

Coronavirus deals fresh blow to Australian tourism

Destinations hottest with the Chinese market are the hardest hit

In search of zen

As more people expect to maintain their wellness routine at home and abroad, hotels and resorts are tuning up their facilities and services to better cater to health-conscious guests

Proudly independent

In a hotel landscape now ruled by giants, Thailand's Royal Cliff Hotels Group CEO Vitanart Vathanakul is determined to keep his company independent



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Onward march to recovery

South-east Asian tourism authorities and stakeholders are taking swift action to patch the leak in tourism business brought on by the Covid-19 outbreak, and choosing to keep their eyes on the road to recovery



Prioritise positivity

A focus on recovery and community support



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It should be early March by the time you get a copy of this issue. More than a month would have passed since news of the Covid-19 outbreak took over front pages and prime time.

I watched how it unfolded in Asia – general cluelessness at ASEAN Tourism Forum in mid-January gave way to curiosity a week later as the world realised how widespread the then-mysterious flu virus was in China’s Wuhan city. Later, as the Chinese New Year holidays approached and the Chinese government slapped a stop-sale order on all travel agencies in the country and suspended internal transportation services, travel and tourism players around Asia realised with horror what that meant to their business.

At press time in end-February, the industry is still struggling to make sense of the impact of the outbreak. Air capacities are being cut, cruise itineraries are being redrawn, new travel restrictions to Asian hot zones are emerging, tradeshows serving various industries are being postponed or cancelled. On top of all that, projections are being churned out every other day by research houses to warn us how the business could tumble further.

With all that you are hearing and reading, are you getting Covid-19 fatigue yet? Because I am.

As a journalist, God forbid I should ever feel exhausted over a hot issue that I need to track and report on. But as a human being, the headlines and projections are depressing, and the continued spread of fake and sensational news is frustrating.

A lot of the content put out for our consumption encourages fear and unnecessary curtailing of travel and meetings.

The travel and tourism industry is often the first to suffer fallouts from negative events around the world, and when this industry falters it brings others like retail, F&B, and transportation down with it.

In Singapore where I reside, the local health authorities’ sharp efficiencies in identifying and tracing potential Covid-19 carriers have earned the city-state the unwanted honour of boasting one of the highest infection rates outside of China. Worried travellers have chosen to keep away, and multiple travel advisories have been posted against Singapore.

Many shops and restaurants have shortened their daily operating hours in response to poor patronage. The other day, an elderly taxi driver told me I was his third customer all morning; it was 10.00 then and he had started his shift at 06.00.

Fortunately, as a journalist and an editor, I can choose how TTG titles contribute to the conversation around Covid-19. While I cannot naively ignore industry developments as they occur, I can choose to balance the coverage with stories of resilience and recovery, and of organisations that provide support for their staff, vendors and others in the external community during these difficult times.

As the saying goes, life must go on. I will continue to meet and speak with any industry peer who desires the same, even as I pay greater attention to personal hygiene.



A lot of the content (around Covid-19) put out for our consumption encourages fear and unnecessary curtailing of travel and meetings.

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Coming Up

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Halal tourism There is greater awareness around halal tourism, and more non-Organisation of Islamic Cooperation destinations are eager to welcome Muslim travellers. Yet, travel painpoints continue to exist for Muslim travellers. What more can we do to be better hosts?

Middle East We are counting down to Dubai World Expo, a massive event that will give travellers fresh reasons to pay the destination a visit.



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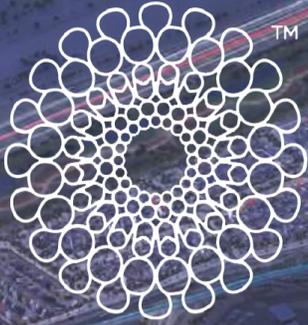
Travel Hall of Fame

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

- At present, these exceptional organisations and their years of induction are:
- Singapore Airlines Limited (2002)
 - Singapore Changi Airport (2002)
 - Hertz Asia Pacific (2005)
 - Royal Cliff Hotels Group - The State of Exclusivity & Fascination (2006)
 - Star Cruises (2008)
 - Sabre Asia Pacific Pte Ltd (2009)
 - SilkAir (Singapore) Private Limited (2010)
 - Lotte Tour (2011)
 - Hong Kong International Airport (2013)
 - Raffles Hotel Singapore (2013)
 - Regal Airport Hotel (2015)
 - Banyan Tree Spa (2015)
 - Qatar Airways (2016)
 - Thai Airways International Public Company Limited (2016)
 - Thailand Convention & Exhibition Bureau (2016)
 - Royal Plaza on Scotts (2018)
 - Royal Caribbean International (2018)
 - Best Western Hotels & Resorts (2019)
 - Travelport (2019)

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





**EXPO
2020
DUBAI
UAE**

South-east Asia on show at Expo 2020 Dubai

Celebrating the very best global culture, creativity and innovation



Delight in the floral-inspired Thailand Pavilion

A world of immersive cultural experiences, unique heritage, exciting innovations and global culinary journeys await the millions of visitors set to attend Expo 2020 Dubai.

With 192 participating countries, visitors will be able to explore the world – no passport needed – and South-east Asian countries are making the most of this chance to showcase the best of their culture, ideas and progress to a global audience of millions.

Delve into Malaysia's commitment to balancing socio-economic progress with environmental concerns at its carbon net-zero pavilion, where

visitors can learn more about the country's #MyButterflyEffect campaign and catch a dynamic folk or skilled warrior dance, such as the *Sabah, Sarawak* and *Joget*.

The stunning Singapore Pavilion – another net-zero energy construction – will take visitors on a journey towards livability and resilience, where they can stroll through a rainforest, past giant garden cones and ascend to the spectacular hanging garden deck to enjoy diverse flavours in the sky market.

Discover the creativity and compassion of the Philippines at a pavilion inspired by a coral reef, with free-flowing, multi-level spaces that

include the vibrant Mangrove Café, and be delighted by the floral-inspired Thailand Pavilion, which showcases the country's warm, friendly culture while highlighting its position as a regional hub for digital technology and creativity.

The region is well represented among the 192 Country Pavilions that will spotlight the very best of global culture, creativity and celebrations throughout the six months of Expo 2020 Dubai, The World's Greatest Show.

Sumathi Ramanathan, Director – Destination Marketing, Expo 2020 Dubai, said: "Expo 2020 will be the largest event ever held in the Middle East, Africa and South Asia region, and the participating South-east Asian countries will make a vital contribution to ensuring an exciting, entertaining and enlightening experience for millions of visitors from around the world."

Visitors can also explore Expo 2020's subthemes of *Opportunity, Mobility and Sustainability* at the three Thematic Pavilions, which will demonstrate tangible ways for each of us to all help shape a brighter tomorrow.

The Opportunity Pavilion will offer journeys that highlight the Sustainable Development Goals, a blueprint set by the United Nations that addresses global challenges, such as poverty, gender inequality and climate change.

The Mobility Pavilion will look at the past, present and future of movement – showcasing human progress through physical and digital realms – while the Sustainability Pavilion will offer an emotional journey through oceans, forests and beyond. Visitors will witness the madness of human consumption and can pledge to help preserve the planet for future generations.

Elsewhere, there will be festivals celebrating everything, from outer space to the future of design, 60-plus live shows daily and special celebrations, such as Chinese New Year, Christmas and Diwali.

Taking place from October 20, 2020 until April 10, 2021, the next World Expo will be an unmissable celebration welcoming millions from across the planet to the UAE.



"Expo 2020 will be the largest event ever held in the Middle East, Africa and South Asia region, and the participating South-east Asian countries will make a vital contribution to ensuring an exciting, entertaining and enlightening experience for millions of visitors from around the world."

- **Sumathi Ramanathan,**
Director - Destination Marketing, Expo 2020 Dubai



The Singapore Pavilion takes visitors on a journey towards livability and resilience

Onward march to recovery



South-east Asian tourism authorities and stakeholders are taking swift action to patch the leak in tourism business brought on by the Covid-19 outbreak, and choosing to keep their eyes on the road to recovery. By **TTG Asia reporters**

As the business fallout from the Covid-19 outbreak continues to unfold across Asia, destination marketers and industry stakeholders are choosing to focus their attention on immediate efforts needed to lift their peers from the doldrums.

