

TTG ASIA

[LUXURY]

November 2020

for buyers of premium travel and luxury meetings

CHANGING PURSUITS



BEYOND PHYSICAL POINTS

This is Beyond is changing the way it connects and inspires its communities

SLOW AND STEADY WINS

Singaporeans are prioritising slow, easy and indulgent staycations

REDEFINING LUXURY

Ghassan Aboud reveals his vision for Crystalbrook Collection

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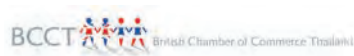
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editor's note



There have been many predictions made at the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic about how travel and tourism would return when borders reopen. The most popular vision is that travellers, having had the chance to reflect on life during the lockdown, would approach

travel and tourism with greater responsibility, choosing to spend their money with sustainable hospitality suppliers and to give back positively to destinations they visit.

This virtuous rebound expectation has yet to be fulfilled. Travellers in general who have resumed their holidays, albeit locally, are mostly going for convenient resort locations or the best deal in town. On the other extreme end, ultra-lux holiday-makers are favouring 'safecations' – worry-free sojourns offered through exclusive resort buyouts to ensure the ultimate in safe distancing.

Perhaps it is still early days in travel and tourism recovery – some Asian governments are still swinging back and forth on movement restrictions as new waves of infections emerge, making it a challenge to plan a decent trip. Perhaps when conditions are more conducive for a stable recovery may we then see a true appetite and intention of travel taking shape.

I maintain a degree of doubt that mankind will emerge from this pandemic with a revolutionary awakening that travel is a privilege and travellers must give back positively to destina-

tions and natives they interact with. Instead, I expect this change to start small – with the luxury travel segment. After all, the wealthy have been ahead of other traveller segments in discovering the joy of transformational and meaningful travel. They have long graduated from the need to grab the most shots at destination landmarks, or to brag about having been there and done that.

An effective agent of change, I believe, is the travel supplier community. A consistent move towards sustainable and responsible travel needs to start with programming, by ensuring that featured activities and contractors support host destinations, communities and local conservation efforts in some form.

There is no need for a quantum leap in travel and tourism habits; small changes today can still be beneficial tomorrow.

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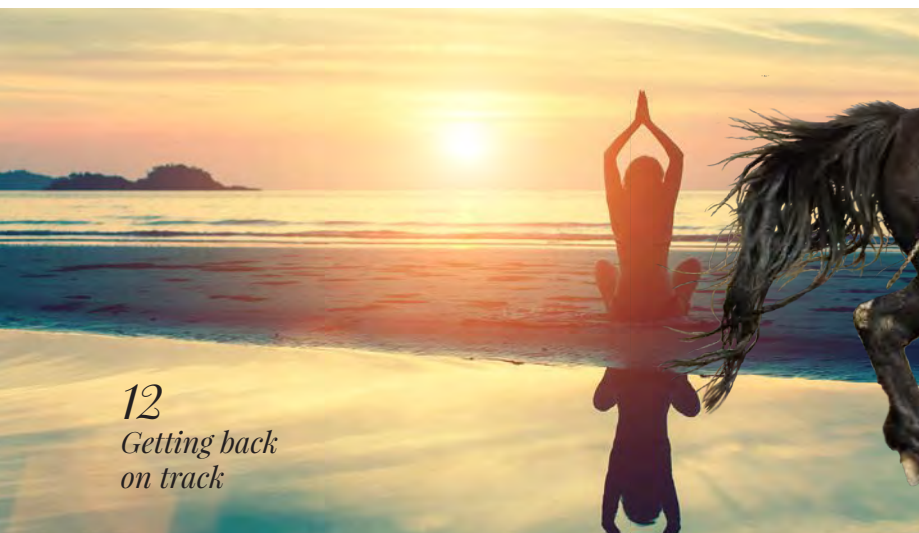
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To wind down, head to the refreshed Majestic Lounge for sundowners in a semi-alfresco setting, a prepared bubble bath, or slink into luxurious bedding linens and be spoilt for choice with the pillow menu designed to complement a good night's rest.

ATTENTION TO DETAILS

Guests will have access to six other swimming pools located across the property. However, what takes the cake is the private, free-form swimming pool located onsite. Discerning touchpoints include sunglasses cleaning, and name plaques on reserved sunloungers for each suite.



Exclusive to Presidential Suites, a personal butler will be assigned to guests round the clock with acceding requests and resort orientation. Headed to the beach? Bask under the Thai-styled pavilion for an open-air jacuzzi, beachfront massages, or even organise a mini BBQ. Staying true to exclusivity, Royal Cliff Hotels Group is the only property in Pattaya to maintain two private beaches for the exclusive use of in-house guests, and Royal Wing Suites & Spa is home to one of them.

Like to excite your taste buds? Chefs at western fine dining restaurant Caprice will be more than happy to personalise a tasting menu from stylish French cuisine to Mediterranean-inspired creations. There is also an option to dine on the private beach.

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Nah Pah Thai Cooking School

The facility comes with an open kitchen for practical lessons, a herb nursery for participants to pick the freshest seasonal ingredients and a Thai-inspired dining room. Classes are in three-hour blocks, and participants will return home with complimentary keepsakes. Special lessons are available for little ones.

Underground Wine Cellar Experience

Enjoy delicious snacks and tasty wines whilst checking out the cellar's inventory. Royal Cliff's collection exceeds more than 36,000, with over 1,000 bottles from the world's most renowned new and old world wine labels, and 15 varieties exclusively made and bottled for the resort's own label. Prices range from 1000 to 1 million baht per bottle.

Royal Wing Suites & Spa is winner of the 2020 Tripadvisor 'Best of the Best' Traveler's Choice Awards as well as a Green leadership hotel. In providing safer stays, the hotel is also awarded the Amazing Thailand Safety and Health Administration Certificate from the Tourism Authority of Thailand for the implementation of excellent health and safety measures to protect guests and staff from Covid-19.

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Slow and steady wins

Meaningful experiences are as important as ever in Singapore, where big spenders are setting the tone for future travel with demand for relaxing staycations.

