

Bringing back the Europeans

Sarawak is lining up a series of campaigns and partnerships to woo Europeans back to the state, following cuts in air services from longhaul markets in recent years

Adapting to the future

As artificial intelligence changes how travel is sold, travel agencies must transform their thinking and strategies to keep up with ever-evolving technology

Discovering new horizons

Discova's managing director for Asia, Suyin Lee, tells Pamela Chow how the newly merged outfit plans to shake up the DMC business



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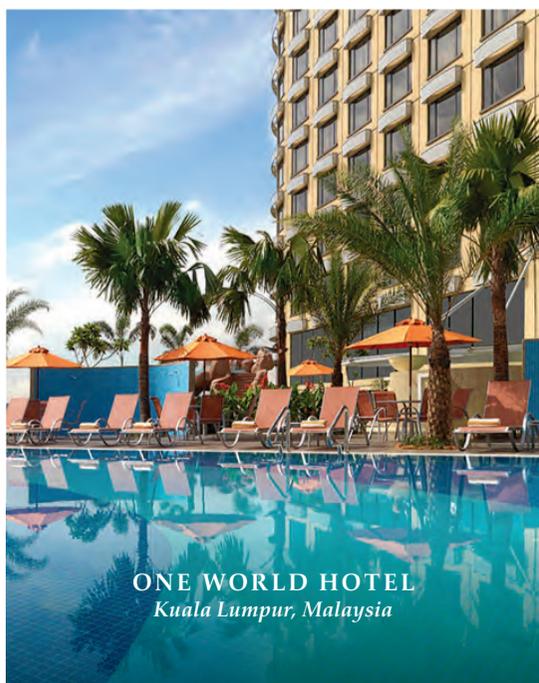


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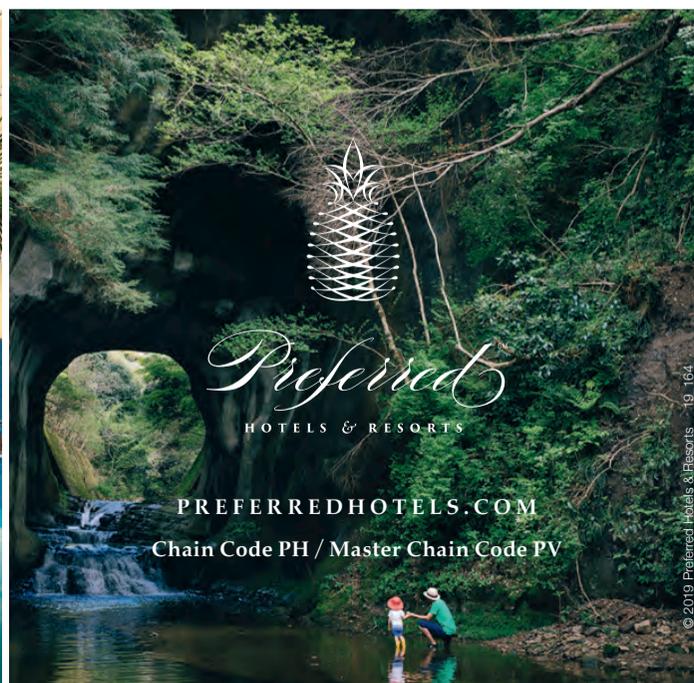


Uncertainty grips Hong Kong

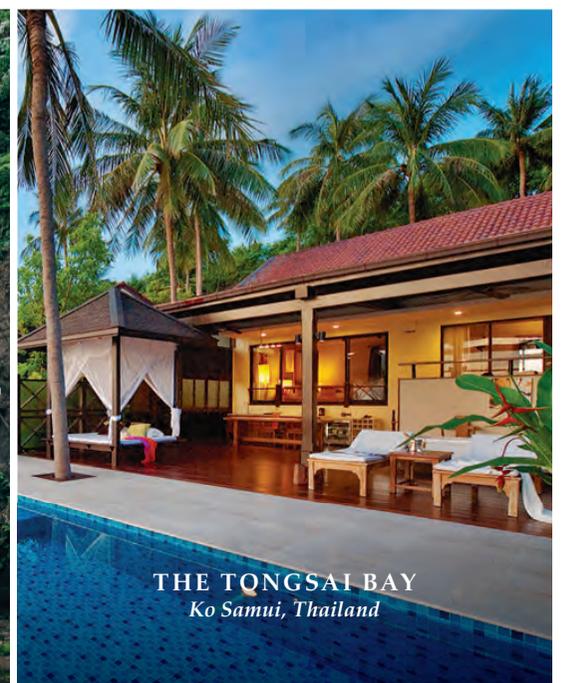
As the Hong Kong economy heads towards a perfect storm of escalating China-US trade war and worsening domestic political unrest, the uncertainty of what comes next is keeping many businesses on the edge. Just how bad would the crisis hit tourism? It's still anyone's guess. By Prudence Lui



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Have tech, will travel

Can travel startup unicorns fly in SE Asia?



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In just a few years since its 2012 launch in Malaysia, Singapore-based ride-hailing giant Grab has expanded to eight countries and become South-east Asia's most valuable unicorn at US\$14 billion.

Its keenest rival in the region, Go-Jek, is also Indonesia's first decacorn after its valuation hit US\$11 billion, and continues to attract attention from investors (the latest? Amazon).

These ride-hailing ventures have grown to become super-apps, engaging consumers on multiple fronts from trip planning to food delivery and mobile groceries as they clamour for a piece of South-east Asia's 650 million and increasingly tech- and travel-savvy population.

Other notable unicorns in the Asian travel sector include Klook, after the Hong Kong-based travel booking platform secured US\$200 million in Series D funding last year, and Indonesia's Traveloka, whose recent fundraising efforts reportedly valued the OTA at US\$2 billion.

In this hospitality space, Singapore-based hotel chain startup Reddoorz has raised US\$70 million from investors, including Japanese e-commerce leader Rakuten, putting it on collision course against Indian rival Oyo, which has scaled up its expansion in South-east Asia with the appointment of a CEO for the region.

The blossoming of ride-hailing apps, flight tracking and hotel booking solutions are just some of the ongoing metamorphosis of South-east Asia's travel tech sector.

In the words of Simon Akeroyd, Amadeus' vice president corporate strategy & business development, the quality of travel startups was still "very poor" in 2015, when Amadeus Next programme was set up as a community to incubate tech startups which provide travel-related services.

In the four years since, South-east Asia's startup scene quickly turned "much more vibrant and mature", Akeroyd noted, as entrepreneurs have gotten a "better grip" of the gaps in the regional travel market.

But Akeroyd also urges budding travel tech startups to focus less on achieving unicorn status and more on solving problems. This view is also echoed by Blanca Menchaca, CEO of BeMyGuest, who remarked that the B2C space appears sexier to budding entrepreneurs, in part due to their connection with the masses and the high-profile success stories in the consumer space, when in fact growing investment is being poured into the B2B sector.

As Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg famously said, a product is not truly a compelling business until it has one billion users. Few startups will achieve trailblazing status in the consumer space like Grab, let alone achieve massive global reach like Facebook or Google.

But in a diverse region such as South-east Asia, where tourism is a fast-growing market, there remains plenty of pain points – not to mention opportunities – in the travel business sector that are still awaiting solutions.

I'm definitely putting my bets on the B2B travel space.



In a diverse region as South-east Asia, where tourism is a fast-growing market, there remains plenty of pain points – not to mention opportunities – in the travel business sector that are awaiting solutions.

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Sentosa shows that more fun can be had with the island's growing offerings



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Dark clouds over Hong Kong's future

As the Hong Kong economy heads towards a perfect storm of escalating China-US trade war and worsening domestic political unrest, the uncertainty of what comes next is keeping many businesses on the edge. The question is no longer about whether tourism would be affected, but how deep this crisis would cut the once-thriving sector. By **Prudence Lui**



For a city that is no stranger to strong typhoons and rain storms, the unprecedented political and social turmoil currently roiling across Hong Kong is seeing no end in sight, dealing a heavy blow to a wide range of economic activities including retail and tourism.

Since June this year, the semi-autonomous Chinese city – which is ruled under a “one country, two systems” policy until 2047 – has been rocked by ongoing protests, sparked by the now-suspended extradition bill.

In recent weeks, clashes between protesters and police have become more frequent and violent with heavy rounds of tear gas, and have affected tourist districts including Tsim Sha Tsui, Mongkok, Causeway Bay and Admiralty, severely undermining the image of prosperity and safety that Hong Kong is once known for.

The shutdown of Hong Kong International Airport (HKIA) on August 12 and 13 was a further setback to the city's reputation as a travel and business hub, as protesters blocked check-in counters and prevented visitors from entering the departure hall, resulting in massive flight cancellations and service disruptions.

These destabilising protests have clearly taken a toll on tourist arrivals to Hong Kong. Preliminary government statistics showed the drop in tourist arrivals had accelerated from a significant 4.8 per cent year-on-year in July to a sharp 30 per cent in the first half of August.

Travel Industry Council's (TIC) chairman Jason Wong. He said: “So far, cancellations have come from shorthaul markets like South Ko-

rea, Taiwan, Thailand, Japan and the Philippines as summer is their typical peak seasons, while group traffic has plunged 30-40 per cent. Even China's robust tourist growth in the first six months of 2019 has been offset by declining and/or negative growth that started in July and August.”

It's likely that potential visitors are now bypassing Hong Kong for other Asian destinations, so impacts on the longhaul market may only be more pronounced “in the next few months when bookings begin for 2020”, Wong told TTG Asia.

Like Wong, Buffalo Tours' country manager for Hong Kong and China Sandy Ho also foresees more cancellations from longhaul markets in the coming months if the crisis is not contained soon. Already, some 28 countries have issued travel advisories to Hong Kong (as of mid-August), further dampening travellers' confidence in the territory as a destination choice.

