



## Discovering new frontiers

The 'Stans are emerging as tourism's newest lure, as travel buyers at PTM seek out novel destinations to sell to a clientele already familiar with most parts of Asia

**By Prudence Lui and Rachel AJ Lee**

To cater to an increasingly discerning clientele, travel buyers are showing a greater appetite for novel and exotic destinations still untouched by mass tourism – and Central Asia appears to tick all the right boxes.

The region is dubbed the “last tourism frontier” by Air Astana’s CEO Peter Foster, sentiments that are also borne out by buyers at this year’s PATA Travel Mart (PTM), which marks the first time a PATA event is held in Central Asia.

Several buyers new to PTM said they were drawn to the mart this year because the host destination, Kazakhstan, is a fascinating and largely-unheard of country to them. This is also in line with PATA’s aim to promote emerging and less popular destinations for tourism.

Miroslav Konarik, sales manager for Czech Republic-based Periscope Skandinávie, which specialises in outbound travel for clients based in Scandinavia, Scotland and Iceland, told the *Daily*: “This is my first time in Kazakhstan, and is also my first time at PTM. I joined because the destination is interesting, and I’m excited to find out what the country has to show.”

Aside from “being on the lookout for new destinations”, Konarik is also interested to develop products to less-travelled destinations in the region such as Georgia and Armenia, adding that they are more “interesting than Thailand”.

Similarly, Madalina Nan, manager of

outgoing department at Romania-based Atlantic Tours, indicated she would like to see more of Central Asia.

“This is unlike any traditional countries we cover, and not many people know about it,” she opined.

Meanwhile, Brazil-based Venturas’ relationship manager, Leonardo Monteiro, revealed: “Apart from Kazakhstan, I’m also interested in surrounding countries like Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan, which are all new to me. Also, the region is affordable. My company offers adventure activities like trekking, and cultural experiences, so I’m

on the lookout for ground handlers and DMCs.”

Maria Ignatova, general manager of Bulgaria-based Opma Tpaden, hopes to seek out new contacts and network with local sellers at the mart, as her “clients are interested in Kazakhstan as a destination”.

Asian buyers are registering interest



**Yeh: quest for novelty**

in Central Asia too. Paul Yeh, president of Shih Chun Travel Service in Taiwan, believes that Central Area will be a new destination that sophisticated Taiwanese travellers would be interested in.

“I’m hungry for new ideas to sell to high-end Taiwanese travellers, who are already very well-travelled,” he shared.

Instead of selling Kazakhstan as a potential mono destination, Yeh intends to add Kazakhstan to an existing India itinerary, as the country is “easier to visit after India”, rather than flying through Beijing.

Likewise, Fei Xin, deputy general manager outbound of Suzhou China International Travel Service, wants to explore possibilities in bringing high-end Chinese groups to Central Asia.

Xin noted: “The (Chinese) government is pushing the Belt and Road Initiative, but the general public is not familiar with countries along the route, along with its visa requirements, modes of transport, history and culture. Hence, we hope to establish a network that can benefit our business.”

“I’m interested to develop products to less-travelled destinations in the region such as Georgia and Armenia, as the area is more interesting for my clients as compared to Thailand.”

**Miroslav Konarik**  
Sales manager, Periscope Skandinávie Czech Republic

## Sustainability, tech at forefront

**By Rachel AJ Lee**

Technology and sustainability are two of the most talked about issues in Asia’s tourism industry, but bringing both together in destination development and management is not without its challenges.

Earlier this month, The Asian Development Bank and PATA teamed up with Plug and Play, a global open innovation platform, to develop technologies to re-define the sustainable tourism space in Asia-Pacific.

But challenges abound, which PATA’s director of sustainability & social responsibility Graham Harper opined was more on the supply side, as emerging destinations “do not have same access” to alternative supply chain options.


He added: “There is also a need for businesses to make use of strong data. At the very start of the project, they need to have a clear indication of where they are going, how they are going to get there, and how to measure it.”

Patricia Nordstrom, manager of corporate partnerships, Plug and Play, added that in comparison to the US, challenges in Asia include having to “fill the gap between corporates, governments and startups”.


“We’re trying to educate corporates on the best practices, to implement them that allows them to grow and scale. An ecosystem is key,” said Nordstrom. “There’s a need to start innovating, to procreate new solutions and streamline opportunities, especially in a place like Kazakhstan,” she noted.




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# Gallery

# Forging connections By Yingyong Unanongrak



Khaolak Laguna Resort Thailand's Praprut Khorpetch, Yada Sa-Arddee and Jarunee Wongkaew



DASTA Thailand's Suthep Keasang (centre) and his team



Travolution UK's Lee Hayhurst and Adara Singapore's Matthew Zatto



Premiera Tour Operator Russia's Nino Khavtasi



GATC Russia's Tileuov Yer-Ali and Gaukhar Zhenisbek



ADB Ventures & The Mekong Business Initiative Vietnam's Jason Lusk, PATA Thailand's Graham Harper and Air Astana Kazakhstan's Richard Ledger



Right: Bukhara Eco Tour Uzbekistan's Rakhmonova Feruza and Anor Travel Uzbekistan's Babanazarova Nargiza



Left: Venturas Brazil's Leonardo Monteiro



ITB Advisory Germany's Bruno Walter, Kazakh Tourism's Timur Duisengaliev and Complete Service Kazakhstan's Abylkhan Sarsenbayev



TTG's PicStop lensmen are on the prowl for great photos. See this photo and more at our online gallery by scanning the code above.




Uttarakhand Tourism Development Board India's Pradeep Singh Negi (left) and Vivek Singh Chauhan (right)



Bangladesh Tourism Board's Mohibul Islam, Abu Tahir Muhammad Zaber, Lubna Yasmime and Bhubon Chandra Biswas



# Two Wheels, Infinite Discoveries

How far can two wheels take me?  
How many valleys passed, how many kilometers traveled,  
How many friendly smiles met...how many memories made?  
From coastline to tree line...surf to snow...wetlands to highlands...  
So much inspiring beauty and challenging terrain.  
I found it all...cycling in Taiwan!

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**Taiwan**

THE HEART OF ASIA

News/Gallery

# Putting Kazakhstan in the “middle of everywhere”

Leveraging its position straddling Asia and Europe, Air Astana seeks to build more inbound interest and traffic into Central Asia

**By Xinyi Liang-Pholsena**

In an age where few places are untouched by mass tourism, the Central Asian nation of Kazakhstan remains “one of tourism’s last frontiers”, said Peter Foster, CEO of Air Astana, speaking at the keynote address of yesterday’s Travolution Forum Asia.