Government-led financial assistance, fresh destination marketing campaigns aimed at domestic travellers and new source markets, as well as attractive travel deals are among the measures rolled out within short weeks. These followed the suspension of transportation networks and city lockdowns ordered by the Chinese government to contain the coronavirus.

While the bold move by the Chinese government succeeded in limiting transmissions beyond China's borders, it also emphasised the severity of the outbreak and, along with a flurry of fake and sensational news surrounding the virus, frightened travellers elsewhere into rethinking their trips to Asia.

Travel analytics company ForwardKeys, which has been tracking the travel and tourism impact of the outbreak, noted in a February 12 update that forward-looking Chinese air bookings to Asia-Pacific for the period of March 1 to April 30 is down by 58.3 per cent.

Weakened travel demand has pushed several major airlines based in the region to rework their flight schedule. Singapore Airlines and Qantas Airways have temporarily cut flights across its global and Asian network respectively up to May. Cathay Pacific Group reduced the over-

all passenger flight capacity on Cathay Pacific and Cathay Dragon by approximately 40 per cent for February and March, with potential for an extended reduction in April.

Top-level attention

As tourism players lose sleep over business losses, tourism authorities and industry leaders have sprung into action with recovery plans.

The Singapore government has set aside a war chest of S\$4 billion (US\$2.8 billion) this year to help stabilise her economy and tide workers and businesses through the economic slowdown.

Another S\$800 million would also be set aside to support the tourism, aviation, retail, food services and point-to-point transport services sectors, which have been directly hit by the Covid-19 outbreak. The range of assistance is wide – financial subsidies to defray the cost of third-party professional cleaning fees incurred by hotels; licence fee waivers for hotels, travel agents and tourist guides; property tax rebates for various businesses; manpower redeployment programmes and staff training funds; a year-long temporary bridging loan programme for tourism businesses; and rebates on aircraft landing and parking charges.

Meanwhile, the Singapore Tourism Board is forming the Tourism Recovery Action Task Force (TRAC) to identify opportunities arising from the crisis, drive measures to instill confidence in the destination's tourism establishments, as well as create and initiate recovery plans.

Across the border, the Malaysian

government aims to release a stimulus package by either end-February or early-March. The package is expected to boost the economy and cushion the business fallout from the coronavirus outbreak.

Indonesian leaders, too, are coming up with ways to bring light to the local tourism industry. Minister of finance Sri Mulyani Indrawati had been worked with the Ministry of Transportation (MOT) and the Tourism Authority to formulate incentive programmes for hotels and airlines to stimulate travel, particularly within the country.

Budi Karya Sumadi, minister of transportation, hoped the proposed programme would have a positive impact on airfares and hotel rates, and allow the creation of attractively-priced bundle packages comprising flight and accommodation.

The programme was being reviewed by the MOT and Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy at

press time.

At the same time, Indonesia's minister of tourism and creative economy and head of Tourism and Creative Economy Board, Wishnutama Kusubandio, is lobbying for some 30 airlines that have cancelled their services to China to reroute their flights to some of Indonesia's favoured destinations.

Home remedies

For some South-east Asian destinations, their own massive population has emerged a possible saviour for their distressed tourism industry.

In February, the Philippine Travel Agencies Association (PTAA) pressed on with the country's biggest consumer travel fair, the 27th Travel Tour Expo (TTE) 2020, despite a challenging tourism business landscape. Apart from dangling travel deals with the lowest prices ever seen in TTE's history, PTAA also chose to leverage the star power of the 10 most-travelled Filipino celebrities, ranked based on their social media posting, to attract visitors.

PTAA president Ritchie Tuano said: "(Celebrities) do a lot to boost the visits to different locations. Their fans aspire to go where they go. They provide both the glamour factor and the reassurance that the place is safe to visit."

The Philippines has continued to offer massive discounts to domestic travellers. More than 40 hotels and resorts around the country – and the number is growing – have agreed to cut room rates by up to 50 per cent in collaboration with the Department of Tourism, Tourism Promo-



As an association, we have to take the lead in reducing travel scare and promote safe travel and precautionary measures recommended by the World Health Organization and the Department of Health.

RITCHIE TUANO
President, Philippine Travel Agencies Association

tions Board, Tourism Congress of the Philippines, Philippine Hotel Owners Association, Hotel and Sales Marketing Association, PTAA and Philippine Tour Operators Association. The offer will run until August.

Alongside this, Philippine Airlines, Cebu Pacific and Air Asia Philippines have agreed to a 20 to 30 per cent reduction in airfares.

These stimulants are unlikely to cover the tourism industry's business losses, estimated at 40 billion pesos (US\$784 million) from February to April. Nevertheless, it will soften the impact of losing China – the country's second biggest source market – and other feeder markets, explained Tuano.

Malaysian Inbound Tourism Association (MITA) is looking to do the same, banking on a week-long e-travel fair in late March, with the date yet to be confirmed at press time, to help galvanise domestic travellers into supporting the local tourism industry.

MITA president Uzaidi Udanis said his team has negotiated with Malaysia's airlines, hotels and attractions to offer discounts of up to 70 per cent during the travel fair.

An innovative measure and a first for the fair is the introduction of digital platforms to sell packages. MITA will also hold a physical fair in Kuala Lumpur after the e-fair has ended.

Likewise, Indonesia has launched the Visit Wonderful Indonesia (Viwi) Nusantara Shocking Deals 2020, an initiative led by several tourism industry associations to entice domestic travellers with special offers.

Indonesian government agencies and industry members are certain that motivating locals to explore their own backyard and encouraging government agencies and local companies to conduct meetings locally may just help to soften the outbreak's blow on tourism business.

Echoing the strategic turn towards the domestic travel market is Rowena Baltazar, managing director of newly-formed A-List Travel Solutions in the Philippines. Baltazar shared that she was reaching out to Filipino travellers using social media.

After all, the country's excess of 100 million domestic tourists have helped the Philippine travel trade to sail through tough times in the past. In terms of numbers, domestic tourists are more than twelve times that



Letting go of staff now is not a solution. It will only bring short term savings, and when things are busy again, you will have a hard time recruiting.

TONY COUSENS
General manager,
Wyndham Hotel Group, Singapore

of foreign inbound tourists, which stand at just eight million.

Observing continued travel confidence among Malaysians Zenith Hotel Putrajaya in Malaysia is targeting the local market in the short term to make up for the shortfall in business, dangling attractive room rates and meeting packages to draw business.

Casting wider nets

Destination marketers, however, are convinced that one strategy – focusing on the domestic market – will not be sufficient. They are turning towards other major tourism source markets with untapped potential.

The Indonesian tourism ministry has said that Malaysia, Singapore, South Korea, Japan, Australia, Canada, and the US are all on its target list, while PTAA is diverting its marketing and promotions to India and the Middle East.

Bambang Sugiono, director of marketing and overseas promotion of Bali-based RD Tours, agrees that casting a wider net makes a safer approach. His business has been hard hit by the outbreak, given that 70 per cent of the approximately 5,000 inbound clients who had planned to visit Bali in February were from China.

Taking care of the family

As business slows down for hotels, hoteliers are wary that staff morale will also take a hit. This has led them to take steps to ensure the well-being of their team mates.

Renee Lim, assistant vice presi-

dent, corporate communications of Banyan Tree Holdings, shared with *TTG Asia* that the group has formed a task force that involves corporate office management and property general managers, as well as town halls to educate, engage and reassure staff on the measures that will be taken during the Covid-19 outbreak.

Tony Cousens, general manager of Wyndham Hotel Group, Singapore, who oversees Days Hotel by Wyndham Singapore and Ramada by Wyndham Singapore at Zhongshan Park, is determined to ensure that their staff will “continue to feel busy and secure about their employment even as business slows down”.

On the other hand, he is also encouraging staff to make full use of the downtime to go on leave and “have a good rest”. The group will also conduct training for teams and individuals; reduce casual labour and redirect duties to full-time staff; assign housekeepers and maintenance teams to tasks that spruce up hotel facilities; and redeploy staff to assist with Wyndham's hotel opening projects elsewhere.

Retrenchment is out of the question for Cousens, who shared that most of his staff have been with the two properties since they opened seven years ago.