Pamela Chow finds out more



With the country's borders still closed to leisure travel, Singapore's spenders are turning to easy-going staycation experiences to satiate their desire for a relaxing holiday. These programmes – ranging from private activities to immersive dining – may be an early signal of how luxury travel could recover in the medium term.

For instance, Capella Singapore has introduced a series of programmes for its staycation groups. Besides a Revitalising Yoga Class every Sunday and Tea Time at The Living Room, guests may also participate in a Build Your Own Boba class, Rum Appreciation, a Heritage and Art Tour, and a Floral Styling Workshop. Children can get busy with the Little Stars Culinary Workshop, with the choice of making cake pops or decorating cookies and cupcakes.

Meanwhile, the iconic Raffles Singapore has partnered with award-winning Peranakan attraction The Intan to launch the Intricacies of the Peranakan Culture package. Staycation guests can enjoy

“

There's a greater desire to slow down, reconnect and savour life's simple pleasures...

Iain Langridge,
divisional
managing
director,
Asia Pacific,
Belmond

a one-hour guided tour by The Intan's owner Alvin Yapp, complete with two-way Raffles Limousine transfer, traditional Peranakan refreshments, and the opportunity to view exclusive collections.

Also garnering much fanfare is Grand Hyatt Singapore's rerun of Le Petit Chef, an immersive dining adventure in the hotel's mezza9 La Cave wine cellar featuring a theat-

rical 3D projection-mapping performance.

Since its relaunch earlier this year, its weekend sessions have almost all sold out.

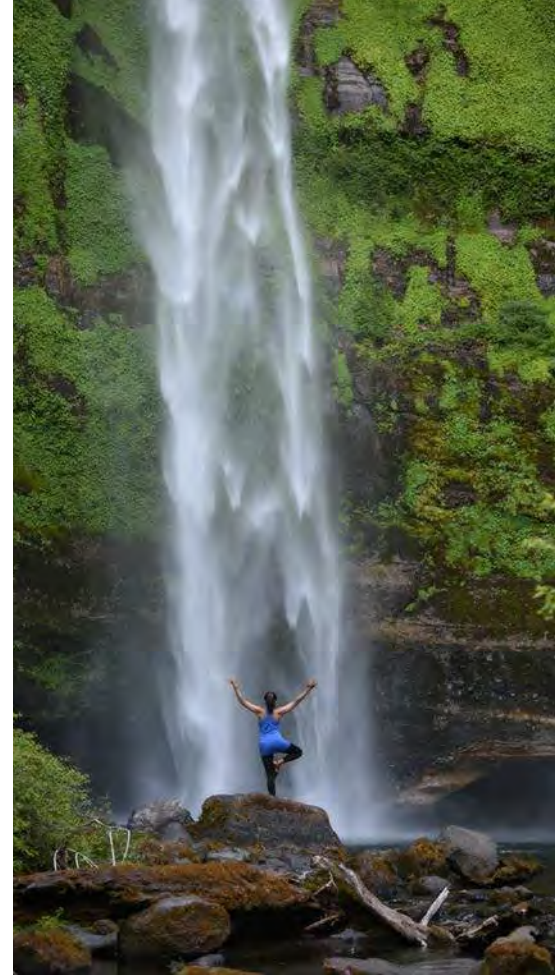


“Both Grand Hyatt Singapore and Andaz Singapore have received staycation bookings, which are driving weekend occupancies. There is a strong pent-up demand for people in Singapore to get out of their homes and to reconnect with their loved ones in a different but safe environment. We expect domestic leisure demand and F&B to drive business at our hotels during this period,” shared Carina Chorengel, senior vice president – commercial, Asia Pacific, Hyatt.

The rise of slow travel

This pattern of slow and meaningful local stays will likely spread into the outbound tourism sphere, predict travel businesses.

Iain Langridge, divisional managing director, Asia Pacific at Belmond, said: “There's a greater desire to slow down, reconnect and savour life's simple pleasures, as well as a nostalgia to return to fond and familiar destinations. We are anticipating more travel within Asia as Singaporeans and Singapore residents explore more



Above from left andBeyond Phinda Vlei Lodge, South Africa; meditating at Salto del Claro, Chile

of their own ‘backyard’ and seek extended, private and inherently safe escapes.”

In preparation for this demand, Belmond has evolved its off-property programmes to include more outdoor, conscientious and community-based excursions. For instance, guests at Belmond La Residence Phou Vao may join a local collective of traditional textile weavers to learn about the traditional Laotian process of creating designs using natural ingredients.

He added that Belmond plans to continue its “hyper-localisation strategy” by focusing on markets where it will be easier to travel to from Singapore, such as Thailand.

Trend findings from andBeyond corroborate this movement towards hyper-localisation, as the company reports demand for “simpler itineraries”. Its chief marketing officer, Nicole Robinson, explained: “We are seeing demand for simpler itineraries within a single country, (with travellers) looking at what can be done without having to cross too many borders. Spending

more time in a single destination encourages more meaningful experiences.”

Month-long getaways will also be a thing of the past; rather, agencies like Belmond are expecting Singaporeans to spend shorter time abroad as they dip their toes into cross-border travel in the short term. Langridge noted: “Singaporean and Singapore-based luxury travellers are accustomed to getting on a plane for a short getaway. With the prolonged travel restrictions, we expect short weekend trips among this demographic to continue to be popular.”

This growth in outbound traffic from Singapore may proceed slowly in the initial stages of recovery even when borders have reopened and there is clarity provided on international movement, opined Robinson. She expressed: “We don’t anticipate a quick comeback, as there are people who will naturally still be very cautious without a vaccine. Until then, the growth and return will be gradual.”

The Singaporean upmarket traveller...

- ❖ will place trust in brands that he/she is familiar with
- ❖ has high expectations of service, and is willing to indulge in quality and rare experiences
- ❖ is a forerunner in multi-generational family travel, who often appreciates slow, meaningful experiences

Beyond physical points



The pandemic has presented This is Beyond with an opportunity to change the way it connects and inspires its communities, CEO Serge Dive tells **Karen Yue**

Just two years old, Further East has made positive waves in Asia's luxury travel arena with its unique approach to integrating stakeholders and inspiring travel ideas. Now, with the pandemic disrupting travel and tourism as well as tradeshows, how are you maintaining connections with and among the luxury travel community?