Applauding PATA’s decision to host its first event in Central Asia, Foster urged sellers attending the mart to become “pioneers” in selling Kazakhstan to their markets. Kazakhstan, the world’s ninth largest country by land mass with an 18 million population, offers a “great steppe” for travel sellers.

Far from being a country “in the middle of nowhere”, Kazakhstan is located right “in the mid-

dle of everywhere”, Foster stated, as evident from the Kazakh flag carrier’s connections to most cities in Asia and Europe within a seven-hour flight radius.

“Kazakhstan is the perfect bridge between Asia and Europe,” he maintained.

The launch of its low-cost arm, FlyArystan, will enhance Air Astana’s hub status and connectivity with Central Asia. Already, the LCC has reduced domestic airfares by 30 per cent, and will soon launch services to regional cities, said Foster.

Meanwhile, Air Astana is expecting delivery of the first of its five Airbus A321neo aircraft within this month, which will gradually replace its Boeing 757s on long range routes to Asia and Europe. Further deliveries of the A321neos are expected over the next two years.

Foster shared that Shanghai and Singapore are high on Air Astana’s flight expansion radar. The carrier is already carrying

a lot of business from China to Paris, London and Frankfurt, leveraging its hub status in Central Asia.

Currently, 40 per cent of its international business is made up of transit business and 25 per cent of its total turnover, therefore the airline chief sees a critical need to build the inbound market into Kazakhstan.

“We’re relying very much on outbound from Kazakhstan and Russia. We’re not carrying many Asians into Kazakhstan,” he said.

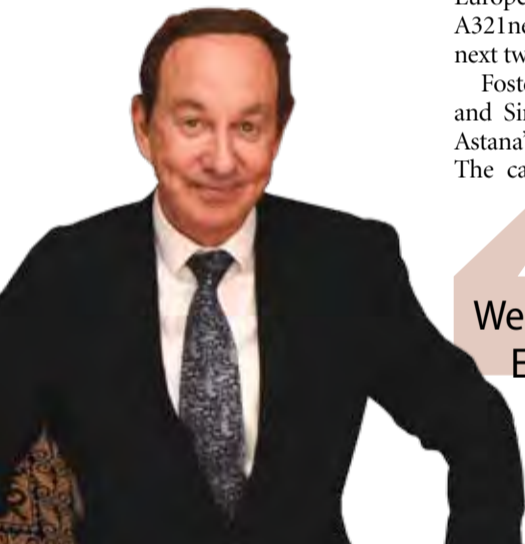
“We need tourists from Asia. The Europeans are all over the Silk Road but we see very few Asians in the region.”

One way is through co-marketing Kazakhstan with the “big five tourism destinations” in the region, which include Almaty, St Petersburg and Moscow in Russia, Tbilisi in Georgia, and Kiev in Ukraine.

Kazakhstan is becoming “a must-see destination” on the Silk Road, said Foster, as the country is home to ancient monuments and cities with storied history.

We need tourists from Asia. The Europeans are all over the Silk Road but we see very few Asians in the region.

**Peter Foster**  
CEO, Air Astana



## India gains ground as key market for the Maldives

**By Feizal Samath**

A combination of several positive factors including endorsement from Bollywood celebrities, growing air connectivity between the two countries, and aggressive promotion, has led to a surge in Indian arrivals to the Maldives, culminating in the powerful South Asian neighbour becoming its second largest source market.

While China reigns as the Maldives’ top source market, India in June overtook Italy as the second largest source to record 82,140 arrivals in 1H2019, compared to 41,082 in the same 2018 period and reflecting a near 100 per cent increase year-on-year from 90,472 arrivals for the whole of 2018.

According to Thooyib Mohamed, managing director of the Maldives Marketing and PR Corporation – the country’s main state tourism promotion agency – the appointment of the new government in the Maldives has brought about the launch of aggressive destination promotion campaigns in India and elsewhere.

As well, the commencement of new services from Indian carriers, IndiGo and GoAir, is another positive factor driving the spike in arrivals from the Indian market, he said, adding to existing scheduled flights to the Mal-

dives operated by major airlines such as Air India and SpiceJet.

The country’s tourism marketing budget has tripled to US\$6.7 million in 2019 from \$2.2 million in 2018, following calls by the industry for greater destination promotion given the proliferation of new resorts opening in the past 18 months.

Dillip Rajakarier, CEO of Minor Hotel Group, which owns the Anantara and Niyama resorts in the Maldives, believes the increase in numbers from India is driven by increased air connectivity, which enhance the Maldives’ value proposition to budget travellers attracted by the growing room supply in the three- to four-star categories as well as local guesthouses.

“At the luxury end of the market we have also seen significant increases of 26 per cent in guests from India,” Rajakarier said.

A current major trend attracting more Indians to the Maldives, according to Andrew Ashmore, chief commercial officer at Coco Collection Hotels & Resorts/Sunland Hotels, is Indian travellers wanting to emulate Bollywood stars in their social media sharing of holidays in the Maldives.

Furthermore, there is also growing spending power among the Indian middle classes spending power, he observed.

## Addressing the power of tech Photos by Yingyong Unanongrak



## Intelligence

# APAC's unstoppable online growth

While the rate of adoption and penetration of online travel services differs across Asia-Pacific markets, digital travel still has much room for growth and opportunities, according to a joint report by analytics company Comscore and PATA

Chinese and Indian consumers play a large role in shaping Asia-Pacific's (APAC) digital landscape, and the travel industry is no exception. China and India have the highest number of travel website users, with 311 million (38%) and 152 million (54%) respectively. Both China and India have a greater audience than Australia, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan and Vietnam combined.

There are distinct differences in the adoption of online travel services by market. In Taiwan, for example, 75% of online consumers accessed a travel website, whereas only 9% accessed a site in Vietnam. Altogether, APAC has plenty of room for expansion; online travel adoption in all APAC markets is still below the 84% level seen in more mature markets like the US.

### COMPOSITION OF THE TRAVEL INDUSTRY

In APAC (excluding China and India), travel information sites are the larg-

est online service, boasting 55 million unique visitors. However, in China and India, the travel information category is ranked fourth, with only 46 and 42 million unique visitors respectively.

In both India and China, categories which allow the purchase of travel services such as OTAs, ground & cruise, and car transportation ranked in the top three travel site categories.

India's top two travel site categories are ground & cruise and car transportation, with 71 and 64 million unique visitors respectively, as travellers tend to travel domestically by land or sea. The tendency of domestic travellers to travel by train (Indian Railways) and bus (redBus) is a major contributing factor to the rise of ride-sharing apps such as Uber and Ola Cabs.