“Letting go of staff now is not a solution. It will only bring short term savings, and when things are busy again, you will have a hard time recruiting,” he emphasised, adding that he has supportive owners who are equally protective of the team.



Captains of Singapore's tourism industry met on February 11 to discuss the way forward amid the Covid-19-induced tourism slump

Travel slump spreads across Asia

The travel setback caused by the coronavirus outbreak has now spread beyond China. Other parts of the Asia-Pacific region are reporting a 10.5 per cent slowdown in outbound travel bookings for March and April, excluding trips to and from China and Hong Kong, according to a study by ForwardKeys.

As of February 9, the setback looks likely to be most marked in North-east Asia, where outbound bookings for March and April are 17.1 per cent behind that of the same period last year.

Meanwhile, bookings from South Asia, South-east Asia and Oceania are 11 per cent, 8.1 per cent and three per cent behind respectively.

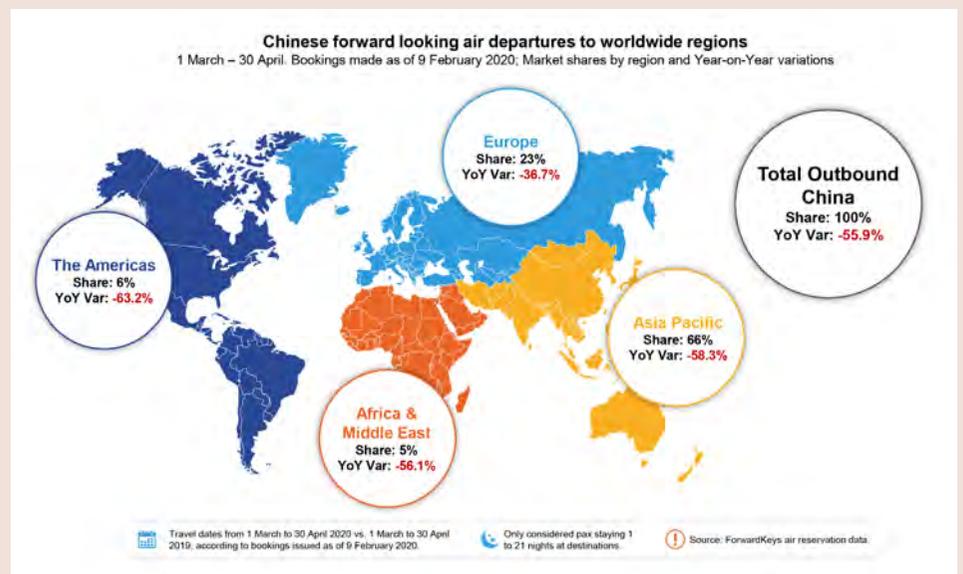
The outbound market most severely affected is, of course, China. Bookings for March and April are set to be just 55.9 per cent of what they were in the same period last year.

For the Chinese outbound market, forward bookings to Asia-Pacific, Europe, the Middle East and Africa, as well as the Americas are 58.3, 38.7, 56.1 and 63.2 per cent behind respectively.

Following the imposition of government travel restrictions, outbound travel from China has fallen by 57.5 per cent.

Of course, inbound travel has not been spared. The Americas have been reported to be the worst-hit compared to the same period last year, with inbound travel falling 64.1 per cent. Travel to Asia-Pacific – which receives 75 per cent of the Chinese outbound market – was down by 58.3 per cent. Over at the two other major regions, Europe, as well as the Middle East and Africa, travel fell by 41.7 and 51.6 per cent.

Olivier Ponti, vice president insights, ForwardKeys, said: “The world's largest and highest spending outbound travel market, China, is in severe difficulty; cancellations are



growing by the day and the impact of this is now spreading to surrounding countries.

“On the brighter side, however, we are not seeing a slowdown in travel outside the Asia-Pacific region; so this is a moment to fill the void by studying alternative origin markets

and focusing promotional efforts on them,” said Ponti.

“We will be monitoring the situation carefully because in a disease outbreak like this, travel trends can change quickly; and different markets are likely to respond differently.”

Coronavirus deals fresh blow to Australian tourism

As both the Chinese and Australian governments restrict immigration to stem the spread of the virus, destinations hottest with the Chinese market are the hardest hit. By **Adelaine Ng**



Australia's tourism sector is facing a double whammy, with the coronavirus dealing a second blow and causing further disruption to an industry that is still reeling from the damage caused by the bushfires.

China's ban on outbound group travel, which was enforced from January 27, led to about a quarter of all Chinese tourists to Australia cancelling their travel plans. Following this, the Australian government decided to ban all travellers from China, except for its own citizens and permanent residents, from February 1.

Qantas Airways has also suspended its two direct flights to China from Feb 9 to Mar 29.

With these latest developments, things may take a turn for the worse before the situation improves for local tour operators.

Tourism businesses in the country are telling a tale of financial devastation and warning of wider impacts on businesses and communities. Unsurprisingly, the impact is keenly felt in locations that have been most popular among Chinese tourists, such as New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland.

Daniel Gschwind, Queensland Tourism Industry Council's CEO, said: "We're getting reports of mass cancellations and significant loss of revenue. I'm talking hundreds of thousands of dollars for individual businesses, and many millions of dollars for the state."

Gschwind believes that the loss accounts for at least a quarter of the state's A\$1.3 billion (US\$879 million) annual income. "On the back of the bushfires, which also affected Queensland, (the Chinese travel re-

strictions) are pushing many businesses to the limit.

"We're already hearing of staff layoffs in some businesses as well as significant concern over revenue loss. This does not just refer to revenue going forward, but also the expectations for the (travel agents and tour guides) to refund pre-payments for any travel. So it is a very, very heavy blow to the tourism industry, obviously Australia-wide, but particularly in Queensland."

China is Australia's largest source country, with short-term arrivals of 1.5 million up to June 2019, and spending to the tune of almost A\$12 billion. Arrivals have grown at a compound growth rate of 15 per cent a year since 2009, causing tourism businesses to shift their focus to this significant source market.

"Australian tourism has become very reliant on China," said Sarah Gardiner, director of the Griffith Institute for Tourism. "We probably haven't seen the full impact of the current events (yet) ... so we're going to need some really strategic thinking and strategic actions to try to assist tourism businesses in navigating this very difficult period."

Gardiner, who is based in the Gold Coast, added: "Interestingly, before all of this happened, the (Australian) tourism industry was aware that it was becoming too reliant on China and was starting

to shift towards other international markets.

"I think that (the coronavirus) has probably added further weight to the idea that we need to diversify our mix of markets to make sure that we're not overly reliant on one particular market," she reckoned.

Both Gardiner and Gschwind are upbeat that the tourism industry will bounce back swiftly from the coronavirus epidemic, citing the industry's resilience during the post-SARS recovery phase in 2003. "In fact, there was even a bit of pent-up demand (during that period)," Gschwind said.

However, in order to seize the opportunity when it comes, businesses need to be kept fully staffed and running, added Gschwind.

"But that is a big challenge because unlike other disasters, including the bushfires, where people can point at damaged infrastructure, we can't see the physical damage (the coronavirus) has done to businesses. How we can directly support and make sure these businesses stay afloat is a big challenge," he said.

Gschwind also noted wider implications beyond tourism. "When income goes down, the whole community suffers (as) many of these regions are so heavily dependent on tourism. We may be on the frontline,

but this is not just a tourism issue; it is an economy and community-wide issue," he said.

The coronavirus' impact on travel has also prompted a response from Australia's tourism minister Simon Birmingham, who noted that the country's seafood export sector and other high quality product suppliers that usually go to China as part of the Lunar New Year celebrations have also been hard hit.

"That's why it's more important than ever that we continue to pursue new trade opportunities, be it with Indonesia, the European Union, India, or elsewhere," he said.

Already, the Australian government has pledged A\$76 million for the tourism industry in response to the bushfire crisis. Birmingham said his department will consult again to recalibrate investments where necessary in the wake of the coronavirus.

The twin impacts of the bushfires and coronavirus mean Australia is looking at "a pretty tough year in 2020," said Gardiner.