Ho explained: “As the booking lead time (for longhaul markets) is long, clients are currently looking for programmes in the next season or year. Booking traffic is slower with a 30 per cent drop recorded.”

Meanwhile, passenger traffic across the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge (HZMB) plunged by a third while border crossings like Lo Wu and Lok Ma Chau also suffered a drop, according to Michael Wu, TIC honorary adviser.

Hong Kong's hotels are struggling to cope with the drastic decline in visitor numbers in recent weeks.

Pointing to dismal performance in the hospitality sector, Wu stated: “For the second half of July, downtown hotel rates plunged 40 per cent, from

Months of street protests have taken a toll on Hong Kong's retail, property and tourism sectors

HK\$1,200-\$1,300 (US\$153-\$166) to HK\$700.”

Speaking to TTG Asia in mid-August, Rebecca Kwan, chairman of the 130-member Hong Kong Hotel Association (HKHA), said that occupancy and room rates in July for members near protest sites like Central and Western District saw a double-digit decrease, while overall yield fell over 10 per cent.

She estimated that hotels' performance would worsen. “The situation for August is not promising due to a mix of unfavourable factors like widespread demonstrations, many of them of a more radical style than we are accustomed to, and additional travel advisories issued by overseas countries,” she said.

“The only silver lining for hotels is that premises near HKIA tapped more airline crew business as the crew sought to avoid downtown traffic problems caused by street demonstrations.”

If the dire situation continues, Wu fears that the current political unrest would cause more damage to Hong Kong tourism than the 2003 SARS epidemic that decimated investor confidence.

“As yet, there is no light at the end of the tunnel since nobody knows how long the protests will last,” he remarked. “To survive, I reckon large-scale agents and hotels will suspend hiring part-time employees while asking full-time staff to clear their leave before implementing no-pay leave. Freelance tour guides and coach bus drivers, specially those serving HZMB, are also at risk.”

Kwan also questioned: “Typical practices like redundancy or no-pay leave are temporary cost-saving

measures, but the key to the problem is really how long will this last?”

And without an end to the crisis in sight, CTSHK Metropole International Travel Service's deputy general manager George Kai accepts that it's futile for the travel trade to roll out any recovery measures.

“It's hard for the Hong Kong Tourism Board to implement any remedial actions now as nobody knows what will happen next. There is no point in wasting promotional effort and resources before the crisis is resolved,” he remarked.

For now, the uncertainty is disruptive enough, but analysts are not painting a positive picture of what might happen next.

Corporate risk consultancy Steve Vickers and Associates (SVA), in its recent update issued on August 13, wrote: “No early resolution to the unrest seems likely, not least given the absence of any visible dialogue aimed at alleviating tensions.”

SVA foresees the protests to continue over the next two months, but with a likely reduction in the numbers of protesters in September as students return to university. “The protesters' tactics, though, may change as the numbers of demonstrators falls; the use of flash crowds, and increasing violence, can be anticipated,” it added.

But with anti-government protests entering its third month in end-August, SVA suggests that the Chinese government “is unlikely to permit the current instability to extend as far as the 70th anniversary celebrations on October 1, 2019. This date may be a ‘drop dead’ deadline.”

Even as the immediate outlook appears bleak for Hong Kong, in-



Typical practices like redundancy or no-pay leave are temporary cost-saving measures, but the key to the problem is really how long will this last?

– **Rebecca Kwan, chairman, Hong Kong Hotel Association**

dustry members believe that the city – which has prided itself for its entrepreneurial and can-do spirit – can certainly rise again.

Aliana Ho, who led Hong Kong Disneyland Resort's sales and distribution marketing teams in Asia-Pacific before her retirement in 2014, said: "In the past 60 odd years, Hong Kong citizens have invested significantly in building up the city's intangible tourism equity. Coupled with our unique history, world-class infrastructure and convenient accessibility, Hong Kong has emerged as one of the top travel destinations in the world.

"There have been a few major crisis along the way, but every time Hong Kong surfaced even stronger and better than before.

"I am confident that the Hong Kong tourism industry, with its well-built global network, strong leadership, passion and resilience will be able to ride through the current crisis to re-establish Hong Kong as a safe and welcoming destination."

The sun will always shine after a storm, and when Hong Kong is finally able to emerge from this crisis, what will its future hold? Will it regain its former standing as a thriving global business and travel hub again? And will small- and medium-sized businesses, which make up a sizeable chunk of Hong Kong's tourism sector, be able to ride out the storm?

It's anyone's guess.

What overseas travel experts are seeing

Putu Ayu Aristyadewi, group vice president marketing and communications, Smailing Tours Indonesia

Hong Kong is a year-round destination for us, both for leisure groups and FITs. We did get some postponement of trips, not so much of cancellations, following the situation in Hong Kong. The advice we received (from our business partners) was to postpone visits to the destination. We expect the market will bounce back from October onward.

Lyn Galon, travel consultant, Scorpio Travel and Tours Philippines

The protests have a big impact on Philippine outbound demand to Hong Kong, which dropped by 50 per cent. Even prior to 2019, inbound to Hong Kong was already decreasing because Filipino tourists are now less attracted to Asian destinations that they've already visited.

Abdul Rahman Mohamed, general manager, Mayflower Holidays Malaysia

We saw a spike in demand from Hong Kong for the purchase of



properties (landed properties and apartments) in Malaysia under the Malaysia My Second Home programme by as much as 200 per cent in June, compared with the preceding year. Demand for July also looked strong. It looks like Hong Kong people view Malaysia as a haven of calm and are willing to settle under this programme with a 10-year visa.

Irwan Raman, business development director, Panorama Destination Indonesia

For us, Hong Kong is a FIT and groups market, with incentives making up a significant portion. We have not received any inbound booking from Hong Kong since the demonstrations began. There was no cancellation, but neither was there any booking nor enquiry. It seems that travellers are postponing trips due to the uncertainty. Hong

Kong market usually books at the last minute and we hope that the market will come back as soon as the condition improves.

Margaret Loh, managing director, Airedated Travel Singapore

People are shying away (from Hong Kong). Even with airline promotions that last to the year-end, my clients are still asking me if they should travel to Hong Kong, because they don't know what will happen in that time. My advice to them is that they can (travel there), but they should avoid the affected areas. Singaporeans are very cautious, in part because our government is very vigilant in asking locals to keep from travelling there if they can.

Quotes for this column were contributed by Mimi Hudoyo, Rosa Ocampo, Pamela Chow and S Puvaneswary

The two-day airport shutdown in August was damaging to Hong Kong's standing as a business and travel hub

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The changing face of Cambodia's tourism

As Cambodia continues its aggressive pursuit for the yuan and arrivals from China continue to rise exponentially, questions are being raised about the impact on the country's overall tourism landscape. By **Marissa Carruthers**



The world is hungry after a piece of the lucrative tourism pie in China amid Chinese's growing appetite for outbound travel – and Cambodia is no different.

According to minister of tourism Thong Khon, the country aims to attract about three million Chinese tourists annually by 2020. This will rise to five million by 2025 and eight million by 2030. And with the country welcoming more than two million Chinese visitors out of a total of 6.2 million in 2018 – a 67.2 per cent year-on-year increase – it looks on track to hitting its target.

However, the rapid-fire growth has come with dire consequences. In the last few years, the coastal town of Sihanoukville has undergone a swift transformation from beach getaway to casino city. Tourism players say it is no longer viable to sell the beach to international visitors, who skip Sihanoukville for the more well-rounded islands off the coast.

Mick Spencer, owner of Ana Travel in Sihanoukville, said: “The only tourists [in Sihanoukville] are Chinese casino tourists. There is nothing for local or international visitors to do and nowhere for them to go. The islands are the only reason to be going through the town.

“The town is forsaken and it will be several years before we understand what it will look like in the

future, by which time I would expect the only visitors to be Asian gamblers and their families.”

Steve Lidgey, general manager of Travel Asia la Carte, said losing the key beach destination in Cambodia, which he called an “essential part” of a Western holiday itinerary, has had a knock-on effect on the industry's efforts to sell Cambodia as a standalone destination to long-haul visitors. While inbound tourists from Asia have grown in recent years, those from the West have fallen.

Said Lidgey: “I believe people are avoiding Cambodia altogether and choosing other destinations for longer tours. If there is no easily-accessible, friendly, value-for-money beach destination, then travellers will instead spend their beach time, and possibly their whole trip, in Vietnam or Thailand.”

A fall in visitors to Angkor Wat has triggered a response from the government, who blames Chinese zero-dollar tourism packages for the slump. The country's top tourist draw welcomed 1.4 million foreign tourists in the first seven months of 2019, representing a 9.7 per cent year-on-year drop. In July, visitor numbers fell by 19.7 per cent to 149,269 foreigners.

While the country's tourism players say the blame does not solely lie with zero-dollar tourism, they have welcomed the government's pledge to crack down on the industry.

Travellers at the 12th century Bayon, a popular temple at the heart of Angkor Thom in Siem Reap



“There are two very different types of tourism. Chinese zero-profit packages are massively different to the upscale Chinese market, which everyone is very interested in.

– Ronni Dalhoff, managing director, Diethelm Travel Cambodia

Said Spencer: “The government is starting to realise that zero-dollar tourism is a real thing, and local economies and businesses suffer as a result.”

Ronni Dalhoff, managing director of Diethelm Travel (Cambodia), lauded the government clampdown on zero-profit tourism, which he said makes up the bulk of Chinese arrivals.

In 2016, the Thai government stamped out zero-dollar tourism, estimating annual losses of US\$2 billion in tax revenue. In the wake of the clampdown, three companies were closed, 2,155 buses were seized, and several arrests were made for money laundering and operating illegal tours.

Lidgey commented: “The hunt for large numbers and meeting targets by attracting the Chinese, and a surge in low-budget tour groups that take up space but ultimately leave little revenue for the Cambodian people, is an issue.”

