggi is situated an hour by train from Seoul.

"So we made EG Tour Bus (with) various themes such as peacefulness, healing and history. Since tourists can

visit three to four attractions in a day (on this shuttle), EG Tour Bus has become very popular now," he added.

Similarly, Gyeongsangnam – located west of Busan – is planning to launch a one-day bus tour that

## What's new

### A land of multifaceted attractions



#### 1 EG Tour Bus

A shuttle bus package for foreigners visiting Gyeonggi, EG Tour Bus departs from Insadong and Hongik University Station and takes visitors around the province. The service plies seven different routes covering various themes such as peacefulness, healing and history, with each route featuring three or four attractions. Lunch is also provided.

#### 2 Jeju Shinhwa World

The integrated resort offers a broad range of attractions such as Shinhwa Theme Park and Water Park; Transformers Autobots Alliance and YG



#### 3 Temple stays and tours

More temples in South Korea now provide tours and stay programmes, thanks to a rising interest in the country's historic and religious sites following the designation of seven mountain temples as UNESCO World Heritage sites. Currently, 130 temples provide such pro-

#### 4 Wonderbox

Republique Jeju Shinhwa World; as well as accommodation such as Landing Jeju Shinhwa World Hotels & Resorts, and Marriott Jeju Shinhwa World Hotels & Resorts. The Shinhwa Resort and highly-anticipated Lionsgate Movie World are next on the list to open.

grammes, 26 of which do so in English. This is according to Templestay, a Cultural Corps of Korean Buddhism initiative that is said to be the only way international visitors can experience an immersion programme in the country's temples, where access has for long been restricted. Participants of Templestay may engage in experiences such as *Yebul* (a Buddhist ceremony), *Chamseon* (Seon meditation), as well as making lotus lanterns and Buddhist prayer beads.

And while foreign tourist accessibility "has improved gradually" with services like EG Tour Bus and K-Shuttle – a foreigner-exclusive shuttle visiting Korea's main tourist cities – having ride-hailing services would also be beneficial, opined Seo.

He said: "The restriction of shared ride services like Uber is a barrier to improving accessibility. If these were to be available in the foreseeable future, foreign tourists can travel around South Korea more conveniently and actively."

On top of these new products, Gyeonggi and Gyeongsangnam are banking on the Korean pop and drama wave to pump up tourist volume.

Gyeonggi is known for its "Hallyu tour activities", Seo said, thanks to popular filming sites such as Petite France from variety show *Running Man*, and Ilyeong Station from boy group BTS' music video, *Spring Day*.

In the case of Gyeongsangnam, the Hallyu wave has brought in more tourists "who visit Korea three times or more", said Shin.

She continued: "The demand for new sightseeing places other than the main cities is steadily increasing. In particular, tourists from countries with a high rate of revisit, such as Singapore, want to visit new places other than famous locations such as Seoul and Jeju."

Among the popular activities in Gyeongsangnam are temple stays, wellness programmes such as herbal foot spas and oriental medicine therapy, learning about traditional crafts such as *raden* (Korean lacquerware), and marine sports like yachting and skin diving.

#### 5 Jeju Air's new route

On July 4, low-cost carrier Jeju Air began direct flights between Singapore and Busan, operating four times weekly using a Boeing 737-800 aircraft. The route is a result of the signing of a six-party MoU to promote trade, business and tourism flows between Singapore and Busan.

# CONNECT

## Attention grabbers

**MOST READ**

### Travel brands attract millennials with Instagram tours

As Instagram creates a wave of social media-fuelled tourism among millenni-

als, travel operators are not only building a presence on the popular photo-sharing platform itself, but also creating photo-driven tours and itineraries to appeal to the new generation of holidaymakers.