On the other hand, OTAs dominate the travel landscape in China, with 198 million unique visitors in January 2019. This volume is largely due to the dominance of Ctrip, Alitrip (also known as Fliggy), and Qunar, travel booking sites that provide a number of travel services including ac-

commodation and transportation reservations, packaged tours, and more.

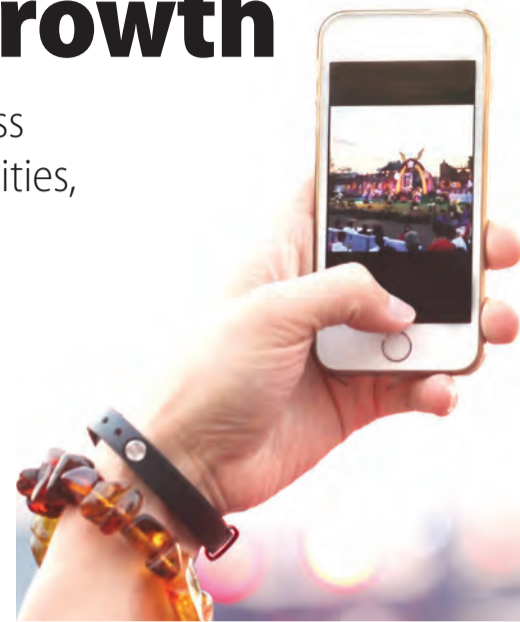
### PROFILE AND BEHAVIOUR OF ONLINE TRAVEL CONSUMERS

A comparison of affinity among different age groups shows that the 25-34 age group is more inclined to consume online travel services, particularly in Taiwan and Hong Kong. However, the 45-54 age demographic displays a higher affinity for online travel services in Australia, Indonesia and Japan.

In January 2019, it was found that airlines, OTAs, and hotel/resort/home-sharing were the most frequently visited sites.

During that period, consumers in Taiwan, Vietnam and Hong Kong were the most frequent users of these sites. Taiwan had the highest average view per visitor (59) in OTAs, Vietnam had the highest average view per visitor (24) in hotel/resort/home-sharing, and Hong Kong had the highest average view per visitor (54) in airlines.

In India and China, the frequency of



site visits was relatively low. This is because users there tend to spend longer on each page of an OTA, with Indian consumers spending 8.6 minutes per view and Chinese consumers spending 1.7 minutes per view. In comparison, users in Taiwan, Vietnam and Hong Kong spent 0.9, 0.7, and 1.0 minute per view respectively on similar sites.

Devices that consumers use to access travel websites also play a part. Mobile devices can be used on the go, and the optimisation of content for mobile devices has made the smaller screen size less of a



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## Intelligence

constraint. However, desktops and laptops are still better for casual exploration or in-depth information gathering due to their larger screens.

As a percentage of their digital population, India and Indonesia are home to the largest mobile-first populations, with over 85% of their digital population being mobile-only. Although China has a large mobile-first population on a percentage basis and the largest in terms of total digital population, the size of the combined desktop-only and multi-platform populations is still significant, with over 103 million unique visitors.

Australia, Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore have digital populations that are spread evenly across the three platforms, with largely combined desktop-only and multi-platform populations.

### INTERACTION WITH OTAs

Consumer behaviour with OTAs provides insights into consumption patterns. The frequency and duration of visits to these sites illustrates consumer reliance on such sites and the level of consideration consumers give to sites when making travel decisions.

China leads APAC in visit frequency, with 16.6 visits per visitor in January 2019. However, Chinese consumer visits last an average of 6.6 minutes per visit, less than consumers in other APAC markets. This indicates quick consumption of information or fast purchases. However, the higher frequency of visits more than compensates for short visit lengths; Chinese consumers spent 110 minutes on travel-related sites.

On the other hand, consumers in Taiwan, Malaysia and Hong Kong visit OTAs less frequently (just over four times per

month) but stay on them longer (over 10 minutes per visit). As a result, total time spent on sites per visitor was more than 43 minutes in these markets in January 2019.

Indonesia and India follow a different trend. Consumers in Indonesia and India tend to spend more time going directly to sites in categories such as ground & cruise and car transportation for transactions related to travel rather than booking them through travel agents. In January 2019, users in Indonesia spent 38.4 minutes per user on ground & cruise sites, while users in India spent 26.1 minutes per user on car transportation sites, each being the top category in terms of total minutes per visitor for each country, respectively.

### CONCLUSION

While India and China have the highest number of users in APAC that accessed travel websites, both markets still have room for growth, as both have a lower proportion of their digital audiences visiting travel sites than more mature markets.

Preference for online travel services differs among different age groups. In some markets, the 25-34 age group is more inclined to consume online travel services, particularly in Hong Kong and Taiwan. On the other hand, in the Australian, Indonesian and Japanese markets, the 45-54 age group shows a higher affinity for online travel services.

Although consumers increasingly access travel sites via mobile, markets vary in their reliance versus desktops. Some markets such as India and Indonesia have a large proportion of mobile-only Internet users, while multi-platform Internet usage is more common in other markets.

# Connecting with

PATA and Mastercard have released a joint report looking at how the Chinese tourism boom is changing and redefining Asia's travel landscape



One of the defining trends in the Asian tourism industry is the surge in outbound Chinese tourists. Over the past decade, many more Chinese tourists started travelling overseas – a direct consequence of rapid economic development in China that has, in turn, led to a booming middle class and a spike in disposable incomes.

These economic advances have gone hand-in-hand with one of the most dramatic infrastructure transformations seen in history, which has impacted air travel. For example, the number of international air routes involving China has risen to 803 in 2017 from a mere 133 in 2000. In the same period, the total number of air travellers in China surged from 62 million to 551 million.

This progress has led to a swell in the number of Chinese travelling overseas. In 2010, there were 57 million outbound trips from China; by 2017, that number rose to 130 million. Correspondingly, as of 2018, only about 120 million Chinese nationals had passports, and this is now expected to double to 240 million by 2020.

Thus, Chinese outbound trips are expected to exceed 400 million by 2030 and radically alter Asia's tourism industry.

### WHERE ARE THE CHINESE GOING?

According to Mastercard's Asia Pacific 2017 Destinations Index, which measures and ranks international tourism arrivals and cross-border spending in 160 destinations worldwide, the Asia-Pacific region saw a total of around 333 million overnight international travellers in 2017, spending a total of US\$264 billion. Chinese tourists accounted for nearly one-fifth of this spending.

Thirty million Chinese tourists travelled to South-east Asia in 2017, representing 22.5% of all tourists visiting the region. This number has grown at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 26.2% per year since 2009. In the same period, total expenditure by Chinese tourists in the region grew even faster, at a CAGR of 29%. These increases highlight the growing importance of the Chinese traveller to the region.