However, Dalhoff notes that while it is the low-budget segment disrupting the market, there remains huge potential in higher-spending Chinese travellers – and that is where the focus should shift.

He said: “There are two very different types of tourism. Chinese zero-profit packages are massively different to the upscale Chinese market, which everyone is very interested in.”

Miles Gravett, general manager of Khiri Travel Cambodia, added: “There needs to be more focus on quality tourists, and not just from China. A lot of zero-dollar tours don't benefit the local economy, and that's something that needs changing.”

Industry players also claim the chase after Chinese tourists has led to other key source markets being neglected. Lidgey noted: “While there are plenty of opportunities to make business from middle-class Chinese who can afford to travel overseas, Cambodian tourism authorities need to be careful. The old adage ‘Don't put all your eggs in one basket’ applies here.”

The latest figures from the Ministry of Tourism show that as of June, arrivals from European markets fell 5.6 per cent while those from the US market dropped 5.3 per cent. In contrast, Chinese visitors rose 38.7 per cent, with a 15.9 per cent increase in arrivals from Asia.

Added Lidgey: “If the new-found wealth in China doesn't last, or people are forced to tighten their belts, then the Chinese will see more value for their money in travelling domestically.”

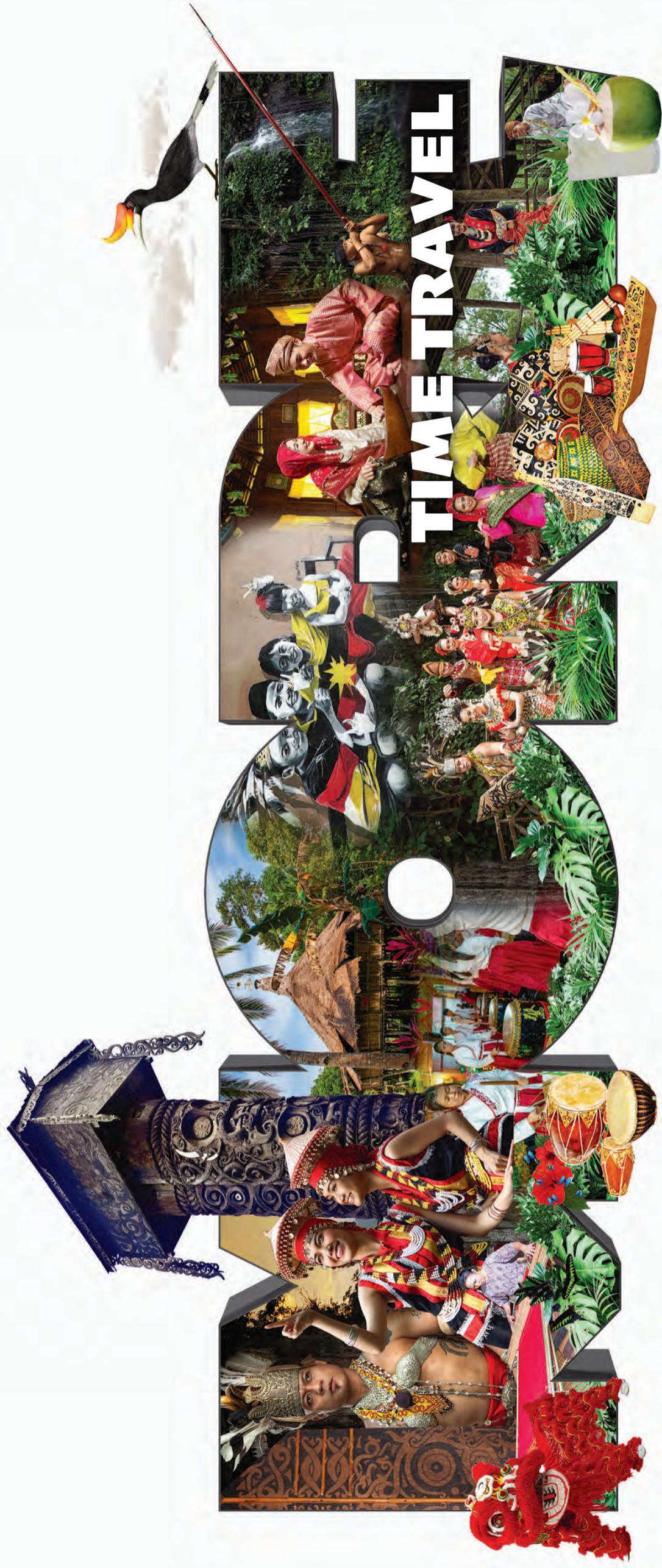
Gravett warned that if proper measures and governance are not put in place to regulate the development, parts of the country run the risk of becoming Chinese gambling destinations. He said: “Cambodia is a beautiful country with so much to offer. It always has been a cultural destination and if it starts becoming known as a cheap package destination with a focus on gambling, this is bad for Cambodia and bad for everyone's business.”

But the influx of Chinese tourists has added value and helped fill rooms in high-end hotels. One luxury hotel in Siem Reap said the rise in high-end Chinese visitors saw them through this year's “tough” low season. It has since pledged to step up its chase for affluent Chinese travellers.

Sofitel Phnom Penh Phokeethra has also seen a “huge spike” in Chinese visitors at the hotel for both business and leisure. Area general manager Charles-Henri Chevet noted that about 40 per cent of the hotel's guests are Chinese. He added that the hotel has “harvested a positive impact” from the growth.

Across the board, hopes remain high that a clampdown on zero-profit tour packages and a shift of focus into more upmarket segments will help bolster the industry.

Said Dalhoff: “China is the fastest-growing market and it's not wrong to focus on them, but we would also like more focus on the Western market, and for a divide to be made between zero-dollar tourism and higher-end tourism.”



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More to Discover

Conquering new horizons

As Buffalo Tours Asia goes global in its merger with Olympus Tours Americas, managing director for Asia, Suyin Lee, tells **Pamela Chow** how the DMC – now operating under a new brand name of Discova – plans to shake up the business of destination management

Instead of keeping the brand legacy of Buffalo Tours Asia and Olympus Tours Americas, what's the motivation to rebrand into Discova?

The plan for the “global DMC network”, as we called it back then, was to continue to grow across the world through acquisitions and organic startups. When that happens, it's very difficult to maintain so many brands across the world as you acquire them. It also confuses our customers because the first thing they ask is, “Is it under the same company? Do you operate in the same way?”

So for us, it made sense to rebrand under a single brand to give us a platform to get onto the global stage. The name “Discova” is a little bit more international, and it's an easy brand to take to new destinations. It's easier to say we're Discova Asia, Discova America or Discova Europe.

What will Discova do differently compared with your DMC operations now?

Part of this brand change involves re-focusing on our B2B partners. We've long noticed that a lot of DMCs look and feel a bit B2C, and even Buffalo Tours had a small B2C segment.

But we've come to realise that our B2B partners is where we can add the greatest value. What's important to us is having the flexibility to lend our products and services – even our commercial models – to really suit our B2B customers, ensuring that our partners' brand DNAs really come through across all the destinations that we operate for them.

We're certainly able to make it a lot easier for our partners to do business with us. Olympus and Buffalo work on two completely different systems – it's not efficient.

We can have a single point of contact and consistency in the look and feel of how we do things (worldwide). The systems that we use, the documents we produce, the way our guides are trained, even our drivers – there needs to be some consistency in our portfolio of products and services.

It will certainly be so much easier to have a single platform across the world so whether our partners are buying for the Americas, Asia or Australia they're using the same platform. For sure it's going to be a combination of a system and technology that we can now invest in as a single brand.

What kind of competition are you seeing from other DMCs? Are they also taking a global approach?

Currently, there isn't a global DMC that is consistent across the world. There are some big and strong DMCs based out of Europe and Asia, but they're not really global – they're very regional – so this is a great space for Discova to create something different and new.

As you bring your operations global, how will you balance that with keeping your experiences local and authentic?

Some 95 per cent of our workforce are locals. We've grown up in those communities, so anything that happens in the destination, how it's evolving and the new products coming up, our people are there to share that with our partners.

Working with locals to ensure sustainable tourism is an important aspect of your business. How will Discova continue in this area?

Buffalo Tours has historically been very focused on sustainable and responsible tourism, largely because our people are from these communities, and we need to be able to ensure that they continue to benefit from tourism without being exploited.

For some of the community projects that we run, we have close to 30 social enterprises in our supply chain. We constantly look at environmental impacts like plastics and wet tissues, and over time we've been pushing and educating our partners to swap those products out for more sustainable alternatives.

In the same way that we've tackled the use of plastics, we've decided to educate our partners – tell them that instead of going to a certain popular destination, here is an alternative. It may not be as developed, but that is its charm, and if we continue to bring people there in a responsible way, the standards of that destination will be lifted. We do need to try to help all communities, rather than just a small community.

How have your partners responded to these efforts?

A lot of our partners are from Europe and they are phenomenal in terms of environmental consciousness and responsibility. They have really taken on board things like refill bottles – in the year before, we took out about 200,000 single-use plastics. I think it's just about changing the mindset and I think most people in our business are really on board.

I want to roll it out at a greater scale across the world, particularly in Asia. This region is quite a mature destination and we would like to (expand) these existing initiatives (here).

Sustainability does seem to be picking up more slowly in Asia.

When we travel around Asia, it's really disturbing how much plastic waste there is everywhere, on the roads and in villages. We work with many local communities to change that.

In Yangon, this incredible woman started to pay local villagers to collect plastics so she can (upcycle them) into reusable goods like handbags and tote bags. These people are making an impact because the villagers

are earning money by collecting rubbish, while learning how to recycle plastics and tyres.

It's our job to take travellers to these local enterprises. You'd need a DMC with people who live there and know about these enterprises, you can't just pop them on your radar.

What about the issue of animal welfare in tourism?

Animal welfare is such a hot topic at the moment, (with elephant rides being a major concern now) from a consumer perspective.

