



Love for Asia is returning

Asian destinations are still value-for-money for European travellers, but pricey airfares and limited air capacity are the biggest obstacles for those looking to return to the region for a quality vacation

By Raini Hamdi

Bookings to Asia are looking healthy for 2023, according to European tour operators, but air seat capacity remains the main concern for the market to reach pre-pandemic levels.

The continent has bucked gloomy predictions last year following the Ukraine war and its ensuing energy crisis. Wall Street bank Goldman Sachs expects the euro zone economy to grow 0.6 per cent this year, compared with its previous forecast of a contraction, thanks to a fall in natural gas prices and the reopening of China's borders, according to a *Reuters* report.

"Bookings are back in full swing and this makes us feel rather confident for this year," said Holger Baldus, managing director of Marco Polo Reisen.

"The yearly holidays are a very important part of the German lifestyle. After nearly three years of the pandemic, customers obviously don't want to abstain from this highlight of their year," he said.

Stephan Roemer, founder of Tourasia, a Swiss tour operating company which also operates in Germany and Poland through subsidiaries, is seeing "excellent figures" coming from the UK, France and Switzerland.

But getting more growth is difficult. "All flights from Europe to Asia are packed to the fullest; there is simply no more capacity," said Roemer, who is also CEO of Thailand-based Diethelm Travel Group.

"Germany appears to us a bit slower (than UK, France and Switzerland), again because there aren't enough flights and there might be a certain amount of reluctance because of inflation," he said.

According to IATA, international bookings for air travel in the UK were back to 80 per cent of 2019 levels in 2022, and more than 70 per cent in Germany.

This was a significant step up from 50 per cent of 2019 level for 2021, and 42 per cent for 2020, said a Centre for Aviation (CAPA) report. CAPA conjectured in late October 2022 that a return to 2019 levels of capacity might not occur in Europe until 2024 or 2025, given "operational constraints and economic concerns".

TUI Group also reports a "promising booking development" for winter and summer for Asia. Spokesperson Anja Braun, however, rued that flight limitations, which have shored up air fares, have "slightly" dented Asia's competitiveness.

"Asia has attractive pricing for accommodation compared with other longhaul

destinations, but longhaul flight prices are difficult to compensate," she said.

Thailand is the number one Asian destination for Europeans. Europe, including Russia, accounted for 6.7 million tourists to the kingdom in 2019, Thailand's National Statistical Office data shows. The pandemic shrunk the European market to Thailand to 2.1 million in 2020, and just 251,000 in 2021. Still, that 2021 preliminary figure represented nearly 60 per cent of all arrivals in Thailand in 2021, as travel restrictions prevented Asians and Chinese – the bulk of the kingdom's arrivals – from travelling.



...Asia (demand) has been coming back at full speed...

Holger Baldus

Managing director,
Marco Polo Reisen

The top five European sources for Thailand are Russia (1.5 million in 2019), the UK (993,000), Germany (853,000), France (745,000) and Eastern Europe (559,000).

"Demand for Asia was pretty low until late summer 2022, mostly because of travel restrictions that were still present in Asia. Since then Asia has been coming back at full speed, however flight availability continues to be the major problem," said Marco Polo's Baldus.

He too said that most Asian destinations are price competitive – "as long as we can secure flights at reasonable fares".

"Asia is mainly competing with the Caribbean, for instance, the Dominican Republic. It lost significant market share to the Caribbean during the pandemic, as travelling there was much easier and less bureaucratic. Ever-changing rules in

a number of Asian countries during the pandemic made travel agencies reroute demand to destinations that guaranteed their income and posed much less operational problems," added Baldus.

As to which Asian destinations are popular now, based on forward bookings, TUI's Braun said the Maldives is topping the sales chart, thanks to its "specials and offers", while Thailand and Indonesia "are picking up now".

Christiane Thoma-Ratnasiri, senior product and contracting manager for TUI and Airtours brands for India, Nepal, Indochina, Myanmar, Hong Kong, Greater China, Taiwan, South Korea and Japan, sees a trend for longer stays in Cambodia.