Abhinav Kumar, regional manager – South-east Asia, GetYourGuide, shared at the recent Arival Bangkok conference that the activities OTA has worked with a tour operator to create an Instagram-driven itinerary to Bali's Lempuyang Temple, and further boosting its bookings and revenue share by upselling the "bestselling

tour" with add-on options of premium car transfers, Polaroid cameras and drone videos to entice the Insta-set.

Nicola Scaramuzzino, Thailand country manager at Panorama Destination, also said that the DMC is also keen to sell Instagram tours on online platforms, as the company seeks to "customise different products for the digital generation".

However, Scaramuzzino also observes a generation more keen on "discovering photogenic spots than the history of a destination". Some attractions, such as Padar



Bali's Pura Lempuyang Temple, with its iconic gates, has gained a massive following among the Insta-set

on Komodo Island, are often reduced to being photo points for the Instagram addicts, as some travellers go to lengths and even dangerous positions to capture the perfect photo.

### Genting Malaysia settles theme park battles with Fox and Disney

Genting Malaysia, Twentieth Century Fox Group of companies and The Walt Disney Company have reached a settlement regarding a dispute over a Fox-branded theme park in Genting Highlands.

Under the settlement agreement, Genting Malaysia has been granted a license to use certain Fox intellectual properties. The company is currently updating its development and construction plans to complete the outdoor theme park utilising both Fox and non-Fox intellectual properties. The outdoor theme park will also be renamed.

The planned reopening of the outdoor theme park is music to the ears of inbound players, as the repeated delays and uncertainty surrounding the Fox-branded theme park have affected promotion plans of Genting Highlands in overseas markets.

Uzaidi Udani, Malaysian Inbound Tourism Association president, said: "It will be easier for our overseas counterparts to convince their clients who have been to Malaysia before to revisit the country."

Arokia Das, director, Luxury Tours Malaysia, commented: "We had earlier forecasted a minimum 30 per cent increase from Asian markets because of the planned opening of Twentieth Century Fox World Theme Park. Now we project the same with the opening of the new theme park, even though it will not be a full Fox theme park."

**WE LIKE**

### Air New Zealand drops ban on tattoo

Air New Zealand has ended a long-standing ban on staff having visible tattoos, in a move that it says will allow employees to express cultural and individual creativity amid growing social acceptance of tattoos.

Research by Air New Zealand found that one in five adult New Zealanders has at least one tattoo, with more than 35 per cent of people under 30 tattooed. Tattoos are common among the Maori people to mark their genealogy and heritage.

Air New Zealand had earlier come under criticism for its tattoo restriction, with some accusing it of hypocrisy for using aspects of the Maori culture – e.g. the fern-like symbol known as *koru* – in its marketing efforts.

Tattoos are culturally sacred for New Zealanders with Maori heritage



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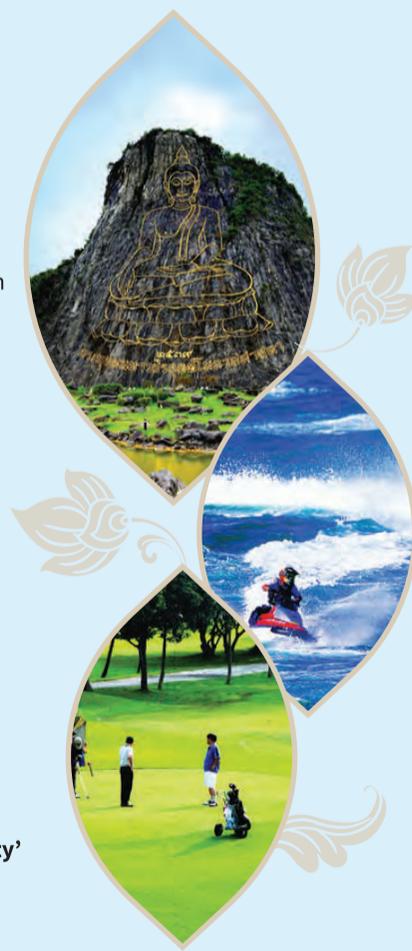
PDMF's event format is unique: alongside the one-day conference, it offers an unprecedented, **culturally immersive experience** of the host destination through the one-day technical tour - introducing delegates to lesser-known yet attractive corners of the world.