We, the travel sector, (in part) created these problems of elephant camps, circuses and parks. Now to say that we're just going to stop selling them and abandon all of these camps is impractical.

For example, in Thailand, there's more than 3,000 elephants in captivity. What are you going to do, just let them go? If we stop supporting them in a responsible way, the elephants are not going to be looked after because the communities that benefit from tourism won't have the money to look after them, and they're going to have a massive collapse.

So it's about how to work with these local communities, animal parks or elephant camps to really bring up the standards of welfare. A big focus for us at the moment is making sure that we follow well-informed guidelines, rather than just bowing to public pressure.

How does the company internally focus on such efforts?

We put a fair bit of investment and leadership support in it. We have a really great responsible travel working group with members from different parts of our businesses at all levels. They work on



There are some big and strong DMCs based out of Europe and Asia, but they're not really global – they're very regional – so this is a great space for Discova to create something different and new.

initiatives and we reward the best initiatives with incentive travel for the team, and we fund ideas where they've demonstrated the concept.

You've also been making leaps in glamourising tour guiding. Why is that needed?

We really take pride in developing our guides. In Indonesia, we launched a guide ambassador programme by inviting young men and women from marginalised communities to join us for six months. We pay for their living allowances and so forth, and they go through this guiding programme to get accredited before going on an apprenticeship with us.

We want to roll that out to Cambodia and Vietnam. Guiding is a bit of a dying trade, so we need to bring in fresh talent and nurture them by giving them a career path.

Some of our competitors don't spend that kind of money because a lot of guides are freelancers. That's where we create a stronger community among our guide base and we engage them in training whether they are freelancers or not. It's important to show these communities that there is good living to be made in guiding, and it's fun.

10 NEED TO KNOW'S ABOUT SUYIN LEE

- **Who's in your family?** My husband and two adopted street dogs known as Singapore Specials, i.e. mongrels
- **What do you do for fun?** Catch up with friends over drinks or a meal, and explore new places in Singapore. We travel so much we are hardly in Singapore so we treat it as a destination for retail therapy.
- **Your ideal vacation:** Either a road trip for some adventure or a quiet beach holiday to recharge.
- **How do you book your own leisure trips?** Through a travel agent because of their knowledge or expertise in a specific destination, or online if it is simple and easy to do. If I don't have time and simply want a stress free experience, I would always book with a good agent.
- **What are you reading right now?** *Born a Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood* by Trevor Noah
- **How do you stay healthy?** Walk my dogs, a bit of meditation, the occasional run and some weights training
- **Favourite food?** Noodles (this could be a bad habit too)
- **A bad habit you cannot kick** Drinking just one glass of red wine
- **Your pet peeve** Queue jumpers. There's nothing more irritating than people who push in
- **Most people don't know that you...** are a chartered accountant





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Adapting to the future

Intelligent retail promises a future of predictive and customised bookings, changing the ways that travellers shop and buy their trips and holidays. But that also means big changes are necessary for travel agencies in their thinking and strategy to remain relevant and survive an ever-evolving wave of technological disruption, finds **Pamela Chow**



At the Sabre Technology Exchange in Las Vegas in July, Sabre unveiled a brand-new solution that promises to catapult the hospitality industry into an age of advanced retailing. The SynXis Intelligent Retailing tool, slated for an early-2020 launch, will enable hotels to sell not just room ancillaries, but also present a guest with highly targeted travel products in real time during the booking process.

These recommended products are determined through machine learning, based on a customer's own preferences and the purchasing patterns of similar users. The menu is all-encompassing, ranging from couples' massages and celebratory champagne to family ticket bundles and, notably, day tours and activities.

The result is a shopping and booking process that is personalised, dynamic and instantaneous. This development opens up possibilities for more players along the travel booking chain, but it also poses the uncomfortable implication that machines will soon know what tours and products a traveller will likely buy – faster and with more accuracy than a travel agent.

Sundar Narasimhan, senior vice president, Sabre Labs and Product Strategy Vision, declared that Sabre is casting a heavy focus on intelligent advanced retailing, and that SynXis Intelligent Retailing is one of the first concrete steps towards the goal of making it an industry-wide mainstay by 2025.

Time is running out

While the industry makes a gradual march towards intelligent retailing, the level of awareness among the travel agency community about its impact and the available digital strategies is still at a worrying low, expressed travel technology providers.

Solutions centred on IATA's New Distribution Capability (NDC) standards and the Airline Tariff Publishing Company's (ATPCO's) New Generation Storefront (NGS) capability can allow agencies to sell unbundled air fares, products and ancillaries, thus enabling them to provide customers with a more customisable and flexible booking experience.

However, the magnitude of these benefits is lost on a concerning portion of agents. Rakesh Narayanan, Sabre's vice president, regional general manager, South Asia and Pacific, travel solutions airline sales, stressed: "While Sabre is investing heavily in training and education for its community of agents, a lot of work still needs to be done to ensure that all industry players are up to date on NDC. At this stage, both travel suppliers and travel agencies have to become better acquainted with the complete benefits brought on by NDC, and how to make these opportunities a part of their strategy."

Similarly, Rob Brown, global vice president and managing director of OTA business, Travelport, observed that although travel agencies have "strong motivations" to provide a smarter and faster retail experience,

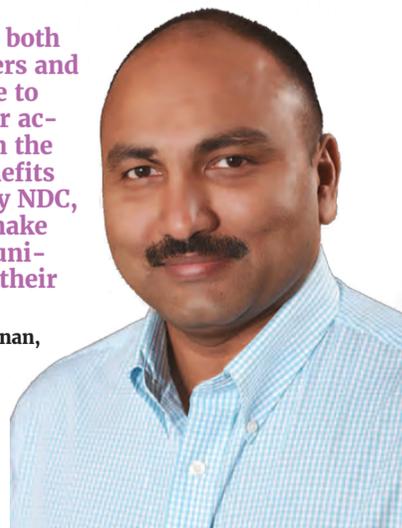
"the primary focus of many is still solely on converting website visitors to bookers, which already makes them fall behind the competition".

And while airlines have been eager to board the NDC train, their efforts are still not being sufficiently matched by distributors. Jeff Lobl, managing director of global distribution for Delta Air Lines, lamented: "There are customers who prefer premium products – we see overwhelming numbers on our direct channels – but 99 per cent of agencies are dominated by the practice of showing the lowest fare first.



At this stage, both travel suppliers and agencies have to become better acquainted with the complete benefits brought on by NDC, and how to make these opportunities a part of their strategy.

– Rakesh Narayanan, vice president, regional general manager, South Asia and Pacific, travel solutions airline sales, Sabre



"But customers don't always want that. The lowest fare is no longer as attractive a product as before, and offers can now be personalised and exciting. But if these cannot be displayed properly and customers can't see it, then they're not buying."

In Asia, the chief reasons for slow industry take-up are a lack of Asia-specific outreach and the high cost of adopting such technology. General manager of Brunei-based Century Travel Centre, Foo CP, said that the degree of engagement between technology providers and travel agents leaves much to be desired, resulting in little awareness of options in the market.

He noted: "Attending more events (with technology providers) would be good to help us see what solutions there are (in the market)."

The benefits of NDC application programming interfaces (APIs) and NGS capabilities are still sinking in, but with the advent of intelligent retail, the agency community may no longer have the luxury of time. The ability to provide smart and dynamic travel retailing will soon be bestowed to hospitality players – and they may be quicker to the draw.

Already Langham Hotels in Hong Kong is working with Sabre to pilot the SynXis Intelligent Retailing tool this year, after which it will run on a test-and-learn phase for the next two quarters. By 2020, the solution will be released to the market, helping more hospitality players achieve "retailing beyond the room, or even without the room", described Jeff Henley, manager, solutions consulting, Americas at Sabre Hospitality Solutions.

And even before hotels begin to roll out smarter in-destination offerings, the role of the travel agent – whether a travel designer, consultant, specialist or destination expert – has already come under threat. More OTAs now enable travellers to easily shop, plan and book innumerable permutations of transport and itinerary options with several clicks of the mouse.

"At the stage of booking, a new and growing OTA model is to deliver a competitive search response that includes multimodal itinerary combinations and connection points for one-way, roundtrip or multi-leg travel. The booking may consist of tickets from multiple suppliers and is a good way of increasing conversion among price-conscious travellers," described Brown.

With such extensively autonomous travel planning available at their fingertips, customers would soon be increasingly inclined to skip the middleman altogether.

NDC, NGS critical lifelines

As more retailing solutions come online, NDC-enabled tools and NGS capabilities are fast becoming

a critical lifebuoy for agencies to stay afloat. Mid-2019 has seen the tech juggernauts roll out a wave of NDC-enabled and NGS developments in attempts to ‘future-proof’ travel distributors.

In April, Sabre launched its first set of NDC APIs with United Airlines’ global flight network, which has been made available to its Beyond NDC agency partners via Sabre Red 360. Soon to follow in 2H2019 are scaled-up additional APIs that support voluntary and involuntary flight changes, refunds and voids.

Meanwhile, a month after the July launch of the Amadeus Travel API for travel agencies, Amadeus announced a retailing partnership with American Airlines and American Express Global Business Travel. The companies shared that American Express Global Business Travel has successfully processed live bookings of American Airlines’ NDC-enabled content by leveraging the new Amadeus Travel API, and the partnership aims to execute the API’s full functionality of end-to-end booking flow and servicing, which includes cancellations, exchanges and ancillaries.

Travelport has also pushed out the first phase of ATPCO’s NGS capability with multiple airlines and partners, including online booking tool WhereTo and global developer Travel Technology & Solutions. As the ATPCO standards continue to evolve, Travelport is working to en-

able exact comparisons across airlines’ full range of products, whether for online agencies, corporate booking tools or Travelport’s desktop solution for offline agencies, Smartpoint.