In Oceania, China is the main source of tourists, contributing 3.3 million tourists in 2017, or 14.5% of all tourists visiting the region. In this period, the total expenditure by Chinese tourists in Oceania rose from US\$1.3 billion in 2009 to US\$4.9 billion in 2017, outpacing total tourism expenditure by all other international travellers.

### WHO ARE THESE TRAVELLERS?

Digitalisation is a growing trend globally, and modern Chinese travellers have quickly adopted new technology and are more tech-savvy than their peers elsewhere. For one, the Chinese have embraced mobile payments faster than others. In the first 10 months of 2017 alone, a record US\$12.8 trillion in mobile payment transactions were made in China, compared to only US\$49.3 billion in the US. Chinese people are also eager adopters of contactless payment technology.

A recent study found that 94% of Chinese tourists prefer using mobile payment over cash or credit card. The same study states that 69% of Chinese tourists made mobile payments in 2018, up from 65% a year earlier.

The implications of this increased digitalisation on the tourism industry are tremendous. Payment platforms, including those that are used in China, are becoming increasingly popular in cities across Asia that see a large influx of Chinese tourists. In fact, 58% of businesses in areas often visited by Chinese tourists within Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand now accept mobile payment, with many adopting Chinese mobile payment platforms.

Businesses across the region are swiftly realising that failing to adapt to the evolving spending patterns of outbound Chinese tourists means risking losing business. More than half of businesses that do not yet accept mobile payments say they are very likely to do so in the future.

Meanwhile, digital and social media is influencing travel behaviour and decision-making among Chinese travellers who are increasingly doing their own online research and following social media accounts to personalise their travel experiences. This trend reflects their growing desire to explore the unknown and seek unique, fulfilling travel experiences.

Digitalisation has also impacted online travel bookings for tickets and accommodation. China alone accounts for about one-fifth of all online travel bookings globally, and digital travel bookings made in China were estimated to have risen by 21% between 2017 and 2018. Driving this growth of Chinese digital travel sales are tech-savvy millennials who look to online booking platforms for an enhanced customer experience.

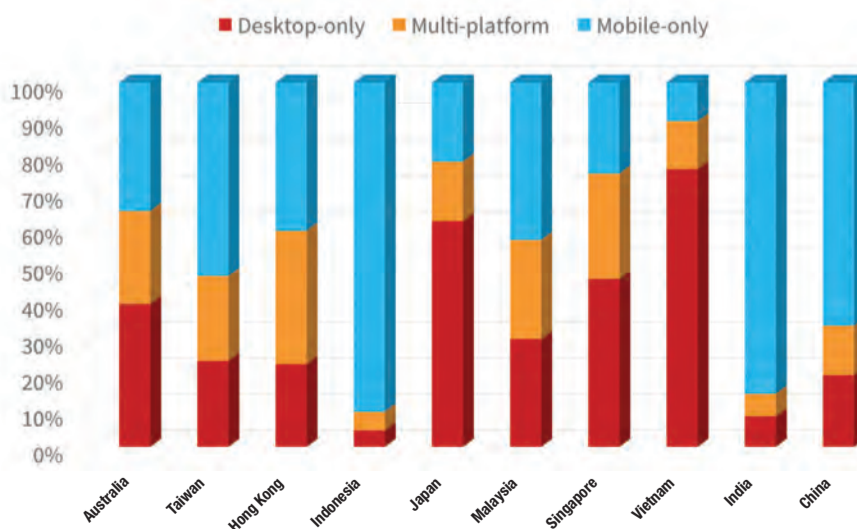
### HOW TO (DIGITALLY) CASH IN?

Appreciating China's rise as a source of tourists in Asia is the first step toward tap-

AVERAGE VIEWS PER VISITOR



APAC COMPARISON OF TRAVEL SITES ACCESS



# the Chinese digital traveller

ping into a changing set of opportunities. Businesses, including luxury chains, restaurants and hotels, must understand the Chinese consumer and customise offerings to their evolving spending habits. To adapt, they must increase their awareness of both the offline and online behaviour of Chinese tourists.

Embracing the digitalisation of payments and travel is one key way to adapt

to the changes driven by the surge in outbound Chinese travellers. This should be a huge priority, both to woo Chinese tourists as well as to generate data.

With the help of technology companies like Mastercard, data analytics can unearth new insights into present and future trends that will drive the tourism industry.

Companies must also seek ways to meet young travellers' growing demand for in-

dividualised, curated and bespoke experiences. Four in five Chinese travellers share their travels on WeChat, underscoring the importance of providing the best possible experiences so that businesses become highly talked about and sought after.

Finally, Chinese tourists' love affair with digitalisation makes it vital that businesses have an online and social media presence. Businesses can also gain easier

access to travellers by providing information and services on their apps and websites in Mandarin. If the region's tourism industry puts the right digital strategies in place, the growth in Chinese tourists will be an economic and technological boon to all. It will open new markets, drive next-generation digital transformations and bring new experiences for all global travellers.

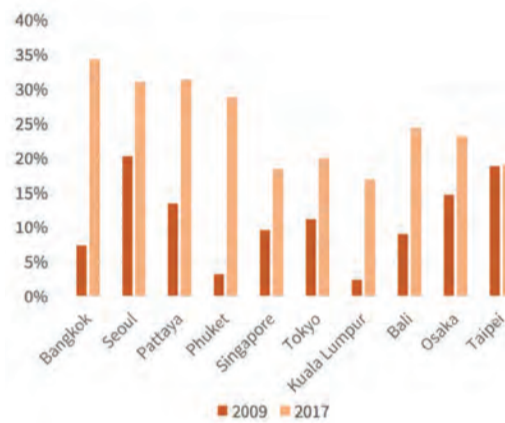
## City snippets

- Bangkok, the most popular tourist destination globally, is a favourite among Chinese tourists. It had 20.1 million overnight tourist arrivals in 2017, with Chinese tourists making up a whopping 34.3% – up from just 7.3% in 2009. In the same period, the spending of Chinese tourists in Bangkok also increased from US\$494 million to US\$5.6 billion.
- Singapore welcomed 13.9 million international tourists in 2017, 18.7% of whom were from China. Chinese tourists accounted for more than a quarter of the approximately US\$17

billion in tourism expenditure in Singapore that year.

- Seoul received a total of 9.5 million international overnight visitors in 2017, of whom three million were from China. This number is even more staggering considering that in 2017, the number of Chinese tourists visiting Seoul actually fell by 48.8 per cent due to a Chinese travel ban to South Korea owing to geopolitical reasons. Despite taking a substantial hit, the share of Chinese tourists visiting Seoul from 2009 to 2017 still increased from 20.2% to 31.1%, while their expenditure grew at a CAGR of 14.7%.