"But I'm confident that Tourism Australia and the industry are working quite hard to ensure Australia is high on the must-see tourist destination list. So I think moving forward, we'll see some good recovery out of these visitor numbers," she said.

The nation's tourism industry is still reeling from the damage caused by the bushfires

US\$3 billion projected loss from bushfires

The drop in inbound traffic in the aftermath of the Australian bushfires will cost an estimated A\$4.5 billion (US\$3 billion), according to a survey by the Australian Tourism Export Council (ATEC). ATEC estimated Australia's international visitor numbers will decrease by at least 10 per cent.

ATEC undertook a survey of its members, who represent both Australian-based tourism businesses and inbound tour operators. "70 per cent of respondents said there were significant cancellations of travel to Australia by internationals," said ATEC's managing director, Peter Shelley.

He added that the value of cancellations ranged from A\$5,000 to A\$500,000, with significant impact seen across key inbound markets such as the US, UK, and Europe.

Fears around air quality, safety, and the impact fires have had on the country's tourism offerings, coupled with uncertainty around the time taken for recovery, are

reasons why foreign tourists are cancelling trips, noted Shelley.

"The bushfires occurred at a significant time for international bookings, with the booking window for around 50 per cent of the UK, European and the US travellers typically captured from these markets between December and the end of February," Shelley said.

Shelley added that the tourism industry is the "economic backbone" of many regional communities impacted by recent bushfires. As such, ATEC is getting behind them by promoting products around Australia that are open for business and ready to welcome international visitors in its social media campaign #bushfirebounceback.

"While Australians understand the extent of the bushfire damage, and have already been keen to re-engage and support the affected areas, we need to work hard to positively influence the narrative around our global reputation as a leading tourism destination," he said.



We're getting reports of mass cancellations and significant loss of revenue. I'm talking hundreds of thousands of dollars for individual businesses, and many millions of dollars for the state.

DANIEL GSCHWIND
CEO, Queensland Tourism Industry Council



Proudly independent

In a hotel landscape now ruled by giants, Thailand's Royal Cliff Hotels Group is determined to stay independent in order to grow in her own way and at her own pace. CEO Vitanart Vathanakul shares his dreams and plans with **Karen Yue**

In a hospitality landscape that is now ruled by giants, how do you feel about the way forward for players that have chosen to remain independent, like Royal Cliff Hotels Group?

I have nothing but admiration for hotel companies that have chosen to remain independent. Mergers and acquisitions have resulted in fewer and fewer hotel players, and stiffer competition.

Independent players like us believe that we can continue to offer something unique for travellers as the hotel industry continues to consolidate. Travellers seek unique experiences, and independent hotels can satisfy that on the accommodation side through our own style and service, and even promise a certain excitement and local authenticity.

In contrast, travellers staying in a chain hotel can expect a certain standardised product.

Has the thought of not being independent ever crossed your mind?

Royal Cliff is not part of any hotel distribution or marketing networks, and we are not about to change that. We rely entirely on ourselves to get business in.

Staying independent grants us the ability to develop our products the way we want them to, that is to always retain a high-level of Thai heritage and hospitality. Furthermore, we can be as flexible as we want to when it comes to decision-making and problem-solving.

We are very proud of our brand and want to continue the legacy. We are planning to expand the brand in the near future, and make Thailand proud that a homegrown local brand can go global.

What's on the expansion cards?

We are growing in Thailand first, but given the current situation (the Covid-19 outbreak which has slowed travel down), we have to wait things out. Timing is everything. We take bold risks, but calculated ones.

This epidemic hit us right out of the blue, and is further proof that VUCA is the new normal. How do you keep clear sight of the way the Group needs to take in such a business environment?

The corporate culture matters. We have been around for more than 40 years, and we can learn from how my mother overcame a number of crises, such as the Tom Yam Goong Crisis (in 1997 when the collapse of the Thai baht led to a chain reaction across Asia), and the (political) crisis in 2008.

We have the advantage of a very strong brand. I also believe that our culture of putting our customers first has helped us through tough times, allowing us to understand what is wanted of us and to spot traveller trends immediately.

It is our culture to listen intently to our customers. I personally read every hotel review, and so does my team. If there was any guest who wanted to speak to the management about her problems or ideas for improvement, I'd be right there.

We invite feedback from customers who had completed their stay, and I pay attention to all that is shared. I even write back for more information when reviews are mostly average. When guests realise that the hotel CEO is personally interested in how they feel, they become more confident in us. We've gained a number of loyal customers this way.

We also analyse traveller behaviour from external sources and spot top three or four trends that we can respond to in the best ways because there is no use being a Jack of all trades and master of none.

What are you doing to maintain stability within?

Continuous learning is a big part of the Royal Cliff culture. We also have a job rotation system, so that everyone is familiar with the various processes in the hotel. That not only allows us to deploy any staff for any role in times of need, it also ensures that everyone understands the challenges their colleagues face in their respective roles.

We have a robust CRM system that all sales managers access. When one of us is ill or occupied by a situation, others can step in and nothing is left hanging for the customer. We also stay up-to-date with customer projects through meetings, which I attend too.

In an interview last year with TTG Asia, you spoke about Royal Cliff pursuing an events route to raise its destination appeal. How is that working out?

The former minister of tourism rebranded Pattaya as a destination for sports and families, and we strongly believe in that vision.

We organise two tennis tournaments ourselves. One, a local tournament that draws players from across Thailand, locals and other nationalities. The other is the International Tennis Federation Grade A, the most senior tennis tour in Asia-Pacific. In our third edition last year, we had over 200 players of 50 nationalities. It helped with Thai tourism, as players and spectators also spent time in other destinations besides Pattaya.

We have great success

with our squash tournaments, which have been replicated by other organisers and corporations to the benefit of Thai tourism.

We've done comedy festivals, operas and concerts. Instead of waiting for our venues to be rented for events, we choose to organise our own to draw people to Pattaya.

We prioritise activities that promote health and wellness, and those that are suitable for seniors. Ultimately, we want Pattaya to be recognised as the destination in Thailand for sports, wellness and lifestyle.

What else do you have up your sleeves this year?

We've won the bid for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation Conference 2021.

We are continuing with the tennis tournaments this year, and growing the line-up with a seniors game. There are senior citizens who are active, have a lot of time on hand, and are hungry for events they can participate in too.

We are in the process of implementing Wi-Fi 6. By 4Q2020 when the installation is complete, our hotels will offer the fastest, most stable and most secure Wi-Fi among all of Pattaya hotels. This is in response to what travellers increasingly want, and to support our move into e-sports events.

Next, I'm looking to create an academy that combines sports with business. I've been in talks with coaches of top 18 tennis players on how they can bring that same motivation to company CEOs. The academy programmes will utilise Royal Cliff's venues and facilities.

In terms of hardware, we are putting the finishing touches to our major renovations of Royal Cliff Beach Hotel. The hotel will get a brand new façade as well as interior.

The Honeymoon Deluxe Rooms at our Royal Beach Terrace, our most romantic product, will be renovated and we are pushing the envelope further on luxurious, romantic experiences for our customers.

We are building the longest infinity-edge pool in Thailand, which will take advantage of the spectacular ocean view we offer at Royal Cliff.

We are always tracking user experience in our digital arena, so we are redesigning our website to improve customer's navigation and booking process. We have invested in a chat messaging app that is manned by an in-house service team. We are a luxury brand, so chat-bots are out.

In the same vein, we have also upgraded the benefits we offer for direct bookings.

Finally, we've got a big surprise coming up for our loyalty programme, which you will hear of later.



We truly believe in maintaining control over what we do, and to be able to do that, we have to stay independent.