From the earliest days of the pandemic, our show teams – for PURE Life Experiences, L.E./Miami, We Are Africa and Further East – have been in constant communication with our communities. We are known for our human-to-human approach and saw no reason why this should not continue during

Covid-19, just because we were unable to meet in person. For many in our communities, there has never been a more difficult year than 2020, and it was vital for us to check in with our members frequently by phone, strengthening the close relationships we have spent 12 years building. We further responded to their needs with a programme of digital content throughout the summer, including masterclass webinars and virtual social events.

For many years, we have wanted to allow our communities to connect 365 days a year, 24 hours a day, rather than just during one week per year, at one of our events.

Above show founder, Serge Dive

That's why I'm so excited to launch The House of Beyond this December – a private members' club for high-end hospitality, designed to bring our communities more connections, more exposure and more business, every day of the year.

How will this influence This is Beyond's plans for 2021?

We've been bringing people together since 2009, creating events that reshape the high-end travel industry into inspired communities. Our mission at The House of Beyond is to make a global world truly local, 365 days a year. The House of Beyond will put humanity at the heart of business to connect like-minded leaders in different niches of high-end travel, wherever they are in the world.

We've always wanted to provide our communities with a place to interact year-round. Now, our network is not limited to attending one or two flagship events each year; rather, they're part of a wider inspired community, able to interact and do business with anyone in the This is Beyond ecosystem, whenever they like.

We believe membership in The House of Beyond is an exceptional opportunity for anyone in high-end hospitality, particularly now, when forming connections and forging a path forward for our industry is critical.

Many business and consumer events have chosen to go virtual, or adopt an online/offline format where possible. Will The House of Beyond be taking a similar approach for its industry engagements?

Yes, but we are also very conscious of the digital fatigue many are

feeling. That's why The House of Beyond will offer hybrid events – both virtual and real-life activities – to ensure members can meet and interact in person, if it is safe for them to do so.

For example, we might hold a sustainability masterclass for 10 people in Singapore, while simultaneously live-streaming the content for members around the world to watch at their leisure.

And there will be no sages on a stage or Zoom either; all sessions will be highly interactive and engaging. We're big proponents of active participation and this will be a key tenet of all content we create.

We know how keen people in our industry are to reconnect in person, so we want to give them every opportunity to do so, while relying on the benefits of technology to unite everyone virtually.

The pandemic has emphasised that travel is a privilege. When borders begin to reopen, travel will be restricted to those who can afford to fulfil the many layers of travel security demanded by governments. So, how do you foresee luxury travel to rebound in 2021? I think the most important thing for people to remember is that for travel, we are starting again from zero. In the past, we may have experienced a blip, but never a hard stop. During the pandemic, we went from 1,000 miles an hour to almost zero.

With that said, I expect a strong and fast rebound for luxury travel; I think the speed and acceleration of recovery will take everybody by surprise.

We don't know when or if there will be a vaccine, but I'm confident we will see improvements by 2Q2021 due to rapid testing, which more and more travel companies like British Airways are now adopting. For travellers, rapid tests will be a huge confidence driver and a modest price to pay in

order to travel freely again.

As we've observed in China, there will be a huge pent-up demand for travel – revenge travel, if you will. I predict two waves of recovery: one where the desire to travel will trickle down slowly, followed by a Wild West period where travellers will go wild and want to go everywhere.

This is why travel brands must be wary of discounting or reducing their prices, as price is a critical factor in profitability. In terms of how consumer mindsets will evolve, I predict the resurgence of a Jack Kerouac-style, on-the-road mentality. More than ever, consumers will see travel not as a break, but as an opportunity to expand their minds and transform themselves after months of lockdown and restricted movement.

So in many ways, I'm optimistic. Yes, 2019 was an exceptional year. But I predict that 2022 and 2023 may be even better.

What specific post-lockdown travel trends excite you most today?

This January, travel's biggest trend was flygskam – flight shaming. Climate change remains one of the biggest threats to our future. However, I am confident that the pandemic will have a positive effect on the environment and bolster sustainable travel, which I predict will define the way we explore the world post-pandemic.

Firstly, overcrowded resorts will be a thing of the past – people will seek remote, open spaces that are far from other travellers, which will mitigate overtourism. More than seeking out these remote places, travellers will also have a greater desire to protect them, inspired by the enormous environmental benefits we have seen during the pandemic.

Secondly, restorative travel will surge. Covid-19 has put a premium on our health, proving it is the only capital that truly matters. Whereas



From top This is Beyond's trade events will continue to engage, connect and inspire industry players online and offline

previously, many of us took this for granted, it now feels more important than ever to lead a balanced life and stay connected to nature – and we will seek out wellness experiences that meet this need. We will be more caring not only of the planet, but of ourselves.

If there had to be one positive outcome from the pandemic, what would it be – and what would the implications be for travel and tourism?

Pre-Covid-19, it was clear that some travellers were taking trips for the wrong reasons, without taking any value from them – for bragging rights or a cheap photo opportunity – a trend largely driven by Instagram.

Travel was increasingly viewed as a birthright, not a privilege. But the pandemic has drastically changed our perspective and given the world some much-needed humility. Now, we've discovered what truly matters: to be social animals, to see and hug loved ones, to have real, tangible experiences for which social media is no substitute.

I think people will desire transformational journeys once restrictions are lifted, meaning the act of travel will be more important than ever before.

Redefining luxury

Ghassan Aboud, the Syrian billionaire owner of Crystalbrook Collection, tells **Adelaine Ng** how smart technology is a key driver for sustainable development in the luxury hospitality sector

Although a relative newcomer to the hospitality scene, you've made a significant impression. What differentiating factor are you bringing to the luxury tourism market?

I wanted Crystalbrook Collection to be a unique hospitality group. To stand out, we needed to do things differently than our global-brand competitors.

Our brand stands on sustainability, personality and technology. Crystalbrook Collection is one of Australia's leading sustainable and innovative independent

hospitality companies, committed to responsible luxury.