Displaying a full range of airline products and ancillaries may just be the first step, but it is critical for online agencies that wish to maintain their “advantaged position”, asserted Brown. He explained that it is “essential for OTAs to present travellers with the branded fare options available across multiple airlines”, as it would “eliminate the need for travellers to visit the websites of airlines and competing agencies to compare offers”.

He continued: “Our research shows that 73 per cent of travellers would rebook with an OTA if they could book the whole trip in one place. OTAs need to work more effectively to exploit this position.”

What agencies should do is immediately get acquainted with the ins and outs of NDC to understand how to maximise their mileage from it. Sabre’s Narayanan advised: “The first step for agents to familiarise themselves with what NDC is and isn’t, is to participate in industry-led sessions, such as the ones hosted by Sabre.

“Then, start an open dialogue with corporate customers so they know that you are proactively analysing the challenges and opportunities related to NDC. Also speak to airline

(partners) and technology providers to understand how they plan to NDC-enable their processes and applications.”

Travelport’s Brown urged that agencies should also take a closer look at their data strategy and reconsider how they can add value to their travellers. Referring to advice Travelport offers to its agency partners, Brown stated: “Integrate closely with your data team, whether in-house or a third-party supplier. With the right data and analytics strategy, agencies can transcend the traditional travel agency business to offer much greater value for customers during every stage of their travel experience.”

Now, the question remains as to where the old-school travel advisor stands, and agents are exhibiting uncertainty about their future in this age of dynamic digital distribution.

Grace DeVita, vice president of Florida-based Post Haste Travel, said that while NDC-enabled content has

allowed her to “do more and more for customers” and “add more value to my company and my clients”, she is also concerned about the changing expectations of customers.

“Our clients’ expectations are different now. They go on the websites and they see what’s out there, then they come back to us and say, ‘I can do this myself when I go online.’ Even the big leisure agencies have the same issues,” she expressed.

Advisors acknowledge that change is imminent, although they do not know how. Jemima Leonard-Thomas, travel consultant, Carib-World Travel, said: “Everybody in travel knows that it’s part of our gig – our work is constantly changing. I’m not worried because we knew this was going to happen eventually, we just have to adapt to it.”



Integrate closely with your data team, whether in-house or a third-party supplier. With the right data and analytics strategy, agencies can transcend the traditional travel agency business to offer much greater value for customers during every stage of their travel experience.

– Rob Brown, global vice president and managing director of OTA business, Travelport



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A balance of digital and physical

There may not be a clear answer in the crystal ball for now, but experts forecast a likely scenario where the successful agencies will marry technological strategy and human interaction. Furthermore, there will remain a segment of customers who would pay for personalised service from a travel designer, and a number of destinations that would require destination expertise and guidance.

Champa Magesh, vice president, Asia Pacific Retail Travel Channels, Amadeus, elaborated: “The entire retail travel agency business model has been about the human touch. The future of retail travel agencies in Asia Pacific (now) requires an optimal integration of human talent and technology enablers to deliver a personalised, frictionless and memorable experience, underpinned by

an omni-channel customer service strategy.

“Successful retail travel agencies must combine technology enablers and human intelligence in a way that creates a convenient and cohesive experience no matter how, when or where a customer reaches out.”

This seamless booking experience extends even into an agency’s physical space, where a customer should be inspired to travel while enjoying a personalised planning session.

Magesh added: “Now it’s about combining the physical, digital and human. (Agencies) need some form of human interaction, but they also need to be omni-channel – working across multiple channels, online, mobile and brick-and-mortar.

“This is a tipping point; the time for change is now. ‘New Retail’ is the future – where physical spaces are used to inspire customers, regardless of whether they make their booking in store or online.”



The future of retail travel agencies in Asia Pacific (now) requires an optimal integration of human talent and technology enablers to deliver a personalised, frictionless and memorable experience, underpinned by an omni-channel customer service strategy.

-Champa Magesh, vice president, Asia Pacific Retail Travel Channels, Amadeus



For the record

“Ninety-nine per cent of agencies are dominated by the practice of showing the lowest fare first. But customers don’t always want that.”

- Jeff Lobl, managing director of global distribution, Delta Air Lines, lamenting the lack of visibility of premium bundles among OTAs and travel agencies

“It’s very cost- and time-saving for us. Our staff don’t have to key inputs manually, resulting in significant time savings.”

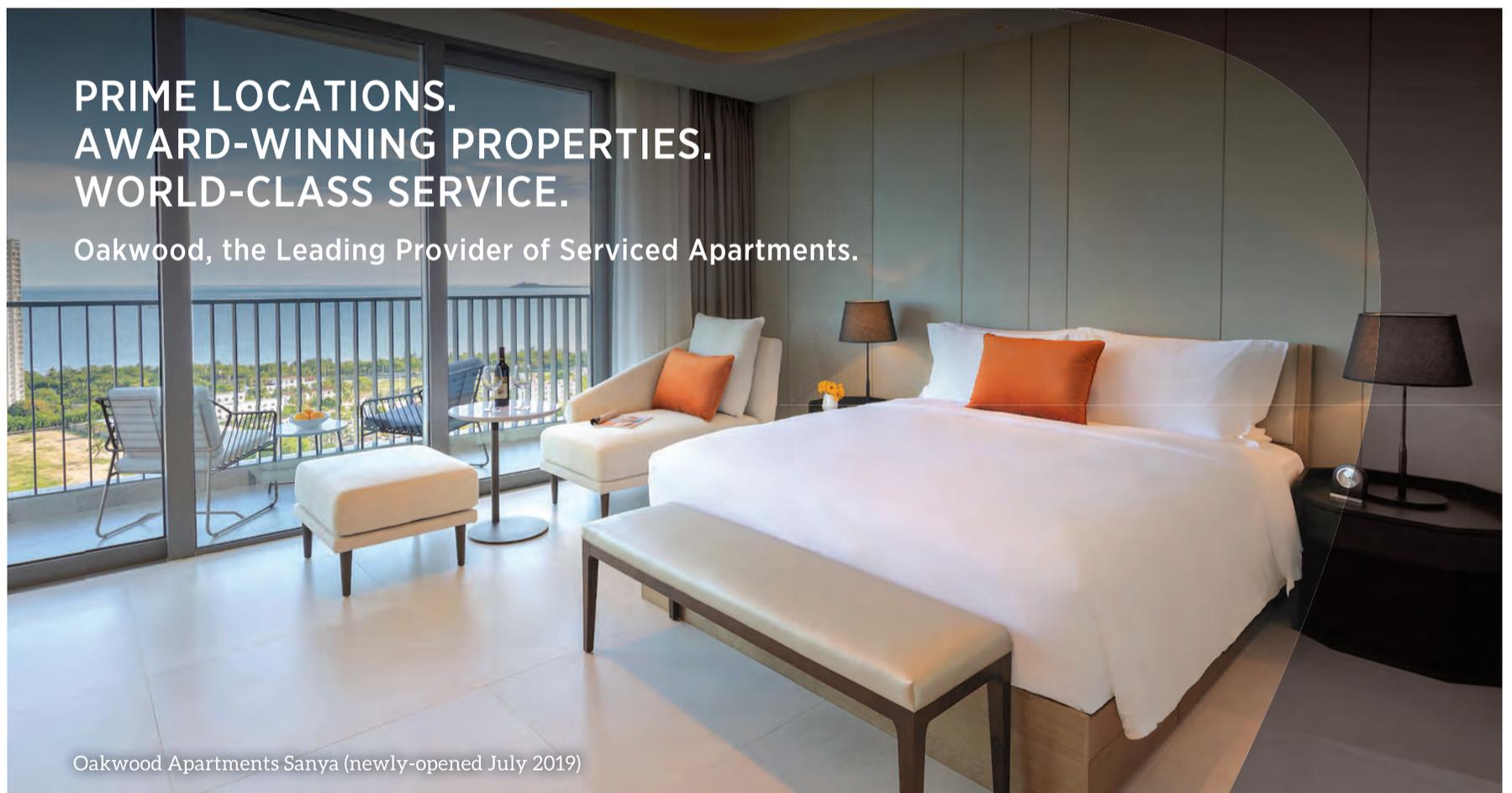
- Kennix Hong, operations manager, Pegasus Travel Management, on the value Travelport’s SmartPoint and TripAssist brings to the company

“We’re a small company with limited resources and digitising processes is a cost and time-saving initiative for us. We would prefer to spend all the humans’ time engaging personally with clients and designing extraordinary holidays for them.”

- Lim Hui Juan, co-founder and COO, Quotient TravelPlanner, who sees a need for travel agencies to balance digital and personal retailing

“It’s definitely expensive. We dare not even think about it.”

- Wilson Tee, founder and advisor, Focal Travel, on investing in digital solutions such as omni-channel technology



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A different look at Thailand

Thailand wants to introduce new areas and provinces to the world, and keep the country a preferred destination for new and repeat visitors alike, writes **Suchat Sritama**

Thailand 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 Ratchakitprakan 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 them-

selves 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 towards 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 obvious. 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

Loei, a province in north-eastern Thailand, has been identified as a destination with potential for more tourism growth

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**

Tours & activities

From wholesome treats to flowers in bloom

1 Bangkok’s MRT services extended

The MRT Blue Line Hua Lamphong – Tha Phra extension is now offering free rides until September 28 as part of a test run. On this line, commuters can get to Chinatown at Wat Mangkorn station or experience local culture along the Chao Phraya River across from Itsaraphap station. The line is expected to be fully operational by March 2020.

Meanwhile, the BTS Skytrain system has added one stop from Chatuchak Park station to Ha Yaek Lat Phrao station at no additional charge.

2 Massage in the dark

Local Alike offers half-day tours that include a Thai massage in the dark. This massage spa provides employment for blind or visually-impaired therapists, who are highly-skilled massage therapists who use their keen sense of touch to guide them.

Its dark interior design concept will encourage guests to unwind. The price for a one-hour massage is US\$15 per person.