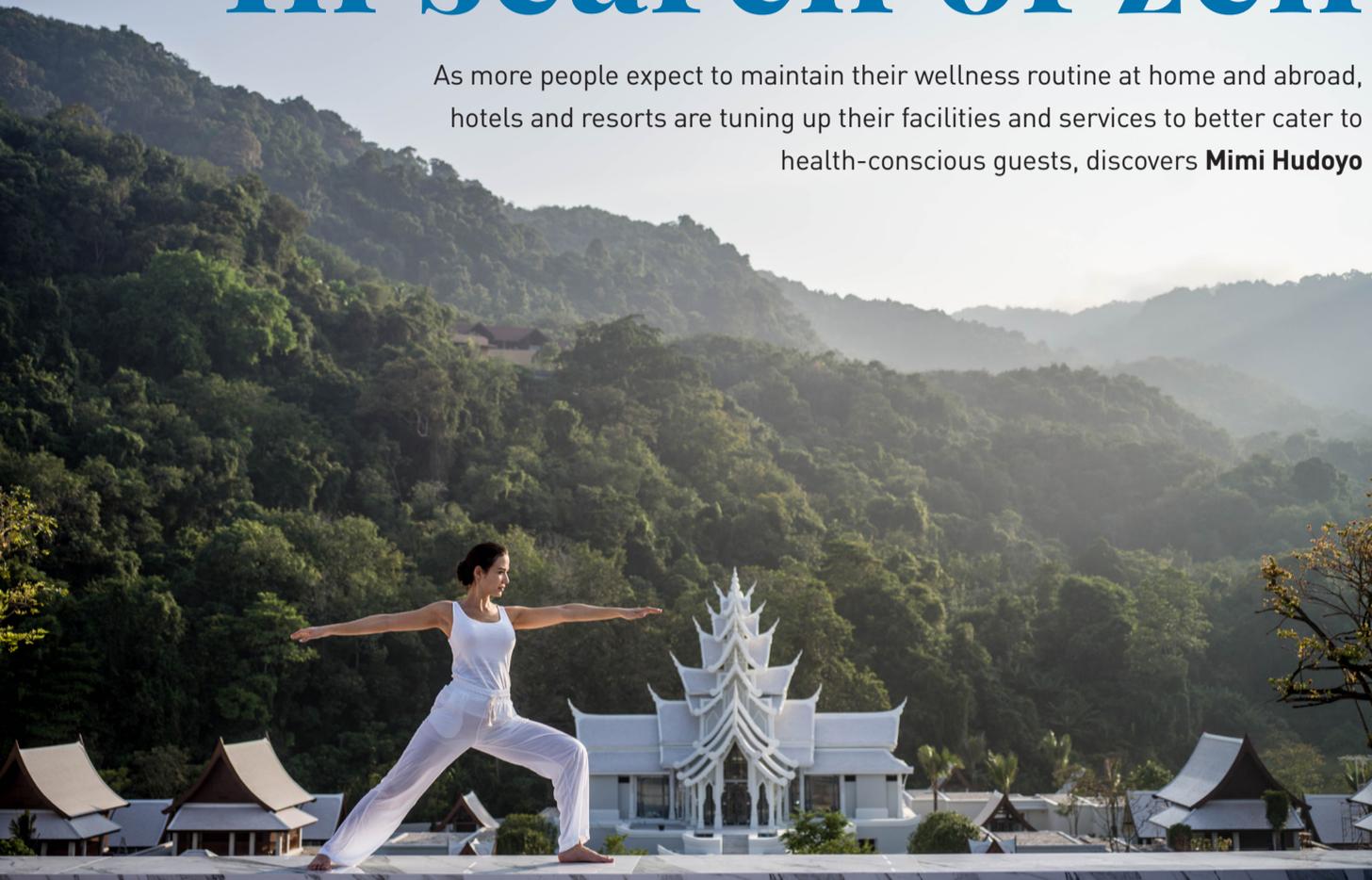


10 NEED TO KNOW'S ABOUT VITANART VATHANAKUL

- **Who's in your family?** Mum is the founder and chairman of Royal Cliff Hotels Group; dad was the CEO of Bangkok Life Assurance and now an active investor; and my brother is the president of Royal Cliff Hotels Group.
- **What do you do for fun?** I play tennis, squash, Thai boxing, and football; run; and work out in the gym on a regular basis. I also enjoy watching sports, reading, travelling and photography.
- **Your ideal vacation?** Skiing in Europe.
- **How do you book your own leisure trips?** Always by myself, as I enjoy the process of planning my own trips.
- **What are you reading right now?** *Measure what matters* by John Doerr and *Bad Blood: Secrets and Lies in a Silicon Valley Start-Up* by John Carreyrou – both in parallel.
- **How do you stay healthy?** I work out six times a week for at least two hours a day. I drink lots of water and meditate daily; I never smoke and drink wine only once in a while.
- **Favourite food?** I cannot live without Thai food.
- **A bad habit you cannot kick?** Working before bedtime.
- **Your pet peeve, something that never fails to annoy you?** Bad manners and condescending behaviour.
- **Most people don't know...** I compete in the Young Senior International Tennis Federation Tour and currently rank first in Thailand and 139th in the world. My aim is to reach top 100 by the end of this year.

In search of zen

As more people expect to maintain their wellness routine at home and abroad, hotels and resorts are tuning up their facilities and services to better cater to health-conscious guests, discovers **Mimi Hudoyo**



There was a time when wellness retreats were unique products, dedicated to healing the body and soul of travellers who took time off their daily grind just for this purpose. Such sanctuaries came with in-house wellness specialists, dieticians and physicians, and offered carefully curated programmes that sought to address guests' specific health needs, be it weight-loss, emotional healing, detoxification or relief from ailments.

On the other end of the spectrum, provision of a gym and spa within the hotel was deemed sufficient.

But as awareness surrounding the importance of good health and a positive mind swell – especially among people who are determined to live well during their travels – hotels and resorts are altering their facilities and services menu to better cater to this demand.

A clear indication of this shift – and a major motivator for hotels and resorts to move into the wellness space – can be seen in the business value of wellness tourism. The industry is expected to balloon from US\$639 billion in 2017 to US\$919 billion in 2022.

Speaking at the 13th Global Wellness Summit in Singapore last October, Susie Ellis, chairman & CEO of the event, observed that people were getting more health-conscious, and living in big cities could be stressful, thereby contributing to the growing demand for urban wellness resorts.

Illustrating the changing approach to wellness escapes, Ellis said: “Most travellers used to look for remote destinations, places with beautiful settings and resorts. Not so much anymore, because people are living in the city and feeling the stress, and need someplace in the city to get their wellness experience.”

Sharing his own observations,

Neil Jacobs, CEO of Six Senses Hotels, Resorts and Spas, remarked: “People want to be well during their vacation and while they work.”

That has led the company, which is synonymous with wellness and sustainability, to develop some city properties. Following the establishment of two city locations in Singapore, the company will open Six Senses Club in New York at end of this year. Six Senses Club will provide New York City residents an opportunity to continue their wellness retreats after returning from Six Senses resorts elsewhere in the world.

Six Senses Club's wellness offering is delivered through restaurants that showcase the brand's popular culinary approach to wellness by using fresh, seasonal and locally-sourced produce and ingredients, and the Six Senses Spa which adopts a high-tech and high-touch approach in its treatments.

A total approach

Wellness hotels are priding themselves in being able to provide an end-to-end experience for their guests, going far beyond just quality spa facilities and services.

Alcide Leali, managing director of Lefay Resorts Italy, which has resorts and residences in Italy's Dolomites and Lago di Garda, told the audience in a panel discussion: “The spa is the core element in the hotel but it is not the only experience.”

Leali explained that Lefay's properties were “conceived, designed and built around wellness”, and they “deliver the wellness experience from check-in to check-out”.

Guests undergo a medical interview upon check-in, and have their dietary menu and activity programme – which can include exercises, guided walks, spa treatments and meditation – drawn up for the stay.

And at the conclusion of the retreat, a final examination is conducted and suggestions on well-being maintenance will be offered.

The total approach is necessary today, as travellers no longer “just go to a resort or hotel, and lie on the beach and do nothing”, remarked Six Senses' Jacobs.

“People want more content during their stay; having good food and good service are not enough anymore,” he added.

At Six Senses Duxton Singapore, a surprising find right smack in the heart of the city-state's business district, arriving guests get their pulse checked by a traditional Chinese doctor in lieu of an all too common welcome drink.

Occupying a row of heritage shophouses and nestled among skyscrapers, Six Senses Duxton boasts a resident traditional Chinese medicine physician who gladly dishes out advice on herbal medicine, acupuncture, *tui na* massage, *qi gong* exercise, and dietary therapy to improve guests' overall wellness. On top of customised wellness programmes, the urban sanctuary provides complimentary outdoor yoga sessions and singing bowl meditation.