We have taken a look at how we can operate in a more environmentally-considered way. That means we have no plastic straws, water bottles, bags or guest room key cards. Instead, we use recycled wood, plant-ingredients and recycled cardboard. We have also reduced the amount of paper usually found in five-star hotel rooms by 95 per cent by introducing technology like in-room iPads and smart TVs.

Our check-in and out, tour desk and press office are also paper-free.

We call this responsible luxury. That's how we're different. We want our guests to have a feeling of partnership in fostering sustainability.

What's your vision for Crystalbrook Collection resorts?

My vision is to provide local and international guests with unique, premium, Australian experiences. Each of our properties has a distinct personality – for instance, Riley is all about living in the moment while Flynn is our wild child. It's like a family.

Three top predictions for luxury travel

- ❖ Sustainability is key: There will be an increase in hospitality companies adopting more sustainable practices. Customers' wants, needs and expectations will force companies to embrace environmental change and sustainability. We have seen already that this is a key concern of many travellers who are choosing to stay and engage with environmentally-considerate hotels and resorts.
- ❖ More independent offerings: Growth in the number of independent luxury hospitality companies that will bring unique offerings, niche facilities and a strong, authentic local focus into the industry. There is a



This attracts a variety of guests with different travel wants and needs. What our guests can always be assured of is the Crystalbrook Collection experience and values at any and all of our hotels.

Why Australia, which is a long way from your Dubai base? And do you plan to expand your hospitality business to other countries?

As a group, we wanted to diversify our business portfolio and also the geographic presence. We are a multi-business group in automotive, retail, food, real estate and logistics. We decided to foray into hospitality.

I was initially attracted to Australia's buoyant economy and strong tourism sector. This made Australia an excellent destination choice to commence the hospitality arm of our business.

And yes, of course we plan to expand. Right now, we are focusing on the Australia and New Zealand market, but I would like to see Crystalbrook go international eventually.

What is your key criteria for investing in a new property?

Destination, market stability, growth potential, and fit with the brand.

What other projects are you working on and what do they add to your current portfolio?

At the moment, we have five Crystalbrook Collection hotels and resorts operating. Riley, Bailey and Flynn in Cairns, Queensland; Little Albion in Sydney, New South Wales; and Byron at Byron in Byron Bay, New South Wales.

(Come 2021), we will launch our sixth hotel, Kingsley – the first five-star hotel in Newcastle, New South Wales.

We are actively looking for new investment opportunities, and there are definitely some exciting projects we are working on at the moment. Nothing that I can elaborate on too much at this stage.

Where do you think luxury travel is headed? How does the future look?

Sustainability and uniqueness are what travellers want. Eco-travel is a huge trend right now, with many independent hospitality groups starting to look at how their operations and business can be made more environmentally-considered.

Guests also want to enjoy unique experiences when they travel. As travellers get more tech-savvy, they look for smart features in their accommodation.

growing customer base of guests who are highly engaged and craving cultural experiences more than a large guestroom and amenities.

❖ Greater personalisation through technology: We will see greater customer personalisation in premium hotel experiences as travellers seek immersive experiences, activities and connections. Technology, data and digital media will continue to drive our ability to create better, more personalised guest experiences. Hospitality companies will continue to use disruptive technologies and artificial intelligence to enhance their guest offerings.



Above Ride wild and free with horse whisperers across Mongolian plains

Changing pursuits

Soul-stirring and eye-opening destination experiences are top of luxury travellers' wishlist today, and this appetite will change how tours are curated, reports **Marissa Carruthers**

Transformational travel was slated to be the new buzz-word in the luxury market pre-pandemic.

But even with the travel freeze today, experts predict that demand will soar once tourism resumes, fuelled by greater keenness among high-end travellers on curated magical experiences away from the crowds.

Christopher Lund, head of hotels at Colliers International, said there would be a huge shift in focus to itineraries that go the extra mile in allowing travellers to escape and have meaningful experiences.

He noted: "There will be much more of a focus on experiences. Holidays where travellers can take something away, especially around eco-tourism, wellness and

conservation, as these all conform with the social distancing that has now become the norm.”

Pre-pandemic, Asia’s luxury tourism players had already been going the extra mile to curate experiences that money cannot buy. From accompanying a private butler to his village, to helping plant coral reefs and meditating with monks, ultra-wealthy travellers no longer mind roughing it if it means securing an extra-special experience that pushes personal growth.

Andreas Grosskinsky, general manager at Destination Asia Indonesia, said for the last decade, luxury travel has been moving into the experiential arena, with more high-end travellers willing to splash out to enjoy authentic local experiences in style. That has changed with the pandemic, with guests becoming more willing than ever to trade in traditional luxury comforts for an incredible once-in-a-lifetime transformational experience.

Grosskinsky noted that “it’s taken some time to educate travel consultants on this”.

Tim Cordon, Radisson Hotel Group’s area senior vice president, agreed that transformational experiences will be in high demand, and that hotels and travel companies should work together to make the most of this trend.

Curating bespoke experiences for high-end guests is high on the agenda at The Pavilions Hotels and Resorts, which crafts a range of Curated Journeys for guests, covering a range of niches, including culinary, adventure, recreation, wellness and family.

Simona Chimenti, general manager at The Pavilions Bali, said: “The big next step is somewhere in between experiential and transformational travel. Guests want to mix with locals and get a real feeling of local life. It’s still luxury but there’s an emphasis on experiences. I call it laidback luxury.”

She added the desires of luxury travellers are changing from simply seeking five-star accommodation and high-end restaurants and transport, to experiencing each destination and the lives of the people who call it home.

Noted Chimenti: “The definition of luxury is shifting – it used to be about sitting in a golden cage and not going outside. Today, people are more interested in genuine service and creating memories to take back home and less about that standard luxury version.”

For example, The Pavilions Himalayas customises hikes for guests to meet monks at a monastery. At other properties in Asia, guests can go with their private butler back to his/her home village, and join a horse whisperer for a horseback adventure across Mongolia’s plains.

Chimenti said: “We really want to capture the essence of a destination and offer something that goes off the traditional beaten path.”

Climate change concerns are also shaping the transformational travel trend, with high-end clients wanting to leave as little impact on the environment as possible while helping to create a better world during their stay – another area

Lund expects to see an uptick in demand within the luxury arena.