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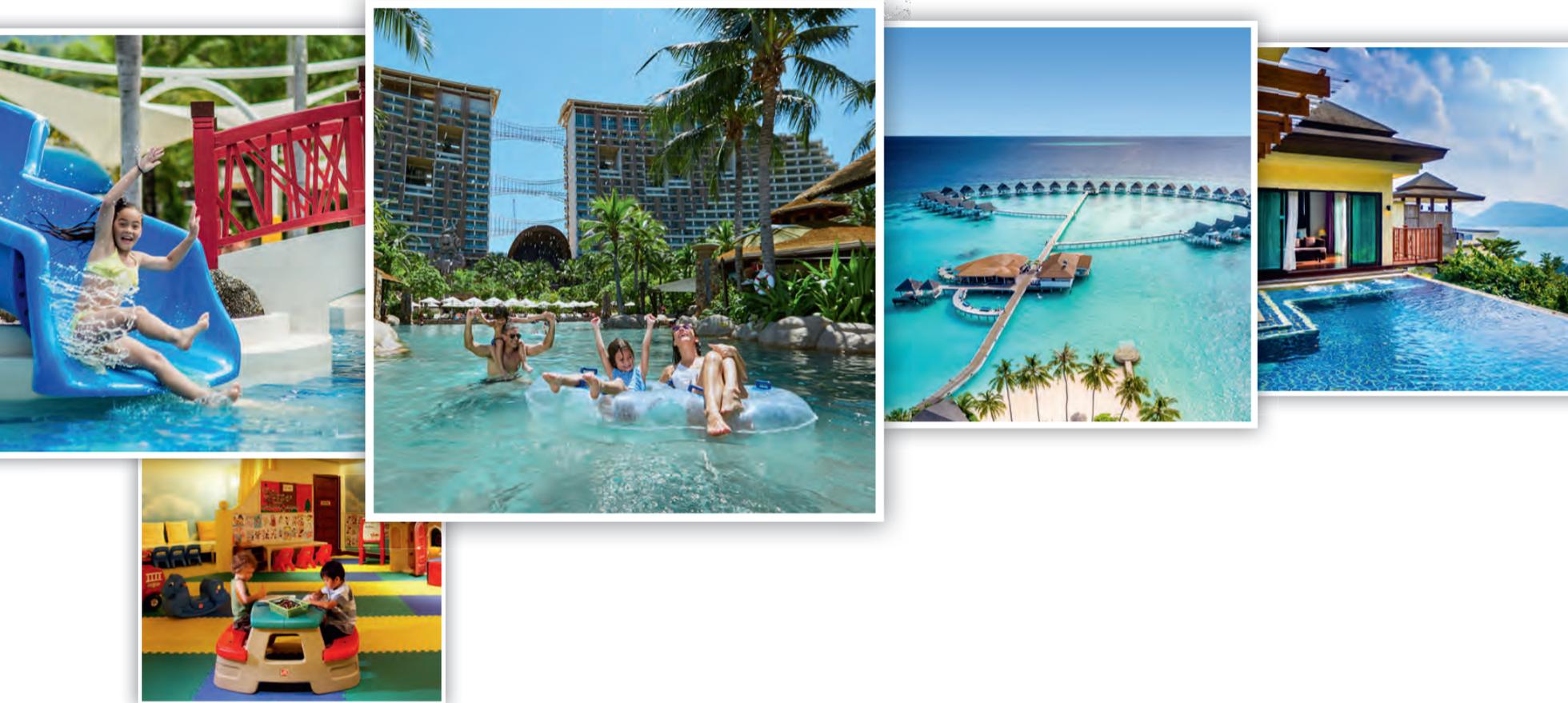
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