## Chinese tourists as a share of all overnight travellers to key Asian cities, %



A similar story is playing out in city after city across Asia-Pacific, particularly in South-east Asia. In fact, Mastercard data shows that 18 of the 20 urban destinations most visited by Chinese travellers are in the Asia-Pacific region, with New York and Los Angeles the only aberrations. Global favourite Paris ranks 21<sup>st</sup> in comparison.

Source: The Mastercard Global Destination Cities Index and Asia Pacific Destination Index

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## Destination Thailand

# Deeper, farther and wider

Thailand is stepping up promotion of less visited areas and secondary provinces to the world, as it seeks to keep the country a preferred destination for new and repeat travellers alike, writes **Suchat Sritama**



Chiang Rai was thrust into global spotlight during the high-profile cave rescue operation in summer 2018

**T**hailand wants to introduce its second-tier provinces to the world so international visitors can have access to a wider and richer range of experiences in the country.

Tourism authorities and operators in Thailand have pledged to form a joint commitment to woo foreigners and locals to 55 provinces that receive less than four million tourists each year.

New tourism and sports minister Pipat Ratchakitprakarn said tourism stakeholders have already begun implementing a series of action plans to strengthen tourism in those provinces.

“The plan is to keep Thailand as a preferred destination for international tourists, and to promote more second-tier provinces to foreigners and locals,” said Pipat.

The Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) will kick off the first phase of promotions and activities for 33 potential provinces. Another 22 provinces will follow in 2020.

Based on marketing action plans drafted by TAT, some of the destinations will be able to promote themselves with their unique attractions, while others may need help to reposition themselves.

In addition, the committee will work towards improving safety and security standards in the provinces. The ministry will work closer with industry players to increase safety standards so tourists will be more comfortable visiting outer areas.

Yuthasak Supasorn, governor of TAT, said the Thai tourism sector has already been contributing nearly 20 per cent to-

wards Thailand’s economy, but it is expected to grow even more this year and beyond.

In 2018, 38 million tourists visited the country. Out of those, only 2.7 million travelled to second-tier provinces. In the first six months of this year, 19.6 million foreigners visited the country; during the same period, both locals and foreign tourists made 35 million trips to second-tier provinces.

The top three most visited provinces were Nakhon Si Thammarat, Pitsanulok and Chiang Rai respectively. Chiang Rai earned the highest tourism revenues, followed by Nakhon Si Thammarat and Satun.

“Thailand has so much to offer but sometimes you need to go beyond the ob-

vious. Clients are taking advantage of the increased airlift into places like Phuket and Samui, but then move to resort areas where they can experience the Thailand of yesteryear,” said David Kevan of Chic Locations, a UK tour operator.

“On my last travels around southern Thailand, I fell in love with the country all over again. It has its pockets of overdevelopment, but there are so many other areas where you can live your dream and in supreme comfort,” he added.

Travel to secondary cities is expected to increase from 30 per cent this year to 35 per cent in 2020, and part of that growth will be driven by foreigners. The data from the ministry shows that 70 per cent of total tourists visited the top 22 major provinces.

Chiang Rai is likely to benefit from the massive international media coverage during the cave rescue operation of the young football team. Satun in the south, meanwhile, was named by UNESCO as a new geopark, and Leoi in the north-east was one of the top ranked in terms of visitor growth.

TAT also wants to elevate some events to international status. These include a car racing event in Buriram, a beach run in Pattaya and in Khon Kaen. These will target at least three groups – senior citizens, females and the millennials.

Wichit Prakobkosol, chairman of CCT Group, one of the largest inbound tour operators in Thailand, urges public and private sectors to collaborate in marketing and product development so less popular destinations will receive a boost in interest from travellers.

“Of the visitors that came to Thailand last year, not many went to secondary provinces as they should have done. Spreading them out to new destinations will be good,” he said.

Phuriwat Limthavornrat, managing director of P Incentive Tour Event, called for officials to put more marketing efforts to boost tourism business in provinces. He said tourists, entrepreneurs and local businesses should share in the benefits of tourism. – **additional reporting by Xinyi Liang-Pholsena**

### What's hot

#### Mövenpick BDMS Wellness Resort Bangkok

Mövenpick’s third outpost in Bangkok has soft-opened on June 1, leveraging its connection with owner Bangkok Dusit Medical Services (BDMS), Thailand’s largest private hospital group which runs the BDMS Wellness Clinic next door, to offer a holistic suite of wellness amenities and programmes.

The urban retreat in Bangkok’s Ploenchit area features 293 guestrooms outfitted with wellness amenities like mood lighting, yoga mats and bouncing balls, of which 15 suites feature Mövenpick’s “first in Asia” YouBed, a Swiss invention that allows adjustment of softness and hardness.



From left: a room in Hotel Nikko Bangkok; Tamarind restaurant at Mövenpick BDMS Wellness Resort Bangkok



#### Hotel Nikko Bangkok

Nikko Hotels International, the Japanese luxury hotel group, has expanded its footprint to Bangkok. Hotel Nikko Bangkok, owned by Grand Tower Inn Group, is located in Thonglor, Sukhumvit, and features 301 guestrooms and suites, including 10 extended stay rooms complete with kitchenette.

#### Centre Point Pattaya

Centre Point Hotel Pattaya has launched, featuring 556 units in a 33-storey building. Each room is equipped with international hotel-standard fittings, a living area, pantry with microwave, and private balcony. The hotel also features a 180-seater restaurant and a 286m<sup>2</sup> room for meetings and events.

#### Shama Lakeview Asoke

Revitalisation work at Shama Lakeview Asoke, under Thailand’s Onyx Hospitality Group, was recently completed, a year after the property’s rebrand. Conceptualised by Bangkok-based ASC Interior, the redesign of the 429-unit serviced residence was inspired by the nearby Benjakitti Park.

## Destination **South Korea**

# 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



Petite France, a French-style theme park in Gyeonggi Province, became popular after famed variety show *Running Man* was shot on its premises

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 runs between Busan and several cities in the province. It will include an English-speaking guide and will be sold through OTAs such as Trip.com, revealed Shin.

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.

### What's hot

#### Gyeonggi bus tours

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.

#### More attractions at Shinhwa World

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



#### 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 programmes, 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.

#### Wonderbox opens in Seoul

A new indoor theme park, Wonderbox, has opened, completing the first phase of the Paradise City integrated resort project in Seoul. The two-storey building covers an area of 3,933m<sup>2</sup>, offering the concept of a night-time amusement park with rides such as the sports attraction Sky Trail, the 360-degree rotary Mega-Mix, and Magic Bike, a pedal-powered gondola ride.