Five-star resort The Datai Langkawi gives transformational experiences an environmental twist. Located in a remote alcove at the foot of a 10 million-year-old rainforest, the resort has recruited naturalists and marine biologists to curate a series of nature-based experiences.

Spokesperson Celine Maginel said luxury travellers now sought more than the usual “bling bling”, and the property could inject something extra from its presence among nature and biodiversity.

The resort works with local NGOs and involves guests in conservation and community work. This includes helping to transport coral from onsite nurseries and joining local artists in upcycling waste.

Rascal Voyages has also tapped into the conservation movement, curating transformational experiences onboard its exclusive floating villas while embracing the shift away from traditional luxury.

CEO Stephen Ebsworth said: “We’re trying to move away from privilege and stuffiness. Exclusive, private, remote experiences that are close to nature will be well positioned for luxury travel in the near future.”

As part of offerings, Rascal Voyages operates bespoke exploration cruises that team up with environmental NGO Conservation International to deliver experiences with three of the world’s best marine biologists. Guests can help to tag sea turtles, follow their migration path, and help marine biologists with their work.

During the first five exploration cruises, 25 new species of fish and a walking shark were discovered. Guests can even get to name any species they find.

Said Ebsworth: “By very definition, travel should be submerging visitors in an experience and be educational. People want to learn something and take that away.”

“

The definition of luxury is shifting – it used to be about sitting in a golden cage and not going outside. Today, people are more interested in... creating memories to take back home...

Simona Chimenti,
general manager,
The Pavilions Bali



A person is shown in a yoga pose (Urdhva Dhanurasana) on a beach at sunset. The person is in the water, with their back to the camera, arms raised, and legs bent. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a warm, orange glow. The water is calm, and the beach is visible in the foreground.

Getting back on track

The pandemic has brought about a renewed focus on wellness, alongside newfound demands for secluded, sanitised stays. **Anne Somanas** delves into how Thai luxury hoteliers are realigning their strategies to suit the future

Thailand's luxury hospitality sector is gearing up post-lockdown to attract domestic travellers who now seek exclusive escapades with a component of seclusion, valued-adds and heightened wellness experiences.

The pandemic has only served to enhance the existing demand for personalisation and bespoke experiences across the board -- now with an added element of safety and seclusion that Thailand's luxury hotels are going the extra mile to satiate.

According to Bruno Huber, general manager at Mövenpick

BDMS Wellness Resort, Thailand's domestic destinations will need to reinvent themselves to stay attractive to the high-income group. "It will require a level of creativity from us in the hospitality industry to create new, aesthetically pleasing and authentic experiences that are engaging to combat the market's short attention span," he said.

This heightened expectation for creative offerings among high-end travellers is also echoed by Nick Downing, general manager at The Siam Hotel, who observed guests "more often than not requesting bespoke itineraries or ideas".

Downing noted that balancing the expected personal touch and

Left Results-driven wellness experiences and health treatments are gaining intense interest among well-heeled Thai travellers

“

Everyone views luxury travel differently, so what Thais are looking for will be different from what the international clientele is expecting.

Vitanart Vathanakul,
CEO, Royal Cliff
Hotels Group

Royal Cliff Hotels Group, said differentiating between domestic and international market expectations is paramount.

“Everyone views luxury travel differently, so what Thais are looking for will be different from what the international clientele is expecting,” he told *TTG Asia Luxury*, adding that hotels with “strong preventative programmes combined with a high level of hygiene” will win customers’ trust.

The tussle for the local tourist dollar has also prompted some Thai luxury hoteliers to veer towards value-added packages that draw marketing buzz.

The key to unlocking opportunities in this climate lies in creating attractive staycation deals that “spread via word-of-mouth and are supplemented by targeted promotional campaigns,” opined Huber.

He cited the examples of “value-added service and food and beverage-driven experiences”.

For Rosewood Bangkok, the hotel is baiting consumers with a host of bundle deals, such as teaming up with sister property, Rosewood Phuket, to create a “dual destination” package, shared Thomas Harlander, its managing director.

“(It’s a challenge to create) products and services that exceed expectations in a highly competitive and saturated market such as Bangkok, (but) the response has been tremendous,” he shared.

“We have also noticed that guests are putting a premium on their health and are willing to spend more on trusted brands and wellness

services... I see real growth in the area of results-driven, luxury wellness retreats with a medical and holistic component.”

Among the biggest developments on this front in Thailand include the December 2020 launch of RAKxa by Minor Hotels, in collaboration with M.K. Real Estate Development and VitalLife Scientific Wellness Centre. Situated in Bangkok’s Green Lung, RAKxa has been billed as Thailand’s first fully integrated wellness and medical retreat.

The September launch of Anya Meditec by event and marketing services firm Index Creative Village also aims to bring hospitals to hotels, latching onto the healthcare trend in premium markets which allows travellers to receive medical services, such as sleep tests, without going to the hospital.

“It’s more than wellness – we have a complete team of doctors, nurses and medical technicians,” said Kreingkrai Kanjanapokin, founder and group CEO of Index Creative Village, on forming the “medical agency” spinoff.

Paul Hawco, corporate director of wellness at Dusit Hotels and Resorts, who is working towards the launch of an integrated wellness centre at mixed-use project Dusit Central Park in 2023, also pointed to the brand’s infusing of “micro-moments of well-being” into the stay experience – such as a mini massage upon arrival – as indication of how luxury wellness would evolve.

Karina Stewart, co-founder and chief wellness director at Kamalaya wellness sanctuary and holistic spa resort in Koh Samui, which offers personal coaching sessions by monks onsite and via Zoom, said the resort has seen a rise in demand for pandemic anxiety treatments.

She foresees a spike in wellness travellers, their stays lengthening, and wellness destinations driving demand post-lockdown.

connection in luxury hospitality with safety protocols has become a fine juggling act -- to that end, the hotel now reaches out to its guests pre-stay to find out their concerns relating to the coronavirus and how they wish for the hotel to address their unease.

With the halt on international tourism necessitating Thailand’s shift to rely on its own vast domestic market, hoteliers have had to evolve their strategies.