3 Play La Ploen blooms

Play La Ploen, a popular resort in Buriram province famous for its Moto GP race and other big sporting events, is planning a

host of tourism activities this year including the Oxy Family Run on December 22. The event is open to local and international runners.

Between November and February in the cooler weather, the resort will highlight its flower festival that showcases flowers from cold climate countries, as well as a new knowledge centre for tourists to learn about local Isan traditions.

4 Wholesome café by the canal

Overlooking Bangkok’s iconic Saen Saeb canal, the new Rim Klong Café at Mövenpick BDMS Wellness Resort specialises in wholesome food, in keeping



with the resort’s 360-degree well-being concept. Expect a selection of delicious and nutritious combinations that blend superfoods, such as quinoa and avocado, with local herbs and fruits like mango and pomelo, all kitted out by chef Gabrielle Kurz, the resort’s culinary consultant.





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Hotels

Cashing in on tourism boom

Thailand's tourism boom has caught the attention of some of the country's biggest companies, which have set up offshoots to ramp up investment in the hospitality sector. By **Suchat Sritama**



A multibillion dollar mixed-use project by AWC will soon join Bangkok's tourism infrastructure

As Thailand projects to hit nearly 40 million foreign arrivals this year, non-traditional tourism players are looking to cash in on the booming tourism sector.

Asset World Corporation (AWC), a hotel company owned by beverage tycoon Charoen Sirivadhanabhakdi's TCC Group, has unveiled an ambitious hotel expansion plan to open 13 hotels worth over 40 billion baht (US\$1.3 billion) by 2025 over the next six years. The group already has 14 hotels across multi brands, all under management contracts.

Wallapa Traisorat, CEO and president of AWC, said the new projects will expand the group's portfolio to a total of 8,506 rooms, up from 4,960 existing rooms. This expansion into the hotel business, he said, is encouraged by Thailand's tourism boom.

The group will also develop a US\$3.1 billion mixed-use project comprising five-star hotels and retail

space on Chao Phraya River, next to Asiatique the Riverfront under its management. Construction work will begin 2020.

Meanwhile, it is engaged in an ongoing feasibility study for a potential investment on a piece of land opposite Asiatique the Riverfront.

In addition, it plans to invest in two high-end hotels and a commercial space in a mixed-use project in Pattaya. That development is expected to cost another US\$3.1 billion.

Singha Estate, another giant beverage company, is also actively moving into the travel landscape not just in Thailand but globally. It has acquired six hotels in four countries from APAC Holdings at a cost of more than US\$3.1 billion. The acquired hotels – located in Phuket, Koh Samui, the Maldives, Fiji and Mauritius – will be rebranded as S Hotels and Resorts, a subsidiary of Singha Estate.

S Hotels and Resorts currently manages 39 hotels globally, including two

existing hotels in Thailand – Santiburi Beach Resort & Spa in Koh Samui and Phi Phi Islands Village Beach Resort – owned by Singha Estate.

Singha Estate is now focused on investments overseas. Currently, it is working on Crossroads in the Maldives, a mega development that will turn nine islands into an integrated resort destination. Each island will have hotels and tourist facilities. The company is set to open two hotels in the first phase by end-2019 before starting the second phase in 2020.

Origin Property, one of the leading real estate firms in Thailand, has unveiled a five-year plan with a new focus on hotel, mixed-use spaces, retail and

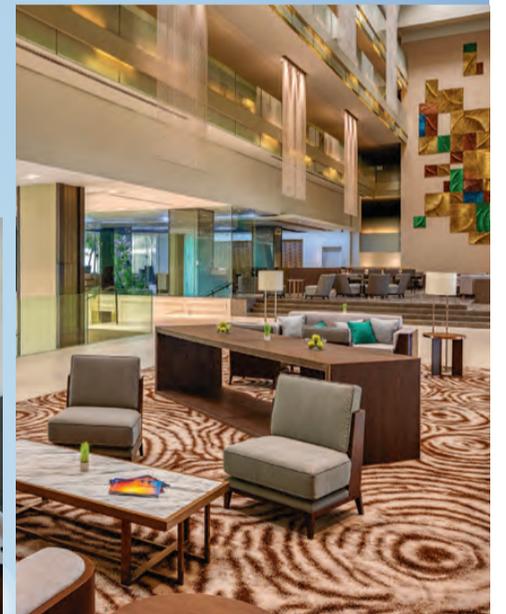
food business. Its new company, One Origin, will handle the expansion.

Kamonwan Wipulakorn, CEO of One Origin, said the company expects to develop 15 hotels and serviced apartments with total of 4,000 units as well as more than 10 offices and retail projects mainly in Bangkok and in the east coast of Thailand.

Origin Property has already entered the eastern region with condo projects in Sriracha to capitalise on the government's Eastern Economic Corridor initiative. Earlier, Origin had signed a contract with the InterContinental Hotels Group to manage upcoming hotels in Bangkok and Sriracha.

Advertorial

New Mövenpick resort flexes wellness power with BDMS partnership



Globally, wellness has emerged as one of the most popular ways to spruce up hospitality offerings, but the new Mövenpick BDMS Wellness Resort Bangkok wants to go a step further – by tapping world-class physicians and latest molecular science in its lifestyle and wellness destination resort proposition.

An urban retreat tucked among greenery in Bangkok's Ploenchit area, the new 293-key destination spa resort is clearly leveraging its connection, with owner Bangkok Dusit Medical Services (BDMS), Thailand's largest private hospital group.

Mövenpick BDMS Wellness Resort Bangkok general manager, Bruno Huber, said that the resort's access to doctors and medical experts, and its correspondingly body of knowledge and services in the field, are what distinguish it from other wellness prop-

erties in Thailand. Mövenpick BDMS Wellness Resort Bangkok is conceived as a destination spa resort promoting long and healthy living.

Next door, the BDMS Wellness Clinic – a purpose-designed wellness and illness prevention centre – offers a wide array of wellness treatments and illness prevention therapies, spanning health screening to chromosome/DNA testing to fertility programmes.

Furthermore, “explosive growth” in wellness tourism worldwide in the last decade makes it an opportune time to launch the Mövenpick wellness property in Bangkok, said Huber, especially as the Thai capital is already an established medical tourism hub in region and the Tourism Authority of Thailand is keen to develop the country's wellness travel sector to the next level.

While retaining the structure of the

former Swissôtel Nai Lert Park Hotel in which Mövenpick BDMS Wellness Resort Bangkok now resides, the rest of the low-rise modernist architecture has been given a major overhaul, featuring an airy lobby with plenty of natural light, tiered corridors and lush greenery surrounding the premises in its latest incarnation.

Guestrooms start from an expansive 42m², with each room offering wellness amenities like mood lighting, yoga mats and bouncing balls, and there are plans to roll out vitamin C showers in the future. Suites make up a significant ratio of the accommodation at 92 keys, of which 15 units feature Mövenpick's “first in Asia” YouBed, a Swiss invention that allows adjustment of softness and hardness, according to Huber.

Established nutritionist Gabriele Kurz has been roped in as consultant

to develop healthy, GMO-free menus for F&B offerings, as well as coffee breaks. The property boasts 2,000m² of event spaces, including the Chamchuri Ballroom that can host up to 800 delegates, three meeting rooms that can be divisible into smaller rooms, and a host of function spaces across the property from private dining room in the all-day-dining Tamarind restaurant to outdoor receptions by the pool.

The hotel's partnership with BDMS Wellness Clinic also gives it ready connections and access into the medical and pharmaceutical fields. In the pipeline is a 780m² spa, which will offer traditional Thai medicine using brand-new technology as well as non-invasive beauty treatments, and the signature restaurant – both of which are scheduled to launch with the resort's grand opening this year-end.

Fresh Eyes

Tours that bind

Amornched Jinda-apiraksa, CEO and co-founder of TakeMeTour, proves that a tour outfit based on the sharing economy can become a thriving business in an age of immersive travel. By **Xinyi Liang-Pholsena**

Seeing the value of showing friends and families around in foreign destinations while he was studying abroad, Amornched Jinda-apiraksa saw possibilities of matching travellers keen to discover destinations through the eyes of locals.

Together with co-founder Noppon Anukunwithaya, Amornched launched their own tourism enterprise in 2012 to offer single-day travel experiences led by “local experts” – natives or locals who were keen to share about the place they have grown up or lived in.

Conceived as a peer-to-peer online activity marketplace, TakeMeTours aims to feature activities and experiences that give a different spin to conventional day tours and programmes in a destination.

However, getting the start-up off the ground in the early days were “very difficult”, although Amornched notes that the high-profile foray of Airbnb into the tours and activities sector through its Experiences arm has further “helped to raise awareness of peer-to-peer experiences”.

Not only does a new generation of travellers crave for immersive in-destination experiences, more people are opening up to hosting and guiding visitors. The peer-to-peer platform offers locals a chance to become a tour guide, much as how Airbnb invites everyone to become a hotelier.

TakeMeTour now receives 30-50 new local experts sign-ups every day, of which the company will further screen and verify to assess their suitability for the programme, Amornched said.

The online marketplace, the largest of its kind in Thailand, has amassed an interesting and unique collection of in-destination experiences.

Instead of visiting classic floating markets that are typically featured on Bangkok itineraries, Amornched shares the example of a TakeMeTour tour that visits Khlong Lat Mayom Floating Market, led by a local expert who lives nearby so that guests can pop over to his residence for a home-cooked lunch by his grandmother.

Another well-received activity on the platform, according to him, is a running tour of Bangkok’s Lumpini Park, led by a Thai fitness enthusiast who accompanies guests to enjoy a local breakfast at the park’s edge after the run.

TakeMeTour also relies on the peer-to-peer model in the promotion and marketing of its tours. For new listings, the company will usually invite its network of photographers and bloggers to tour trials and share their reviews online.

Seven years since its founding in 2012, Bangkok-based TakeMeTour has now grown to over 1,000 experiences offered by 25,000 local experts across 55 different cities in Thailand.