#### Jeju Air's new Singapore link

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.

## Destination Vietnam

# New beach stars in making

These sleepy coastal towns might have been flying under the tourist radar, but not for much longer as their infrastructure improves and garner the attention of hospitality and inbound travel operators. By [Marissa Carruthers](#)



The central coastal province of Quy Nhon is now seeing the entry of international hotel brands

Vietnam's developing coastline is helping to position the South-east Asian nation as an all-round leisure destination, thanks to its more than 3,000km of coastline, of which large swathes remain untouched.

Pockets of development along the coast, coupled with an increase in flights to secondary destinations, have also added to Vietnam's appeal as a beach destination.

Jeff Redl, managing director of Diethelm Vietnam, said: "(Vietnam's) coastal areas are definitely rising in popularity, and this has a lot to do with air connections, as well as an increase in agent awareness."

The expansion of accommodation sup-

ply in these areas, combined with flexible visa policies and higher standards of service offered at lower prices, said Nguyen Thi Tuyet, Asia DMC Indochina's managing director, have also made Vietnam's central and southern coast a competitive beach destination.

She opined that the uniqueness of Vietnam's beaches is "another advantage", with each beach suiting "different seasons and different types of travellers".

Despite the spike in interest for coastal spots, Nicholas Wade, general manager of Khiri Cambodia, said Vietnam does not have the myriad offerings like diving and snorkelling of established locations such as Bali or Thailand's islands, which makes it difficult for the country to become a

standalone beach destination.

However, he added that it is precisely this that helps Vietnam "stand out", as the country's beaches are appealing because of its "rich culture and heritage, delicious food and incredible countryside".

"We are seeing more demand for beaches to be added as an extension to standard tours," Redl said, singling out Phu Quoc as a beach destination to watch. Rising demand, plus growing air connections from Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur, as well as charter flights from the UK and Scandinavian countries, Japan and South Korea have bolstered its appeal.

Added Redl: "An important element to this (stems from the increased) marketing and promotion in Europe."

Other factors that will continue to fan demand for Vietnam's coastline include development in beaches within driving distance from Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), including Ho Tram, Vung Tau and Phan Tiet, which are destinations that travel experts have revealed they are keeping a close eye on as infrastructure improves and tourism products increase.

Alexander Leven, general manager at Asian Trails Vietnam, said: "Beach destinations that can be reached by car from HCMC are becoming more popular. You don't need to buy a second flight, so the (overall package) price is much lower."

Leven shared that Ho Tram, which recently welcomed a Meliã resort, is growing in popularity, while various other high-end offerings are under construction.

But Ho Tram's infrastructure remains a challenge for now, as it offers few dining spots or seafood restaurants suitable for international visitors outside of the resorts. "But that will come," Leven believed.

However, Leven expressed fears over the imminent development of a casino complex, which he said will steer the area towards "mass tourism and take the destination totally in another direction".

Other destinations are now coming onto the radar of inbound tour operators.

Asia DMC's Nguyen predicts that Vung Tau, a two-hour drive from HCMC, is another emerging beach destination. Aside from being an ideal MICE location, its push as an environmental coastal city with upscale accommodation facilities is luring more leisure tourists.

As for Redl, Quy Nhon is one to watch, after Anantara and Avani opened there, with more upscale international brands expected to follow suit.

He said: "It has so much potential with hidden creeks, alcoves and beautiful beaches along the coastline – some of which are the most beautiful in Vietnam."

### What's hot

#### Teeing off in central Vietnam

Vietnam's golfing offerings just got off to a tee with Central Vietnam's Laguna Golf Lang Cõ becoming the first fully operational course in the world to be elevated into a new elite category by its designer Sir Nick Faldo.

The new Sir Nick Faldo Signature category will only be applied to Faldo's courses that match then maintain their designer's famously exacting standards across a range of markers including sustainability, conservation and quality of design.

#### Scenic coastal ride on Vespa

Enjoy the ride of a lifetime with Vespa Adventures' Hai Van Pass & Coastal Adventure tour. Starting in Hoi An, guests are driven on a Vespa past Danang beach and onto the iconic Hai Van Pass, which boasts incredible views across the bays that dot Central Vietnam's coastline. After passing temples, old war bunkers, ancestral houses and tombs, and stopping at charming fishing villages, the

full-day tour ends in historic Hue. Lunch at a local restaurant is included.

#### Discovering the art of cruising

The Lux Group has launched Heritage Cruises to sail the lesser-explored waters of the Gulf of Tonkin. The luxury cruise service offers authentic experiences for 40 guests on board a boutique river and ocean cruise ship. Amenities include two restaurants, a spa, indoor and outdoor lounge, swimming pool and bar and 20 suites. The cruise departs from Haiphong, and takes guests around the Cat Ba Archipelago.

#### Halong Bay from above

The Northern Vietnam Helicopter Company has started operating the country's first helicopter tourism service using two five-seat Bell 505 helicopters. Visitors can now enjoy unique bird's-eye views of Halong Bay's iconic limestone karsts jutting from the ocean, with various flight options, routes and timings. Alternatively, guests can travel in style from

Hanoi to Halong, or the service can be used for aerial surveys and photography.

#### New beach club in Ho Tram

Meliã Ho Tram Beach Resort has opened the country's first Spanish beach club – Breeza Beach Club – that boasts panoramic views of pristine

sands and heaps of chilled Mediterranean vibes.

The beach club is home to an open kitchen, airy interior that seats up to 160 people, a terrace with an outdoor cocktail bar at its centre designed to take advantage of Ho Tram's sunsets, and cabanas peppered between palm trees on the beach.



Heritage Cruises

## Destination Singapore

# All hands on board

Demand for experiential offerings is growing among travellers to Singapore, spurring inbound companies, hotels and resorts to serve up a new breed of tours and activities. **Pamela Chow** unearths these alternative attractions



Hotels are joining hands with travel operators to offer tours to unique sites in Singapore (pictured: Kampong Glam)

As the red-hot craze for immersive travel gains ground, tourism proponents in Singapore are getting creative by whipping up experiential and value-added activities for intrepid travellers.

Kicking off industry-wide efforts was the Tour Design Challenge launched last year by the Singapore Tourism Board (STB), which selected tour operators for a programme comprising industry workshops, site visits, pitching and grant support for selected applicants to pilot these new tours.

The challenge helped launch innovative tours such as Singapore 1920s: Trails of Ah Huat by Let's Go Singapore and the back-of-house Silicon Valley of Singapore Insider tour by UBE Singapore.