Vitanart Vathanakul,
CEO of



Five luxé products

Siam Premium Outlets Bangkok

Situated a mere 15-minute drive from Suvarnabhumi Airport, this outlet mall and luxury shopping centre features global high-end brands such as Burberry, Balenciaga and Hugo Boss, alongside local brands like Jim Thompson. The joint venture between Siam Piwat (which manages retail developments such as Siam Discovery, Siam Paragon and Iconsiam) and Simon Property Group opened its doors in June 2020 and is Thailand's first premium outlet centre.

Kimpton Maa-Lai Bangkok

IHG's five-star charismatic and edgy hotel in Bangkok's Langsuan neighbourhood, part of the Sindhorn Village development, is the brand's first hotel in South-east

Clockwise from left Siam Premium Outlets Bangkok; RAKxa; Kimpton Maa-Lai Bangkok; Pullman Khao Lak

Asia. It has 362 rooms, including 131 serviced residences, and 578m² of meeting space. Eclectic dining options include all-day dining at Stock.Room; a neighbourhood grocerant, with six open kitchens that seats 400 guests and offers master classes; all-day lobby bar Craft; narrative-led cocktail bar Ms. Jigger and urban rooftop garden Bar.Yard.

RAKxa

Opening December 2020, Thailand's first fully-integrated wellness and medical retreat sits in serene Bang Krachao, also known as Bangkok's Green Lung on the Chao Phraya River. The facility is operated via a partnership between M.K. Real Estate Development, Minor Hotels Group and Bumrungrad Hospital subsidiary VitalLife Scientific Wellness Centre. Of the 60 private luxury villas, 27 garden villas will open this year, while spacious pool villas and presidential residences will follow in 2021.

Pullman Khao Lak

Soft opening on December 1, 2020, the 253-key property with 383m² of luxe meeting space, including the 260m² Celadon Ballroom, is a nice

Right
Nusara

addition to the Khao Lak MICE scene. The property also contains eight accessibility-friendly rooms, six pool villas, two presidential suites and 50 family rooms. Located on Bang Muang Beach in Khao Lak, 1.5 hours from Phuket International Airport and 100km from Phuket city, its designers include Martin Palleros of Tierra Design and artist Yui Jatuporn from Artslonga.

Nusara

A restaurant with a heart-warming background story, this is the concept restaurant that celebrity chef Thitit Tassanakajohn of Le Du fame promised his grandmother he would open for her before her passing. The restaurant takes only 10 seatings a night for the 12-course culinary journey, served up in an atmosphere reminiscent of a vintage drawing room on the second floor of a shophouse on the riverside across from Wat Arun.





Holidaymakers in Japan favour luxury hotels offering well-rounded experiences and wellness facilities like hot springs that are away from crowds; an outdoor onsen at a hot spring inn in Yamagata Prefecture pictured

Big push for micro-tourism

The rise of micro-tourism as Japan's domestic travel market springs back to post-pandemic life, aided by a national campaign, has birthed new opportunities for luxury hoteliers in Japan, who are tapping that demand with safety promises, curated activities and creative pivots. By **Kathryn Wortley**

Even with the halt on inbound tourism, new opportunities are emerging for luxury providers in Japan as the micro-tourism trend gains steam among domestic travellers.

The small-scale style of travel has seen an uptick across the country, given impetus by the government's July launch of a subsidised travel campaign offering 50 per cent off trips. Most participants so far have opted for single-destination trips within a few hours' drive of home and, due to the discount, have been happy to splurge.

Keen to shun crowded attractions and facilities, many travellers with mid to high disposable income have been seeking hotels that can offer an all-rounded experience, including relaxation (a hot spring or spa),

destination japan

various F&B options, activities (a pool or gym) and local interaction (exclusive mini-tours). This trend is enabling luxury hoteliers to maximise on the rebound in the domestic market.

Hoshino Resorts, for instance, is targeting locals living within a 60-minute drive from its properties, with the lure of meals, hot springs and relaxation in a private space. Footfall has risen, with more Japanese consumers favouring “travel closer to home and in a safe space”, said Jiseon Lee, the company’s area manager of global marketing.

At Small Luxury Hotels of the World (SLH), guests are showing a keen interest in enjoying their hotel and its surrounds in a way that suits the new normal.

Mark Wong, SLH’s senior vice-president Asia-Pacific, said: “The reservations team has been receiving more requests to make restaurant reservations, spa appointments and local city excursions.

“We are also partnering with local experiential travel providers to curate activities that are off-the-beaten-track. (Our) partners have specifically identified and curated safe tour itineraries that avoid crowded places, so guests have that added security.”

Properties that average about 50 rooms are also enjoying a resurgence in hotel buyouts as social distancing becomes the norm. Since the pandemic, SLH’s trio of Japan hotels that offer buyouts have seen an uptick in enquiries from families and groups of friends for exclusive use at the end of 2020 and into 2021.

In response to that demand for privacy and seclusion, the company launched its Stay Small, Stay Exclusive programme to offer enhanced health and detailed safety guidelines, promising peace

of mind to potential guests. Standards established under the programme are safeguarded by SLH’s partnership with the Global Biorisk Advisory Council and the latter’s GBAC STAR accreditation.

Even before the coronavirus struck, most luxury providers had placed a premium on small-scale, bespoke trips to off-the-beaten-track destinations, rendering them particularly poised to tap rising demand for micro-tourism.

Case in point: Bespoke luxury DMC Discover Shikoku, which has always put privacy and separation at the heart of its operations. Managing director Sean Brecht noted that no “significant leap” was needed for the company to adapt to the realities of travel in a post-pandemic world.

Some luxury travel providers who once solely targeted foreign visitors have successfully pivoted to the domestic market, thanks to micro-tourism business opportunities.

One such provider is itinerant hotel brand 700,000 Heures, whose properties operate in each location

for six months. After launching near Kyoto in May, the hotel began to attract locals keen on micro-trips due to its European atmosphere.

In the face of prevailing uncertainty around inbound tourism, the owner saw an opportunity, dialling up the hotel’s European elements, and even making the switch from Japanese to European cuisine.