Regional expansion is now on the cards for TakeMeTour, which has recently branched into Cambodia, with Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia next on the expansion radar.

As the start-up scales up, Amornched expresses his desire to invest in more back-end technology to better leverage data insights.

“We have more than 1,000 tours right now, so we want to show the right ones to the right travellers. We own all the content, and we also do NLP (natural language processing),” said the robotics engineering graduate who was listed among Forbes’ 30 Under 30 list in 2018.

With travellers increasingly staking out their independence and seeking unique in-destination experiences, Amornched also sees traditional tour operators expressing greater interest in TakeMeTour offerings such as café hopping tours. As such, he is currently developing API options to connect TakeMeTour’s experiences with the “big players”.

TakeMeTour also recently launched a new pilot campaign, in partnership with Thailand’s leading property developer Sansiri’s subsidiary Plus Property, to introduce property tours.

Amornched explained: “Basically, it’s a tour targeting foreign property investors and expatriates who plan to relocate to Thailand. We will have a local expert – in this case, a property expert – to show them around to find the right condo/apartment to fit their needs in just one day, (looking at various factors such as) the budget, location close to their office, international school for kids, supermarket, etc.

It’s clearly an “interesting time for the sector now,” the entrepreneur stated, not-

ing the considerable amount of interest – and investment – currently poured in the tours and activities sector.



We have more than 1,000 tours right now, so we want to show the right ones to the right travellers.

Amornched Jinda-apiraksa
CEO and co-founder, TakeMeTour, together with co-founder Noppon Anukunwithaya



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From above: A traveller visits a Thai railway market with a local expert; a pad Thai cooking lesson and home-cooked meal delivered by a grandmother in her home



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Destination

Bringing back the Europeans

Sarawak is lining up a series of campaigns and partnerships to entice Europeans back to the destination, which has been impacted by a slew of cuts in air services in the last few years. By **S Puvaneswary**



Sarawak Tourism Board (STB) has intensified efforts to create greater visibility for the East Malaysian state in its traditional market of Europe, after tourism took a hit following the loss of air services linking the continent to Malaysia in recent years.

European arrivals to Malaysia plunged when Malaysia Airlines axed Frankfurt from its flight network in April 2015, followed by Amsterdam and Paris in January 2016, as part of

its route rationalisation exercise to stem losses.

“With a bigger marketing budget, we are going all out to rebuild promotions in Europe by working with more airline partners and increasing our product offerings from this year on,” said STB’s CEO Sharzede Datu Hj Salleh Askor.

Just months earlier, European carriers Air France and Lufthansa had also cancelled their services to Kuala Lumpur in October 2015 and February 2016 respectively.

The attention given to longhaul markets is deemed critical as key European markets including Germany, the UK, France and Benelux countries are year-round, high-yield tourists who spend an average of two weeks in Sarawak.

To boost arrivals from Europe, STB is working with airline partners that have European sectors on several tactical and joint marketing campaigns, said Sharzede.

In addition, STB had participated in ITB Berlin earlier this year, and

will lead the private sector at the upcoming ITB Asia in Singapore and World Travel Market in London in November.

The board is targeting 77,138 tourist arrivals from Europe this year, representing a five per cent growth from 2018. It hopes to grow European tourist arrivals to 82,538 next year, which is also designated *Visit Malaysia 2020*, and to 84,800 European visitors in 2021.

While Sarawak’s past promotions for the European market were focused on soft adventure and cultural attractions, this year, the state NTO wants to raise interest in other areas such as nature, the local cuisine and unique festival offerings including the world renowned Rainforest World Music Festival on the foothills of Mount Santubong and the Borneo Jazz Festival in Miri.

Nature-based events being promoted in Europe include the International Bornean Frog Race, an event focused on promoting awareness, interest and education about amphibians and amphibian conservation around the world. Sarawak’s Kubah National Park is also home to the world’s second smallest frog, the *Microhyla Nepenthicola* species. Another annual event being promoted in Europe is the Sarawak International Bird Race. Sarawak has 22 bird areas designated by BirdLife International in which inhabits 54 endemic bird species.

“Including nature in the promotions is a good move as this will interest Europeans. If the marketing campaign is done well, we should see an increased interest to Sarawak next year,” said Manfred Kurz, managing director, Diethelm Travel Malaysia.

“It is good that STB is having multiple airline partnerships with airlines that service both Europe and

Performance by the Iban tribe in Sarawak at the Sarawak Cultural Village

Tours & activities

From high tech show to splendid nature

1 Encore Melaka

The 70-minute live theatre performance recounts stories of the early voyagers from China to the birth of modern Melaka. The show is specially curated and directed by Wang Chaoqe, the creative force behind the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games opening ceremony.

The specially-built theatre has a 360-degree rotating auditorium and special effects are created through 3D projection mapping with intricate theatre props, creating a virtual reality effect, allowing audience to travel through time. Multi-stage hydraulic sets

are used to elevate performers on stage. From Mondays to Saturdays, shows run at 17.30 and 20.30. On Sundays, show times are 14.30 and 17.30. <https://encore-melaka.com/>

2 Borneo Big 5 Wildlife

The 6D/5N package by Borneo Eco Tours offers travellers a chance to glimpse Borneo’s celebrated five – the pygmy elephant, orang utan, proboscis monkey, crocodiles and the rhinoceros hornbill. Highlights include a river cruise and visits to Sepilok Orang Utan Rehabilitation Centre, Borneo Sun Bear Conservation Cen-

tre, as well as Gomantong Cave and its surroundings to witness a bat exodus at dusk. <https://www.borneoecotours.com>

3 Mantanani Island Snorkelling

Borneo Trails’ Mantanani Island Snorkelling is targeted at non-divers, visiting Sabah’s Mantanani island that teems with marine life and coral reefs. The journey begins with a two-hour drive to Kampung Kuala Abai jetty in Kota Belud, followed by an hour’s ride on a speedboat. The one-day package includes a return transfer from hotel in Kota



Kinabalu, a BBQ lunch, snorkelling equipment and snorkelling at two sites on the island. <http://www.borneotrails.com.my>

4 River tubing on Kampar River

On this exhilarating outdoor adventure with Adventoro, guests will brave the Kampar River rapids with varying speeds on rubber tubes. This two-hour

Malaysia through their hubs, as it is a logical thing to do.

“The state government should look into infrastructure development and attracting more investments to the state. Having an international hotel brand on Damai Beach will make it easier to sell the destination, while also increasing the length of stay of Europeans.”

Nigel Wong, director, Urban Rhythms Tours, Adventures & Travel said growing the arrivals from the European longhaul market is ideal for the state which already attracts mature European travellers in their late 30s or older, as this segment likes destinations that are peaceful and not overcrowded.

“At ITB Berlin, there was a large amount of interest on Sabah and Sarawak. Both states conjure up images of a lush and pristine destination which appeals to the European market. STB’s marketing efforts will reinforce the image of Sarawak as an attractive tourism destination and help it reach its intended markets in Europe,” he said.

“Sarawak’s appeal has always been the rainforest, conservation of nature, wildlife and authentic experiences. This marketing effort by STB to promote diversified attractions will resonate well with the market. Along with regular product updates from the state NTO, we should be able to promote Sarawak as an exciting and attractive destination. Since ITB Berlin, we have already seen a pickup in bookings for the destination; with *Visit Malaysia 2020* fast approaching, we hope interest will continue,” Wong added.

Adam Kamal, general manager, Tour East Malaysia, said: “We have a lot of requests from European travellers to Sarawak who are interested in visiting UNESCO World Heritage site Mulu National Park. We sell the destination as an educational adventure experience where visitors can learn about the earth’s geosystem while they seek adventure.

“With increased marketing and promotion of diversified attractions, this will attract repeat and new visitors from Europe. Because Sarawak is a niche destination, getting higher yield per tourist is always better than going after mass tourism which could negatively impact the destination.

“I hope the joint international tourism development programme between Tourism Malaysia and Malaysia Airports Holdings will also attract more Middle Eastern airlines to fly direct to Kuching as that will further boost tourism.”

activity requires a minimum of three people. Children aged 12 and below and pregnant women are not permitted. The activity includes an English speaking guide, lunch, safety equipment and return transfers from Gopeng. <https://www.adventoro.com/>

5 Le Petit Chef

Le Petit Chef, an innovative dining experience, features an animated chef projected onto diners’ plates. Using 3D project mapping technology, Le Petit Chef will ‘cook’ the food on the plates in front of diners. Guests are treated to a combination of sight and sound as well as a menu designed by Michelin-starred chef Jeff Ramsey.

Available until end-2019, Le Petit Chef is offered in three sessions from Mondays to Saturdays, and four seatings on Sundays. Seating is limited to 36 diners per session. <https://www.elements.my/>

Destination

Melaka entices the world

Eager to meet its tourism goals, Melaka is reinventing itself with new attractions and world-class events. The positive first quarter results show its initiatives are working. **By S Puvaneswary**



More attractions are adding to Melaka’s appeal to leisure and business tourists

Melaka State Government’s *Visit Melaka Year 2019* campaign, aimed at increasing visitor arrivals to 20 million tourists this year, is already bearing fruit.

The state saw a 17.5 per cent increase in tourist arrivals to 4.8 million in 1Q2019, from the same period last year. Of these, 3.4 million were domestic tourists and 1.4 million were foreign tourists.

Under the umbrella campaign, initiatives are multi-pronged.

Special events have been curated for this campaign including the recent Melaka Food Festival, Melaka By the Sea Carnival in September, and Melaka Fiesta in October.

Tourism Melaka, through its Tourism Information Centres in Ayer Keroh and Jalan Kota, are giving away discount vouchers for entrance tickets to 28 attractions, including Melaka River Cruise, Menara Taming Sari, Encore Melaka and Melaka Maritime Museum.

Melaka’s travel trade partners have come onboard with the campaign, some pushing out their own initiatives.