Furthermore, under this year's Marketing Innovation Programme, STB awarded seven businesses up to S\$1.3 million (US\$933,428) for marketing proposals that introduced a new dimension to storytelling about Singapore. One of the winning businesses, local e-commerce company Carousell, will launch a campaign – Embark on Your Great Singapore Treasure Trail – inviting Indonesian users to explore Singapore by planning their own 'treasure trail' itinerary using the Carousell app.

The need for innovative visitor experiences is not lost on the local hospitality sector. The young Six Senses Maxwell has paired with Jane's Singapore Tours to bring guests through locales such as MacRitchie Reservoir Park, Botanic Gardens and the Civic District.

Capella Singapore, under the Capella Curates programme, has launched the Qi

& The City experience that whizzes guests around the city in vintage sidecars while providing commentary about the fengshui principles reflected in the local architecture along the way.

Murray Aitken, general manager, Six Senses Singapore, expressed: "We want to be an intrinsic part of the local fabric and culture, and if this calls for a deeper exploration of community partners who can bring about a layered approach to help our guests reconnect with themselves and experience the community, then we will continue to innovate, look for experiences that are always unique – often unexpected, sometimes unusual – and partner with leading experts."

The trend has spilled over even to Singapore's two integrated resorts, which are building on the traditional resort model to provide more experiential offerings. As part of a suite of massive expansion plans, Resorts World Sentosa (RWS) will increase its gross floor area by about 50 per cent to usher in new attractions, and Marina Bay Sands (MBS) will welcome a fourth tower and a 15,000-seat indoor entertainment arena.

Putting a greater focus on immersive products and services, RWS will first open a pirate-themed "adventure dining playhouse" in end-2020 to replace the Resorts World Theatre. Arriving in phases through to 2025 will be a public seafront attraction with free evening light shows and a new waterfront lifestyle complex helmed by two new destination hotels.

Additionally, Universal Studios Singapore will unveil two new themed sections – Minion Park and Super Nintendo World – and S.E.A. Aquarium will more

than triple in size and be rebranded as the proposed Singapore Oceanarium. The transformed resort, which will be backed by a S\$4.5 billion investment, is touted to "create a new wave of tourism growth for the next decade."

Tan Hee Teck, CEO of RWS, said: "RWS will form an integral part of the future Greater Southern Waterfront and become a centrepiece of the transformative journey to enliven the southern corridor."

Meanwhile, MBS has already begun flexing its creative muscle in the lead-up to its expansion. Where celebrity chef restaurants and Michelin-star dining were once all the rage, consumers are now hungry for an experience beyond the meal.

Miike Lee, vice president of sales, MBS, explained: "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."

That mentality is distilled in the resort's fresh F&B concepts recently opened with TAO Group that have "morphed entertainment and food" together, shared Lee, referring to rooftop restaurant Lavo, inventive nightclub Marquee, and Japanese restaurant and sushi bar Koma.

MBS has also taken the visitor experience to the next experiential level with the Wonderland trail, an adventure and food tour inspired by the ArtScience Museum's Wonderland exhibition. The trail brackets a visit to the exhibition with a specially concocted Wonderland Crazyshake at Black Tap and Wonderland-themed high tea at the signature Renku Bar & Lounge.

### What's hot

#### Reminisce the good old days

Relive 1920's-era Singapore with storytelling tour, Singapore 1920s: Trails of Tan Ah Huat, by Let's Go Tour Singapore. The four-hour bicycle tour, which follows the crafted story of fictional immigrant Tan Ah Huat, offer glimpses of Singapore from a bygone era with the aid of multimedia slideshows and compelling narrations.

#### Brush up on Eurasian culture

The Eurasian Association, established in 1919, has upgraded its Eurasian Heritage Gallery to feature more multimedia and interactive exhibits, tours, food tastings and more than 100 artefacts, including World War II-era memorabilia. The Eurasian Heritage Gallery will also offer tour packages that include a range of community experiences like a traditional Eurasian folk dance and a cooking demonstration with food tasting by Eurasian chef Quentin Pereira.

#### Behold Changi's shining Jewel

Jewel Changi Airport has added the Changi Experience Studio and Canopy Park to its suite of offerings. The 3,000m<sup>2</sup> Changi Experience Studio includes a singing garden, a runway race, a quest to collect airport trolleys and a battle of smiles. Elsewhere, the 14,000m<sup>2</sup> Canopy Park features seven play attractions and creative gardens. Visitors can navigate through the Mirror Maze and Hedge Maze, bounce on the Manulife Sky Nets, explore the sculptural playscape of Discovery Slides or savour the view from the glass-floored Canopy Bridge suspended 23m above ground.

#### Voyages to the Southern Islands

The little-trodden Southern Islands of Singapore hold many secret spots. Yacht Cruise SG has launched the country's first Southern Islands Cruise that takes patrons on a 2.5-hour journey beyond the shores of Singapore.

Lap up the luxury yacht life onboard *Le Tara* while soaking in the sights of places of interests like the Dragon Teeth's Gate and Machine Gun Post at Labrador Park, landfill-turned-biodiversity haven Semakau Island, coral-rich Sisters' Islands, former penal settlement St John's Island and the man-made Lazarus Island. The experience will also include a land tour on the charmingly mysterious Kusu Island.

#### Fengshui meets modern design

Singapore may be a beacon of modernity, but did you know that a number of its iconic landmarks and architectural marvels are built upon fengshui principles? Guests of Capella Singapore can find out more about these storied structures on the Qi & The City sidecar tour, where participants will zip around town in vintage sidecars while learning about the hand fengshui played in shaping Singapore's urban landscape.



Sidebar tours by Capella Singapore



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## News

# Hong Kong's not a lost cause

Trade grapples with uncertainty, plunging arrivals, but also sees pockets of hope

By Prudence Lui

As the protests in Hong Kong stretched into the fourth month without any signs of abating, industry stakeholders are coming to terms with the impacts the turmoil have brought to their business, and are now laying out plans to cushion further fallout as the crisis drags on.

Inbound arrivals to Hong Kong have been affected. According to Hong Kong Tourism Board (HKTB), total visitor arrivals in July 2019 declined 4.8 per cent year-to-year to 5.2 million, while total overnight arrivals – which amounted to 2.4 million – dipped 5.3 per cent year-on-year. A fall in the total number of both mainland and non-mainland visitor arrivals were also recorded.

A HKTB spokesman said: “Preliminary figures show a drop of about 30 per cent in the number of visitor arrivals in the first half of August. The travel trade has reported that the number of forward bookings in September and October has also dropped significantly.”