Julia Maeda, co-founder of boutique travel agency Okuni, which utilises 700,000 Heures in its trips, said the hotel was booked solid by Japanese residents following the pivot.

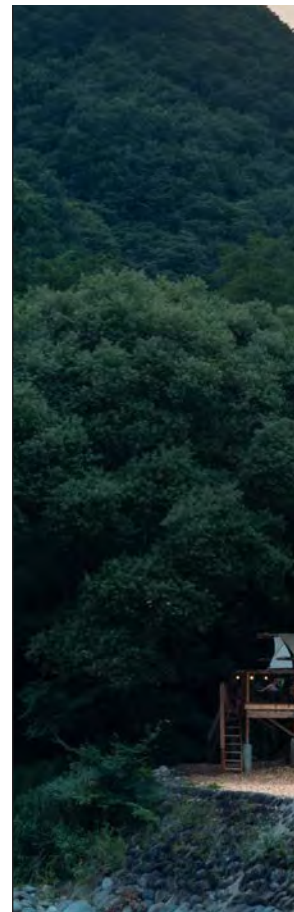
In the long run, the rise of micro-tourism in Japan is expected to provide a welcome boost to the luxury market via a greater number and variety of products and services.

Moreover, as micro-tourism also enhances collaboration among nationwide and regional companies and local experts, this approach can improve industry operations, according to Hoshino Resorts’ Lee.

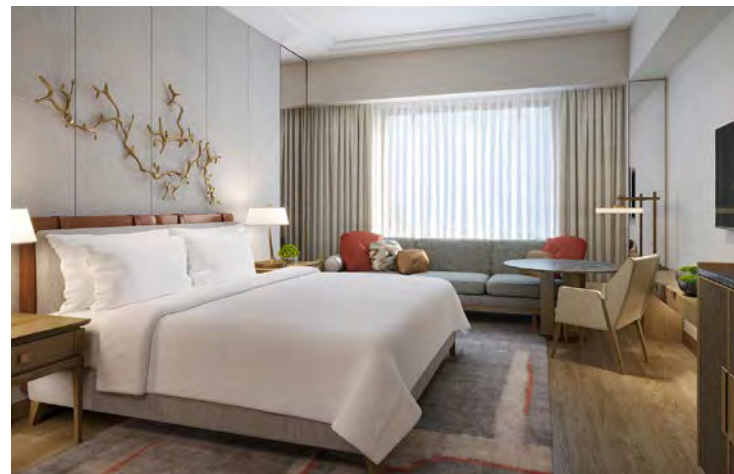


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Mark Wong,
senior vice-president
Asia-Pacific,
Small Luxury Hotels of
the World



Five
luxé
products



Kimpton Shinjuku Tokyo

Kimpton Shinjuku Tokyo marks the debut of the InterContinental Hotels Group's luxury boutique brand Kimpton Hotels & Restaurants in Japan. Inspired by New York's art and fashion scene, the high-end hotel balances calming design with urban energy. It features 151 guestrooms, three meeting spaces, a health and fitness centre, and dynamic F&B offerings, including a relaxing lounge and terrace bar and an all-day deli café.

Shiroyama Hotel Kagoshima

Spanning 200m², Shiroyama Hotel Kagoshima's new Imperial Suite incorporates a living room, dining space and bedroom, each separated by partitions for privacy. Guests can enjoy a personal check-in/out service, welcome champagne, a chef's presentation and a 24-hour call service. The hotel has 12

F&B choices including Japanese, Chinese and French cuisine, and an open-air hot spring bath with scenic views of Sakurajima volcano.

Sowaka

Sowaka Kyoto, a 2020 addition to the Small Luxury Hotels of the World Group, offers two private cultural tours exclusively for hotel guests. The sunrise trip to Kiyomizu-dera Temple is delivered by temple priests, with access to normally off-limit parts of the 1,200-year-old World Heritage Site; while the night outing to Kodaiji Temple features an illuminated garden that showcases weeping cherry trees in spring and autumnal leaves come fall.

JW Marriott Hotel Nara

With 158 rooms and 16 suites inspired by local scenery and natural colours, JW Marriott Hotel Nara is designed to offer relaxation, ex-

periential luxury and a personal touch. It features a multi-concept food theatre, a speciality Japanese restaurant and a lounge bar. There is also a 24-hour fitness centre, an indoor pool and a luxury spa. The Executive Lounge offers a concierge service, F&B options and a private meeting room.

Minakami Riverside Oasis

Minakami Riverside Oasis, a glamping spot near the entrance to Joshinetsu National Park in Gunma Prefecture, is surrounded by native forest in a secluded valley overlooking the Yubiso River. The facility offers Safari, Waterfront and Bell tents in riverside locations, complete with all the creature comforts of a hotel. Guests can enjoy a private barbecue experience, go swimming, or partake in adventure tours including canyoning and rafting.

Clockwise from left Minakami Riverside Oasis; Kimpton Shinjuku Tokyo; Shiroyama Hotel Kagoshima; JW Marriott Hotel Nara; and Kiyomizu-dera Temple in Kyoto

ONE&ONLY'S FIRST ASIA RESORT ARRIVES ON DESARU COAST



The ultra-luxe resort One&Only Desaru Coast – the brand's first Asian outpost – is nestled on the south-eastern shoreline of Malaysia, and is a two-hour drive from Singapore.

The resort offers a collection of 42 Junior Suites, a pair of two-bedroom Grand Suites and a four-bedroom Villa One. All boast private plunge pools, alongside indoor and outdoor living spaces.

Secluded from the main resort, the 1,500m² Villa One is ideal for larger groups or special events. The two-storey, four-bedroom villa takes in a spa treatment room, a home office, and a central courtyard with ocean-facing lawns surrounding a 27m swimming pool.

In addition, the resort offers 50 Private Homes available to own or rent.

From the Mediterranean-inspired restaurant Ambara to the resort's signature

Japanese restaurant Hoshi, a variety of F&B options await guests. Elsewhere, there are the Andrew Walsh-helmed Ember Beach Club, Malaysian-inspired pool café Essential, and the open-air Dusky Monkey bar.

For recreation, guests can enjoy the Pedi:Mani:Cure Studio by Bastien Gonzalez, fitness studio, a specialist Pilates studio, a yoga pavilion, spa, and two infinity pools.