Beyond opportunities to stay active and eat well, wellness experts are also predicting an explosion of sleep-wellness solutions for guests staying in hotels and resorts. These solutions, such as best foods or suitable in-room lighting, may aim to combat jetlag.

Big boys join in

Major hotel brands are in the game now, taking serious steps to answer their guests' call for healthy options.

However, Mike Fulkerson, vice president brand & marketing Asia Pacific for Marriott International, said the approach taken by major

hotel chains would be different from that of specialised wellness resorts.

Fulkerson explained: “The Westin brand alone has more than 250 hotels around the world. It will be very difficult for Westin to do things that are very unique and specialised, like what the niche, individual hotels are doing with wellness.”

“Hence, our focus is on the traveller experience and what they need.”

He discovered that business travellers' main frustration during work trips was the inability to maintain their daily routine.

“Their needs generally fall into three different buckets: diet, exercise and a good night's sleep. There are different programmes (at Westin properties) created to meet these needs,” he said.

“For those who want to maintain their running exercises, our hotels provide a running kit with shoes so travellers won't have to pack that,” he added.

Sister brand W takes a different approach. With the brand identity and guest profile in mind, selected W hotels host FUEL Weekends which are action-packed fitness vacations that combine celebrity workouts, killer parties, delicious and healthy cuisine and unforgettable adventures.

Fulkerson further explained that W adopts a Detox. Retox. Repeat. philosophy.

Detox is where well-rounded workouts in multiple disciplines are offered to guests; Retox is where hard work is rewarded with welcome cocktails and light bites, open bar sessions featuring world-class DJs and late night, poolside parties; and Repeat is where Detox and Retox goodies are brought on again.

Wellness from within

Hotels that are with the wellness movement are clear that they need healthy and happy staff to be able to deliver healthful experiences all day, every day.

Mia Kyricos, senior vice president & global head of wellbeing, Hyatt Hotels Corporation, said: “When we talk about wellness, it was for our colleagues as much as for everybody else. We are looking at the whole ecosystem of well-being. If we care for our colleagues, they will be more engaged and happy at work, and the turnaround is a promise of care for customers.”

Allen Law, CEO of Park Hotel Group, Singapore, shared that the company is “moving towards a more flexible working arrangement”, and is open to different work hours and work/break arrangements “as long as the entire team is together in it, so that the work flow is not disrupted”.

Discover wellness in the serene surroundings of the new InterContinental Phuket Resort



We are moving towards a more flexible working arrangement.”

ALLEN LAW
CEO, Park Hotel Group,
Singapore



Rejuvenating retreats

From serene coastal resorts to city hotels, Asia offers good options for wellness-seekers to begin their journey to body and soul recovery

Anantara Peace Haven Tangalle Resort, Sri Lanka

Tucked away on a serene part of Sri Lanka's southern coast, Anantara Peace Haven Tangalle Resort charms wellness-seekers with award-winning Ayurvedic treatments at its Anantara Spa. Meet with the resident Ayurveda doctor, who will recommend treatments, as simple or as complex as the guest desires, to restore body, mind and spirit.

A range of off-the-shelves wellness programmes are also available, such as the five-day Inner Harmony Ayurveda Programme which prescribes a mixture of wellness cuisine, technology blackouts, Ayurvedic treatments and acupuncture, and excursions to meet and interact with locals.

InterContinental Phuket Resort, Thailand

The new InterContinental Phuket Resort on Kamala Beach is described as "a social enclave for the island's most vibrant entertainment, gour-

met, wellness experiences with a relentless focus on environmental sustainability and local community" by general manager Bjorn Courage.

The Sati Spa and Wellness centre is where guests begin their journey to mindfulness through treatments featuring customised flower scents based on the guest's birthday and the world's first unique application of Khit triangle pillow to enhance the benefits of Thai massage.

One Farrer Hotel, Singapore

The five-star urban resort soothes the body and mind of guests with serene surroundings made up of 14 gardens located across 20 levels, providing lush greenery, flowing waters and reflective spaces, including a 1,031m² urban farm.

The in-house Adeva Spa Retreat specialises in a range of beauty and wellness treatments from facials and foot rituals, to body scrubs and Asian massage.

Lotte Hotel Seoul, South Korea

An affiliate member of WorldHotels Collection, the Lotte Hotel



Seoul has crafted a wellness itinerary that puts the spotlight on creating private and intimate moments for couples. The experience includes a hike through Cheonggyesan Mountain on the scenic Wontegol Trail, a visit to Gangnam for Korean medicinal balance spa treatments, and an evening stroll down Hangang

From above:
Anantara Peace Haven Tangalle Resort, Sri Lanka; One Farrer Hotel, Singapore

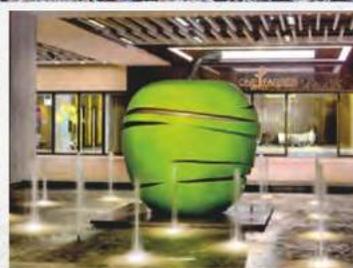
River. Throw in the hotel's Promesse d'amour package to enjoy a stay in a Junior Suite, a complimentary bottle of red wine, mini cookies and flower, as well as free access to the Le Salon executive lounge and a private, healthful meal at Pierre Gagnaire à Seoul.



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A family affair

Pamela Chow finds out fun is the name of the game as Singapore welcomes more family-friendly attractions and activities, updated for a new generation of parents and kids

Singapore is on the cusp of resurgence as a family destination, as the country shapes up with a slate of new and upcoming developments aimed at drawing younger families.

Preceding the opening and announcements of these fresh developments was the Singapore Tourism Board (STB)'s Action Seekers marketing push.

Launched in January last year, the initiative targeted adventure- and sports-minded travellers, including children, youth and of course, by extension, families.

Then, in April last year, the island of Sentosa welcomed three new hotels under the Far East Hospitality group. Of the three, the 606-room Village Hotel at Sentosa is a family-friendly option featuring themed pools and a range of activities for all ages.

Besides playing host to new hotels, Sentosa will be rolling out major transformations such as an expansion of Pulau Brani, beach enhancements, new attractions, and nature zones.

On top of all this, Resorts World Sentosa (RWS) is undergoing a S\$4.5

billion overhaul, which is set to increase the gross floor area of the integrated resort by about 50 per cent.

As part of RWS' transformation into RWS 2.0, new experiences will be delivered in phases until 2025. The first will be a pirate-themed dining playhouse, which is slated for end-2020.

Coming down the line are a public seafood attraction with free evening light shows, expansions and two new sections for Universal Studios Singapore and an enlarged S.E.A. Aquarium, which will be renamed Singapore Oceanarium.

All of these enhancements are expected to entice visitors to extend their stay in Sentosa and Singapore.

Guy Allison, then-director of procurement, Tour East Holdings and now co-founder and chief talent officer, G & P Recruitment – a Bangkok-based hospitality company – commented: "Sentosa's becoming quite a family destination. It's starting to attract people to stay in Singapore for not just a few nights, but

From above:
an aerial view of Sentosa;
one of four activity zones at NERF Action Xperience



three or four – maybe even a week. With the new developments, it might even become a destination in itself."

On Singapore's mainland, NERF Action Xperience, with its high-octane offerings, opened in September last year. To continue pulling in more family visitors, the centre will host the inaugural NERF Agility League for children and youths from seven to 16 years old this year.

Returning in October this year is

the HSBC Singapore Rugby Sevens 2020, which is shaping up to be one of Singapore's tent-pole extravaganzas for families. A third of the crowd at last year's event had purchased family packages, said Steven Rodaway, general manager of HSBC Singapore Rugby Sevens.

Billing itself as a family-focused edition of the global event, this year's Singapore leg will feature carnival activities, a children's FunZone with stage performances, live shows, art activities and face painting, as well as a line-up of new family-friendly activities that will be announced.



Sentosa's becoming quite a family destination. It's starting to attract people to stay in Singapore for ... three or four (nights) – maybe even a week. With the new developments, it might even become a destination in itself.

GUY ALLISON
Co-founder and chief talent officer,
G & P Recruitment



Hotels

Stay and mingle

Hotels in Singapore are establishing social spaces that encourage cultural exchanges and community interaction, finds **Pamela Chow**



Singapore's hoteliers are re-inventing the hospitality experience with innovative features and services. These brand-new touches immerse aim to quench the modern travellers' thirst for memorable experiences within a destination.