HS Travel International's executive director, Hazen Tang, said: “The Hong Kong Airport (closure) was a severe blow to my

business, (resulting in) numerous cancellations for October and November.”

He added the company is not entirely reliant on Hong Kong and may redirect some bookings to other destinations, including Thailand, Japan, Russia and the UK where it has overseas offices.

Meanwhile, HS Travel International is also keen to explore business opportunities in new markets such as Central Asia.

“Hong Kong is still a safe city for travellers”, stressed Tang, adding that the company sends regular updates to their clients to allay any visitors' worries.

iVenture Card International, which provides pre-paid destination attraction passes, observed some cancellations and refund requests for Hong Kong's attractions, but the number was not overwhelming, according to Asia sales manager Nicky Kwok. “Attractions are not affected, and tourists are not targeted,” he said.

“At this stage, safety is not the main concern and queries are mostly about traffic arrangements in Hong Kong. Some visitors encountered trouble when accessing attractions, so we offer advice on public transport and alternative options,” Kwok pointed out.

Like Tang, Kwok foresees a slowdown in inbound business in the near future, but believes Hong Kong remains a “great

destination”. But business being business, iVenture Card will manage risks by focusing promotion on its 17 other destinations for now.

It's not entirely a dismal picture for Hong Kong's inbound sector, as industry players still see a glimmer of hope.

ATI Travel's owner Richard Woss shared that longhaul travellers booked with his company are unlikely to cancel their trips, which typically last between a week to 10 nights, and are usually combined with China.

He explained: “As Hong Kong only accounts for one to two nights, clients are very reluctant to (cancel). But it's a different story for those who treat (Hong Kong) as a mono destination.

“Frankly, Europeans regard protests as a sign of freedom of speech and democracy. If you go to Paris, protesters would be more violent. Our clients take a more mature approach to look at (the current situation), and they have confidence in Hong Kong,” he added.

Sanjay Mehta, chief executive of India-based Trans Globe Travels, also thinks the perception of street violence in Hong Kong is exaggerated by rolling media coverage. “As far as I know, the protests only affect several blackspots in downtown areas on weekends and Sundays, so it's still safe to visit the city,” he remarked.

“Despite widespread negative media reports on violent actions by protesters, we still send Indians to Hong Kong because of attractive deals promoted by hotels and agents during this period. It's such a good bargain, and I understand Indians also leverage special cruise offers for ships departing from Kai Tak Cruise Terminal.

“It's sad to see the plunge in visitors, but I am confident that Hong Kong will rebound swiftly,” Mehta said.



We still send Indians to Hong Kong because of attractive deals promoted by hotels and agents during this period.

Sanjay Mehta  
Chief executive, Trans Globe Travels India

## IN BRIEF

### Up, up and away over Taiwan

The recently-opened 5D simulator ride i-Ride Taipei in Taiwan “flies” travellers over the country's diverse landscapes. Expect to view from above, cities such as Kaohsiung and Tainan, as well as natural attractions like Taroko National Park and Jade Mountain.

Lasting 15 minutes, the indoor ride combines visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile sensations and motion special effects.

### A rare spectacle in Thailand

The Royal Barge Procession will be held in Bangkok on October 24 this year. Catch over 50 elaborately-crafted royal barges, along with 2,200 traditionally-costumed oarsmen, rowing down the Chao Phraya River. These elaborate rituals are part of a year-long coronation celebrations to mark King Vajiralongkorn's accession to the throne.

### Taj Mahal opens for night viewing

India's tourism ministry has unveiled plans to offer after dark, year-round, access to this UNESCO-listed mausoleum. Plans to illuminate the area around the icon, and develop infrastructure to manage night crowds are also in the pipeline.

## M'sia eyes growth from Central Asia

By S Puvaneswary

Tourism Malaysia has outlined concrete plans – which include improving air links and building destination awareness – to grow inbound traffic from Kazakhstan, as the Central Asian country was among the fastest growing tourist source markets for Malaysia in 2018.

Arrivals from Kazakhstan surged 33.2 per cent from the corresponding period in 2018, from 6,385 tourists to 8,503 tourists. The length of stay of Kazakh tourists also increased by two nights over 2017 to 8.3 nights in 2018, while whole per capita expenditure grew 4.5 per cent in 2018 compared with the preceding year.

To improve the country's accessibility, Tourism Malaysia is leveraging its joint international tourism development programme with Malaysia Airports, which provides cash incentives to attract more Central Asia Airlines to fly direct, as well as charter flights, to Malaysia.

Tourism Malaysia's director-general, Musa Yusof, elaborated: “Our collaboration with Kompas Tour late last year resulted in three charter flights by Kazakhstan's Sunday Airlines for the Almaty-Langkawi-Almaty sector in Decem-

ber 2018 and January 2019.”

He added that the NTO is in the midst of discussions with a few other airlines from Central Asia about the possibility of mounting more charter flights for the coming winter season.

Direct connections between the two countries are currently limited to Air Astana's thrice-weekly flights between Almaty and Kuala Lumpur.

Meanwhile, to further increase per diem expenditure of tourists from Kazakhstan which averaged about RM534 (US\$128) per person in 2018, Tourism Malaysia will be promoting multiple Malaysian destinations and encouraging expenditure on activities such as shopping.

Musa shared: “Currently, travellers from Kazakhstan prefer to stay at a beach destination for a few days before returning home. We would like to develop tour packages that combine multiple beach destinations and city attractions to encourage longer stays and higher expenditure. For example, Langkawi and Penang or Kuala Lumpur and Kota Kinabalu.”

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“Safety and security of travellers in Hong Kong is of the utmost importance,” the HKTB spokesman stated, adding the the board is closely monitoring the latest developments, and keep visitors informed via the website, visitor centres and service hotline to help them plan their trips.



Musa: untapped feeder markets

Shopping also is a key element for this market, as travellers from Kazakhstan “love to buy electronic items and gadgets”, Musa revealed.

In addition to exhibiting at PATA Travel Mart, Tourism Malaysia will be participating in the Tashkent International Travel Fair 2019 in November, and Kazakhstan International Travel Fair 2020 in April 2020 to promote Malaysia.

“I believe there will be many opportunities as well for us to explore possible collaborations with attendees such as tour operators from CIS countries to promote *Visit Malaysia 2020* in tactical campaigns.”

Aside from Kazakhstan, the rest of Central Asia are emerging inbound source markets for Malaysia and have potential for growth.

Musa noted: “Our consistent marketing efforts and collaboration with airlines and tour operators in Kazakhstan has proven to be fruitful, resulting in strong growth in the market. We hope to continue the momentum and increase our marketing activities in the surrounding market areas.”



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