Club One offers a variety of sports, from tennis to watersports, to tantalise the more active guests. They can also gain insight into local culture with a lesson in *Silat Melayu*, a traditional Malaysian martial art, or tee off at two championship-level golf courses at the nearby Els Club. Young ones can enjoy an array of activities at KidsOnly – learning about the local ecosystem at the EcoLab, discovering local aquatic life at The Fisherman Hut and getting creative at the Art Studio.

Romance of the rails

Those seeking the old-fashioned romance of train travel can embark on an opulent rail excursion through the Vietnamese countryside on The Vietage, a 12-seated luxury carriage. Launched in July, The Vietage chugs along Vietnam's South Central coast between Anantara Hoi An Resort and Anantara Quy Nhon Villas. The six-hour journey passes through local villages and the rural countryside, with a few station stops en route. Amenities on board include a fully-serviced bar and massage area. The train departs from Danang Railway Station near Hoi An each morning, and makes the return journey from Quy Nhon every evening.



Discover your Myanmar

Luxury tour operator Abercrombie & Kent Myanmar has rolled out a series of multi-day private tour experiences for domestic travellers. Dubbed Discover Your Asia, the tour series includes a three-night Escape to Ngapali at a high-end retreat within the township; and a four-night Hill Tribe Trek & Inle Lake experience from Pindaya to Inle Lake, featuring an overnight trek and monastic stay, with an optional sunrise balloon flight before exploring the lake's floating gardens.

Other offerings are the three-night Scenic Trails of Hpa An, including light trekking in Hpa An and cave discoveries along the way, as well as a hike up the sacred Mount Zwe Kabin lined with Buddha statues. Elsewhere, the three-night Bagan Bold escapade explores local villages, pagodas, and Mount Popa, along with a sunrise balloon flight over Bagan's temple-dotted landscape at request.

Guests can also dive into the wonders of Myanmar's water world with the three-night A Dream of Inle Lake package, featuring a tailored private boat tour, with an optional floating lunch experience. Each tour comes complete with private guide and transport, alongside accommodation.

Myanmar residents can take advantage of residents-only rates for a luxury cruise on the all-suite ship *Sanctuary Ananda*, travelling between Mandalay and Bagan along the Ayeyarwady River. The custom-built ship is fitted out with three spacious decks, a sundeck with an outdoor pool, and a lounge. The cruise lets passengers explore villages, pagodas and monasteries by day, while enjoying craft cocktails and gourmet meals prepared by the onboard chefs.



SLEEPING UNDER THE STARS

Nestled in a private game reserve in South Africa, a treehouse has opened with the tantalising promise of the ultimate in sleepout experiences beneath a blanket of stars. The Ngala Treehouse experience, launched in February by luxury travel company andBeyond, offers a remote retreat in the andBeyond Ngala Private Game Reserve, where guests can catch glimpses of the free-roaming wildlife.

Cocooned in natural bush surrounds, the four-level treehouse features two sleeping areas – an enclosed and weatherproof bedroom with a king-sized bed, alongside an elevated sleep-out platform under a retractable awning.

The treehouse also comes with a stocked bar, a coffee station, in addition to a selection

of midnight and breakfast snacks. A walk-in shower with hot running shower and a separate flushing toilet complete the high-end wilderness experience. Guests are also offered a tapas-style picnic dinner, and given a radio and mobile phone in case of inclement weather or other emergencies. What's more, the treehouse is solar-powered, allowing guests to recharge their devices.

Not designed for long-term stays, the Ngala Treehouse is only open to guests who are staying at either andBeyond Ngala Safari Lodge or andBeyond Ngala Tented Camp. It sleeps a maximum of two adults and two children. Guests can enjoy exclusive game drives and bush walks on 14,700ha of private wilderness land.

Go sight-sea-ing

Singaporeans looking to get away from the urban jungle can embark on a sailing adventure with the Yacht-cation Escape package rolled out by Millennium Hotels and Resorts. The package pairs a staycation at either Orchard Hotel or M Social, along with a luxury yacht ride to explore the Southern Islands of Singapore.

The two-day/one-night package at Orchard Hotel, priced from S\$1,600 (US\$1,180) for two guests, features a stay in a Premier Suite, welcome afternoon tea, dinner at Hua Ting, gourmet picnic lunch set, private limousine return transfer to the Yacht Club, a four-hour yacht experience, breakfast, and an early check-in and late check-out arrangement. A three-day/two-night option is available from S\$2,160.

Meanwhile, the package from M Social is priced from S\$1,380 for two persons on a two-day/one-night arrangement. Along with a stay in a Premier Loft, guests will enjoy welcome amenities, a mixology class, breakfast and set dinner at Beast & Butterflies, gourmet picnic lunch set, private limousine return transfer to the Yacht Club, a four-hour yacht experience, breakfast, as well as an early check-in and late check-out arrangement. A three-day/two-night option is available from S\$1,560.

Prior reservation is required and booking is subject to availability.



Luxury meets mindfulness

Situated in Jimbaran Bay, the hilltop Raffles Bali has opened, offering sweeping vistas of the Indian Ocean and its own secluded beach. All 32 pool villas on the beachfront property features an outdoor terrace and private pool, indoor and outdoor showers, yoga mats and beach accessories, alongside a soaking tub.

F&B venues range from the brand's iconic Writers Bar and the adjoining Library where guests can enjoy a tippie or two, to the Rumari restaurant serving Balinese cuisine and the Loloan Beach Bar and Grill for seafood feasting. For lovebirds, intimate dining experi-

ences can be arranged at The Secret Cave or the Purnama Honeymoon Bale. Other amenities comprise a 25m infinity pool and a trio of spa suites, including a remote hillside treatment suite, The Sanctuary.

A new initiative, Raffles Wellbeing Butlers are also on hand to arrange bespoke cultural experiences, from temple dance ceremonies to traditional cooking classes. Raffles Bali will also be the first Raffles to launch the brand's new wellbeing programme, Emotional Wellbeing by Raffles, which guides guests through curated programmes, spaces and rituals resulting in a sense of calm.