In September 2019, The Ascott debuted its millennial-focused brand with the launch of lyf Funan Singapore. The 11,241m² co-living property comprises 412 keys across nine storeys, including 18 four-bedroom apartments and four six-bedroom units.

Each apartment features individual bedrooms and communal living, kitchen and bathroom areas.

Other co-living aspects of the property include a communal space that doubles up as a co-working spot, an open gym, as well as a social kitchen.

Guests can participate in activities organised by lyf and Funan Mall's tenants, such as workshops, movie screenings and tours to the nearby Fort Canning Park, as well as Asian Civilisations Museum.

Mindy Teo, deputy managing director, lyf, noted that travellers today,

lyf Funan features a communal space that doubles up as a co-working spot, as well as an open gym and a social kitchen

particularly millennials, seek "community experiences that are local, authentic and add value to their lives".

In response to this, lyf Funan presents a community living space where guests can build connections and exchange ideas, said Teo.

This space is managed by lyf guards or a millennial concierge, who may be residents themselves.

Some activities that the lyf guards have pulled together so far for guests include a *char kway teow* cooking workshop, a Formula 1 weekend special, complete with a live broadcast of the races and a *Fast and Furious* movie marathon.

In May, Capri by Fraser, China Square opened with communal spaces designed for fun and interaction. These include the Den, a 24/7 hub with designer furniture, wireless charging pads, games and refreshments, and a self-service laundrette featuring an Atari Pong set-up.

Over at Far East Hospitality (FEH), CEO Arthur Kiong noted that there was demand for hotels with "a strong sense of place".

FEH's answer to this is The Clan, a 324-room property coming up in mid-2020.

Offering an optimal combination of value for money, quality hospitality service, stylish design, the hotel targets millennials and tech-savvy travellers between 25 and 44 years old.

Harking back to how clan associations took care of Singapore's early migrants, the hotel will reflect kinship, clans and community through precinct tours and neighbourhood experiences with local craftsmen.

According to Kiong, The Clan's guests will be treated like members

of an exclusive club – they will receive special privileges at favoured lifestyle establishments, for instance.

Staff members will also be tasked to recognise guests by name and offer traditional Chinese tea for guests upon check-in, he added.

Meanwhile, Singapore hospitality company Next Story Group is slated to bring its community-focused brand Ink Hotels from Melbourne to Singapore. Opening in 2021, the Singapore property, to be located in Tiong Bahru, will feature social space Urban Commons, where locals and travellers can exchange tales and ideas.



Today's travellers, especially millennials, are looking for community experiences that are local, authentic and add value to their lives.

Mindy Teo
Deputy managing director, lyf

Fresh Eyes

Making travel tech affordable

Simplifying the process of reservation and redemption for attractions and travel agents, GlobalTix's CEO Chan Chee Chong shares with **Pamela Chow** how his firm is creating a smoother path towards adopting millennial-focused travel solutions

The dynamic travel tech boom has proven a double-edged sword for industry players. While travel tech solutions promise higher outreach and efficient resource allocation, many of them are costly.

As such, travel agents who cannot afford them find themselves falling behind in terms of market penetration. Larger attraction operators, on the other hand, often struggle to strike a balance between traditional sales and new, dynamic distribution channels.

Filling this need for affordable and value-added solutions is GlobalTix, a Singapore-based company that leverages cloud technology, big data and analytics to disrupt traditional manual ticketing.

GlobalTix CEO, Chan Chee Chong explained: "Millennials are driving changes in the way travel is bought. They want things instantly and seek

out unique experiences during their travel. In today's connected world, operators need to be discoverable and bookable."

Many Asian niche operators "are missing out on this digital and mobile revolution" because adopting the relevant technology is out of their budget, noted Chan.

To meet this need and match the budget of industry players, GlobalTix offers its solutions based on a subscription model starting from US\$39 a month.

The affordable price means clients do not need to put money into customised solutions and expensive hardware, shared Chan.

Through unique customised B2B portals on GlobalTix, attraction operators can set agent-specific prices, capacity limits and special promotion prices.

Further down in the chain, agencies can access exclusive rates and re-

serve tickets, which are then digitally delivered to their customers.

Chan – a tourism pundit with 15 years of experience in the industry – co-founded GlobalTix with his brother, Chan Chee Kong, in 2013.

The company has grown its reach to more than 2,000 agents and 80,000 tours and activities in 120 cities.

Partnerships have been established with TripAdvisor, Expedia and Trip.com, as well as local DMCs such as Nam Ho and Asia Consolidated.

On top of solving ticketing woes, GlobalTix also offers other on-site solutions. For instance, it uses facial recognition so customers at attractions can buy candid photographs in which they have been tagged.

When asked about GlobalTix's strategy moving forward, Chan said: "We intend to strengthen our local presence to provide better customer service for partners here and become a partner of choice for agencies."



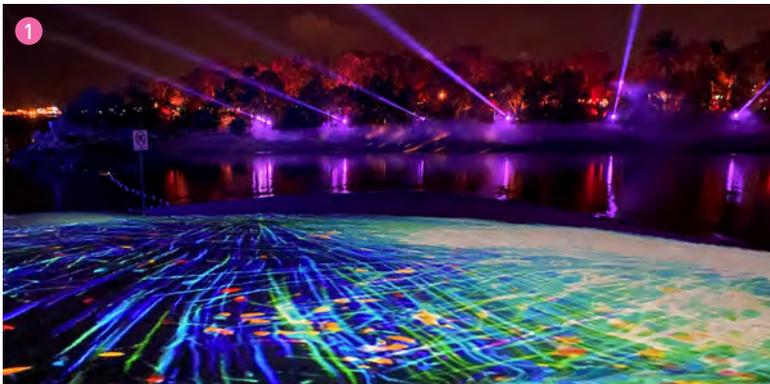
Many niche operators in Asia are missing out on (the) digital and mobile revolution simply because they cannot afford to adopt (the relevant) technology.

CHAN CHEE CHONG
CEO, GlobalTix



What's hot

A bounty of attractions and fresh stays



1 Magical Shores at Siloso, Sentosa

Launched in January, the multi-sensory experience immerses the 400m stretch of Siloso Beach with vivid light, sound, and mist effects. Billed as Singapore's first interactive beach light art attraction, Magical Shores is set to strengthen Sentosa's position as a night destination.

2 ibis budget by Accor

Accor's ibis budget brand has swept into Singapore with 13 new ibis budget hotels rebranded from the economy Fragrance Hotel brand. The new offerings have been progressively brought into the global hotel group's distribution network since October 2019.

3 The Barracks Hotel Sentosa

Far East Hospitality has capped off its trio of hotels in Sentosa with The Barracks Hotel Sentosa, set in a restored British artillery outpost. Billed

as "ultra-exclusive", the hotel comprises 40 rooms and suites across two storeys. The 29m² premier rooms with pool access on the ground floor come with an outdoor balcony that opens up to the pool.

4 Changi Experience Studio and Canopy Park, Jewel Changi Airport

Jewel Changi Airport has unveiled the Changi Experience Studio and Canopy Park. The 3,000m² Changi Experience Studio is located on the fourth level of the iconic development. The digital attraction includes a garden that sings and an adrenaline-pumping runway race. One level up is the 14,000m² Canopy Park, which features seven play areas, as well as creative gardens. Guests can navigate through mazes, bounce on huge suspended nets, and enjoy the view from the glass-floored Canopy Bridge 23m above ground.

5 Matisse & Picasso, National Gallery Singapore

As part of a four-year partnership between STB and National Gallery Singapore, the gallery will welcome art exhibition Matisse & Picasso in May 2020. Featuring the dynamics between the French and Spanish artists, the exhibition will shed light on how the two artists' friendly rivalry shaped the course of 20th-century art. The show will be the first of four special exhibitions at the gallery, with the next being an exhibition on Nam June Paik in October 2021.

6 Amara Singapore

Amara Singapore unveiled 27 premium executive guestrooms in July 2019, along with a refreshed gym and a pool bar on the sixth level. This kicked off the hotel's rejuvenation project, in which Amara Singapore's remaining guestrooms and public spaces are being progressively refurbished.