Said Uzaidi Udani, president, Malaysian Inbound Tourism Association (MITA): “On our part, MITA organised a three-day inbound tourism boot camp in Melaka in July that was attended by 50 tour operators and product owners. We identified and developed eight new tourism products and packages for foreign markets. Some new ideas include a walk to Konet Island during low tide from Telok Gong and an overnight stay at the former mansion used by the governor of Melaka, Mohd Khalid Yaakob.”

He added: “Melaka may only be a small state, but it is steeped in history and culture. Its UNESCO recognition received in 2008 has also been a boost for tourism.”

Klaus Sennik, general manager, Ramada Plaza by Wyndham Melaka, shared: “As a hotel, we are also taking our own initiatives to support the campaign through our hotel activities and campaigns to garner more publicity and support for this campaign which has resulted in a gradual increase in hotel occupancy.”

Asmaliana Ashari, senior manager, Tourism Melaka, said the campaign is also aimed at creating more awareness of the

destination’s facilities and capabilities for business events.

Foreign tourists from this segment spend three times more than the average leisure tourist. Last year, the average

spend per tourist per night was RM504 (US\$122). For international business tourists, the average length of stay is six nights.

Arokia Das, director, Luxury Tours Malaysia, said: “With 186 events planned for the year, and new live theatre productions such as *Encore Melaka* and *Rasa Melaka*, it is easier to promote Melaka to meeting planners. These professionally-run shows with elements of heritage and culture cater to the needs of meeting planners.

“Meeting planners are looking for new destinations beyond Kuala Lumpur and within a two-hour drive from the city. In this respect, Melaka fits the bill. Kuala Lumpur has lost some of its allure for repeat leisure tourists because of the absence of new attractions; tourists have been cutting down their stay in the city to one or two days.

“We are trying to entice day trippers travelling south to Singapore to spend at least a night in Melaka instead, by highlighting the state’s rich history, culture, gastronomy and ecotourism products to Asian markets.”



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Hotels

Too many (unregulated) rooms?

In spite of increased tourist arrivals to the country, hotel occupancies in Malaysia have fallen. Much of the blame has landed on the influx of short-term rentals, a sector which remains unregulated. By **S Puvaneswary**

A 2.7 per cent growth in tourist arrivals to 6.7 million in 1Q2019 failed to lift market sentiment for Malaysia's hospitality sector. In lieu, the hotel industry saw a 1.5 per cent decline in national occupancy to 64.2 per cent, from 65.7 per cent in 1Q2018, revealed a recent report by the Malaysian Association of Hotels (MAH).

With 39 per cent of arrivals from neighbouring Singapore, it's possible a good number of tourists may have stayed with friends and relatives, or gone home after midnight.

However, what has hoteliers more concerned is the other likely contributing reason for the occupancy drop – the influx of unregulated short-term accommodation services such as Airbnb, said MAH's CEO Yap Lip Seng.

In July, Airbnb reported it had more than 53,000 listings in Malaysia and that it welcomed some 3.3 million guests to the country between

July 2018 and July 2019, a staggering 73 per cent year-on-year growth.

"The number revealed by Airbnb is a worrying 21 per cent of legitimate hotels," said Yap, comparing the figure to the Tourism, Arts and Culture Ministry's database of 250,000 legitimate hotel rooms nationwide.

But such unregulated short-term accommodation services, said Yap, are negatively affecting the Malaysian tourism industry where the average occupancy rate of hotels was only 56 per cent in 2018.

Yap said the association welcomes regulation of short-term accommodation services and also called for a study to look into where short-term rentals could work for the industry, such as in rural areas.

"Kuala Lumpur has an oversupply of rooms. Allowing short-term accommodation rental services in the city centre is not helping. The government needs to act fast – every minute, valuable tourism dollars are leaked out of the system through un-

regulated businesses such as Airbnb," lamented Yap.

Uzaidi Udanis, president of Malaysia Tourism Council agreed. "(We urge) the government to make it a level playing field for hotels to compete. Hotel regulations should also be relooked to consider reducing the number of permits required," he suggested.

Uzaidi, who is also president of the Malaysian Inbound Tourism Association, called for more collaboration between hotels and tour operators to develop value-added packages that include tours. This will enable hotels to earn better revenue, grow market share and compete more effectively against Airbnb which offers dry rooms and tours and activities, he said.

"It is a better strategy than dropping rates to compete," he stated.

Malaysian Association of Hotel Owners' executive director, Shahrudin Saaid, thinks regulating the hotel sector could have an even big-



Hotels in Malaysia seek greater regulation of short-term rentals

ger impact than the introduction of the tourism tax.

"We need to find ways to attract more tourists. We are now competing with emerging destinations like Vietnam and Cambodia, and established ones like Thailand and Singapore. We cannot keep selling the same products and attractions we did 20 years ago," said Saaid.



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Fresh Eyes

Glamping it up

Enamoured with the glamping concept, one Gen Z entrepreneur abandoned her studies in Australia to start a glamping venture in her hometown. By **S Puvaneswary**



Flenny Wong Cheng, 22, was first introduced to glamping during the first year of her three-year Bachelor of Media programme at the University of Adelaide. She quickly saw glamping as a viable business opportunity in her hometown of Kota Belud, Sabah, where there were no similar offerings.

She pitched her idea to her parents who supported her decision to quit her studies and pursue her dream of setting up a glamping venture in Sabah. “Besides, they missed me and were glad I was coming home for good,” she recalled. Her parents and siblings also provided her with financial support to kick-start this new venture.

It took months of planning and getting the ground

work done before Cabana Retreat opened to the public on February 1. It is located on Rampayan Beach in Kota Belud, about 70km from Kota Kinabalu, the state capital.

While the homepage on the official website describes Cabana Retreat as the first pop-up beach resort in Malaysia, there are no plans as yet to relocate as Wong had leased the site for a five-year period from the land owner.

She has set up 24 cotton canvas luxurious tents, custom-made in China. The tents are equipped with lighting, air-conditioning, pillows and mattresses, side tables and most basic amenities guests would expect from a hotel stay, including free Wi-Fi and daily housekeeping. While there are no TVs, movies are screened under the stars at the open cinema.

Said Wong: “We provide a luxurious way to enjoy the outdoors, while staying connected to family and friends.”

Half a year since opening, Wong describes business as being hectic, with high occupancies usually on weekends, school holidays and long public holidays.

“Our guests are mainly locals, young couples and families, and stays range from one to three nights. International guests are mostly from China and Europe. They like Kota Belud’s nature and activities like jet skiing, paddle boarding, banana boat rides, ATV rides and local tours to see the fireflies, Mantanani Island, and river cruises.”

Besides marketing through its website and social media, Wong partners inbound tour operators. She also has plans to add more tents and to entice investors to develop more activities in Kota Belud.

New Hotels

1 The Prestige Hotel, Penang

The colonial heritage property boasts 162 rooms, plus an all-day dining outlet, a mix of retail outlets, gym, event spaces and rooftop infinity pool. The hotel is walking distance from Pinang Peranakan Mansion, Clan Jetty Heritage Home and Fort Cornwallis, and is along the Heritage Trail of Penang.



2 The Westin Desaru Coast

The 275-key resort is part of the new Desaru Coast development, a large-scale integrated holiday and event destination in Johor. Bright, airy sea-facing rooms are bathed in natural light and provide elevated vantage points, with sweeping panoramic views of the South China Sea. The resort is about 82km from Johor’s Senai International Airport.

3 The RuMa Hotel and Residences

The 253-key RuMa Hotel and Residences pays tribute to Kuala Lumpur’s tin mining and colonial past, which integrates seamlessly with modern cultural influences by local artisans in the décor and furnishings. Guest facilities extend to 24-hour check-in and check-out, complimentary minibar in all rooms, complimentary Wi-Fi and all-day butler service for select suites.



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Finnair Airbus A321



To support biofuel flights, Finnair customers can purchase biofuel via the carrier's Push For Change service online (www.finnair.com/pushforchange), which can also be paid for with Finnair Plus frequent flyer points. The biofuel available for sale comes in 10, 20 or 65 euros (US\$11, 22 or 72), to reduce the emissions of a return flight in Finland, return flight within Europe, or a return intercontinental flight, respectively.

Finnair customers can also choose to support a carbon dioxide emission reduction project by making offset payments of 1 euro for a return flight within Finland, 2 euros for a return flight within Europe, and 6 euros for a return intercontinental flight. The charges are based on the average emissions and costs of reducing a carbon dioxide ton within the project.

The payments are transferred to an emissions reduction project in Mozambique in full through NEFCO, a financial institution established by the Nordic governments to finance sustainable green growth and climate projects.

The Finnish carrier says it also offsets the carbon dioxide emissions of its own personnel's duty travel through the carbon dioxide emission reduction project.

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Through pre-matched appointments, meet face-to-face with leading adventure product buyers and sellers from across the world including state, regional and local tourism agencies from established and emerging markets, unique accommodation providers and tour operators.

ONE-DAY CONFERENCE

Explore the nuances, trends and dynamics of one of the fastest-growing tourism sectors. The programme brings together international experts at the forefront of the adventure travel industry from both private and public sectors to discuss the sector's issues and opportunities.

EXPERIENCE KOTA KINABALU

Situated on the beautiful island of Borneo, Sabah is the second largest of thirteen states that comprise Malaysia. Sabah is richly blessed with nature diversity, unique cultures, fun adventure, beautiful beaches, and fantastic cuisines for the adventurous taste buds. From the world's largest flower - the Rafflesia, to one of the highest mountains in South East Asia - Mount Kinabalu, including one of the world's top dive sites - Sipadan Island, Sabah offers an infinite playground for the most adventurous travel explorers. Kota Kinabalu International Airport is Malaysia's second busiest airport and the main gateway to Sabah, situated around 8 km from the city centre, with direct flights from major cities including Bangkok, Tokyo, Shanghai, Perth, Hong Kong, Singapore, Seoul and Taipei.

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