6 Hotel Soloha

Situated close to the cultural and nightlife hub of Keong Saik Road is the new 45-room Hotel Soloha, which opened in August 2019. Defined by a tropical modernist theme and splashed with bold interiors, the intimate shophouse property boasts creative room layouts, social spaces, and a noodle bar. One of its more unique room designs boasts a loft-style configuration.

7 Evelyn Chen's Hawker Haunts, Capella Singapore

Under the Capella Curates programme, Capella Hotels & Resorts has launched an epicurean experience incorporating local flavours. Led by the eponymous food journalist and one of the regional academy chairs for the World's 50 Best Restaurants Awards, Evelyn Chen's Hawker Haunts will showcase the city-state's most favoured dishes such as kaya toast, chicken rice and char kway teow.

Tried & Tested

Creepy Tales of Singapore

Equal parts historical and creepy, this new tour by Oriental Travel and Tours delves into Singapore's lesser-known war sites, where supernatural activity has been reported to take place. **Pamela Chow** susses out this hair-raising experience and learns about the city's past

WHY Singapore's popular historical landmarks, such as Fort Canning Park and the Civilian War Memorial in City Hall, have been well-travelled and well-documented by tourists. Reviews, however, often miss out obscure memorials and trails that sit square on the battle grounds of World War II – and few tours take visitors to these sites with ghost-detecting equipment.

WHAT Oriental Travel and Tours' newest project, Creepy Tales of Singapore, lifts the fog on these locations in the western region of the island.

Armed with flickering candles and electromagnetic field (EMF) readers, participants on this night tour are brought to sealed-off bunkers, preserved batteries and a cemetery, where the guide relays tales of heroes and historical figures who fell in these locations.

Along the way, the guide will relay

anecdotes of spine-chilling encounters. Participants may have an unexplainable experience of their own. During my four hours on this tour, several members in the group and I witnessed a number of incidents.

HOW My tour was led by Oriental Travel and Tours' co-founder Jasmine Tan, who was well-read and passionate about the lesser-known background details of World War II, as well as the history of the locations we visited on the tour.

Tan remained calm and consistently checked in with the group on our comfort. She payed special care to details, down to providing mosquito repellent and tissues.

Transport is provided between locations on this tour, making the journey comfortable and fuss-free.

Though dinner is not provided, the journey does end at popular hawker centre Adam Road Food



Centre, where participants have a hearty supper and a "debriefing" session with the guide.

The tour will run with a minimum of two pax. Should larger groups choose to take on the tour, they will be divided into batches.

Smaller group sizes are recommended, however, for an ideal immersive experience.

VERDICT Recommended for history buffs, but not the faint of heart, this rare after-dark tour unveils Singapore's unexpected side.

Duration Three hours

Rate S\$118 per person

Contact

Email: orientaltravel@outlook.sg

Website: oriental.tours

More Sri Lankan draws need to be known but the country's global marketing campaign is delayed yet again; pictured here is Sigiriya rock fortress



What's hot

Ideas for memorable retreats and exciting retail therapy

1 One Galle Face Mall
Colombo's first prestigious shopping development and the largest in Sri Lanka sits alongside Shangri-La Hotel, Colombo. One Galle Face Mall is home to 200 tenants/stores and offers visitors an unparalleled shopping experience catering to their every need, from dining and entertainment, to beauty and technology.

2 Sheraton Kosgoda Turtle Beach Resort
Soft-opened in mid-February

2020, the Sheraton Kosgoda Turtle Beach Resort offers 172 guestrooms overlooking the Kosgoda beach in the south of Sri Lanka. Its home is a town that is famous for a landmark sea turtle conservation project.

The resort boasts the usual trimmings of an international five-star hotel, and features a large banquet space, an all-day dining restaurant, and an advanced fitness centre.

3 Brew 1867 by Dilmah
Named after Sri Lanka's renowned tea brand and the year coffee production gave way to tea on the slopes of the central highlands, Brew 1867 by Dilmah is a café in Colombo that specialises in exceptional Ceylon tea and Ceylon coffee.

Beverages are complemented by homemade salads, sandwiches, cakes, cookies, tea-flavoured ice creams and more.

4 Ayurvie Sigiriya
Theme Resorts & Spas' latest project is the Ayurvie Sigiriya, a new Ayurveda and yoga retreat that opened early in February. Located in the town of Sigiriya and alongside a lake and a paddy field, the 10-room resort is reminiscent of a traditional laid-back Sri Lankan village. The soothing setup promotes the healing of body and mind. Every guestroom faces east, allowing guests to enjoy the sunrise. The retreat is a sustainability delight, as it was built with recycled polypropylene bags filled with moist



Destination

No end in sight

The Covid-19 outbreak that has shut down much-needed Chinese arrivals to Sri Lanka has thrown yet another spanner into the works for the destination's global marketing campaign launch, which has been delayed for years.

Feizal Samath reports

Sri Lanka's ill-fated attempt to roll out its global destination marketing campaign, which has been delayed for years by cumbersome bureaucracy and changing heads of the main state tourism agency, has suffered yet another setback by the Covid-19 outbreak that has crippled many Asian markets.

Arrivals from China, the destination's third largest source market, dropped to a trickle in February and left Sri Lankan tourism authorities scrambling to maintain visitorship which was already hurt by Easter Sunday attacks in 2019.

One of the prime causes of delays to the campaign launch is the high turnover rate at the top of the Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau (SLTPB), the main state body that drives tourism promotion.

In the past five years, six people have had been appointed to the chairperson role. In practice, this appointment is a political one made by the minister in charge of tourism.

Besides the lack of a stable leadership, the new chairperson often presents a fresh marketing proposal to the government, instead of carrying forward the proposal

made by his/her predecessor, adding to the delay.

When Sri Lanka Tourism chairperson Kishu Gomes quit in mid-November 2019 after a new executive president was elected to power, industry officials said his sudden departure dealt a blow to campaign approval process.

"We have been struggling to launch the global public relations and marketing campaign in key markets. (Gomes') resignation means further delays. We are going backwards," cried Hotels Association of Sri Lanka's president Sanath Ukwatte.

Mahen Kariyawasam, president of the Sri Lanka Association of Inbound Tour Operators, the country's main inbound industry body, told *TTG Asia* that the campaigns are not moving forward.

"If we even get the campaign out in 12 cities, it would help Sri Lanka tremendously," he remarked.

The campaign, which would be rolled out in several markets including China, was allocated 100 million rupees (US\$550,230) per city and does not require cabinet approval since the SLTPB – whose directors are also private sector players – is allowed to approve its own

projects that are valued no more than 100 million rupees.

Despite the autonomy, new chairpersons were reluctant to proceed without government approvals.

For now, Sri Lanka's desperate tourism

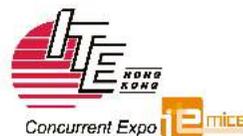
hopes are all placed on a single destination marketing campaign – a poster project in the London Railway Underground which started in November 2019 for two months, and is expected to be extended for a further two months.

Kariyawasam said the delayed global destination marketing campaign has been in the works since 2015.



If we even get the campaign out in 12 cities, it would help Sri Lanka tremendously.

MAHEN KARIYAWASAM
President, Sri Lanka Association of Inbound Tour Operators



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subsoil, and stacked Eco bricks. Cement and concrete, the world's second largest contributor to pollution, are not used.

5 Jetwing Gallery Kandy

Overlooking the Mahaweli River in the central hill town of Kandy, Jetwing Kandy Gallery makes local art and craft a big part of its architecture and interior design. The 26-key, four-storey hotel comprises two wings that are connected by a semi-public Gallery Walk.

The luxurious and elegant hotel adopts the the location's natural sur-

roundings into its design, which emphasises the tranquility of the Kandy hills and nearby villages.

Perfect for spiritual retreats, as Kandy is home to the sacred Temple of the Tooth, and relaxing breaks, Jetwing Kandy Gallery offers personalised butler service, yoga and meditation classes, complimentary binoculars for guests to explore the natural world with in the resort's backwoods, an infinity pool that overlooks the Mahaweli River, and an in-house museum that portrays life as it was in ancient Ceylon.





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