"Cambodia's average length of stay was 3.2 stays but now we are seeing long stays of 10 to 14 days in Siem Reap, which are really good value bookings for our hotel partners. I believe Cambodia is benefiting from its move to be the first Indochina destination to reopen borders for tourists," said Thoma-Ratnasiri.

On the other hand, Laos is still suffering from being the last to reopen.

"Laos is a niche product with low bookings, but now bookings have hardly returned and I think it will take a long time for it to get back to normal," she said.

Vietnam is picking up day by day but figures are still behind pre-Covid levels.

For Marco Polo, Japan is on fire. "Since its re-opening in August/September, Japan has seen total recovery and will enjoy a boom in 2023 if flight capacity improves," said Baldus.

And it seems that Europeans are not cutting back on spending.

"We are seeing higher average travel budgets than pre-Covid," said Tourasia's Roemer.

"Asia is extremely competitive, in particular Thailand, Indonesia and Sri Lanka. Hotels are still giving high discounts for early birds. Moreover, most Asian currencies have lost in value to the USD or CHF, which makes costs even cheaper," he said.

But China's faster-than-expected travel reopening from January 8 has raised the question whether a surge in demand in Asian destinations that are popular with Chinese travellers may put a squeeze on rooms availability and jack up rates in some of those places.

Thailand is the top Asian destination for Chinese travellers, welcoming 11 million of them in 2019. Japan, Vietnam, South Korea and Singapore are next.

"Demand of the Chinese market de-



Thailand is a hot favourite; Phuket pictured

fines the availability for the EU," said TUI's Braun. This is particularly for the late buying market, which requires good availability until shortly before departure, she said.

European airlines will not reinstate their capacity as quickly as the Chinese counterparts, in part due to operational constraints posed by access to Russian airspace, said Mayul Patel, head of Asia, OAG Aviation.

"For those flights, this can add up to two hours' additional flying time in each direction, which can increase operational costs due to higher fuel prices. In turn, Chinese carriers will have an upper hand given their access to Russian Airspace. This will increase demand to Europe for Chinese travellers as China resumes package tours," he said.

Nevertheless, Patel said additional seat capacity growth from Europe to Southeast Asia will continue, "given the high confidence level in longhaul travel from European markets and Asia's wide variety of destinations and tourism product offerings".

In short, the conversation in 2023 has shifted, from how to fill airline seats and rooms, to how to find them.

That, augurs well for the industry to return and even exceed pre-pandemic levels.

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Improved tourism KPIs for South-east Asia

Tourism performance is getting back on track, but more work has to be done

By Karen Yue

Continued destination marketing under the ASEAN banner as well as the progressive relaxation and removal of travel restrictions by member states throughout 2022 have yielded more positive tourism numbers for the South-east Asian region. At the February 5 press conference concluding the 26th Meeting of ASEAN Tourism Ministers (26th M-ATM) in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, meeting chair Sandiaga Uno, minister of tourism and creative economy, Indonesia, noted that destinations in the economic grouping have altogether achieved a 1,706.61 per cent year-on-year increase in tourism receipts based on preliminary figures for 2022.

ASEAN member states have also recorded 1,222.99 per cent year-on-year increase in international arrivals, while hotel rate occupancy has improved by 16 per cent over the same period.

Destination marketing efforts fuelling the return of tourists to the region include social media content, digital campaigns and activities bearing the new brand and tagline, *A Destination for Every Dream*.

The Meeting emphasised the need for member states to deepen their collaboration with relevant partners in the areas of destination marketing. It also commended initiatives that were supported by external partners, such as the Intra-ASEAN



Tourism ministers of the 10 ASEAN member states and their economic partners met in Yogyakarta

Tourism Recovery Campaign, which received support from the Canadian Trade and Investment Facility for Development, as well as ASEAN's collaboration with regional travel trade publisher and event organiser TTG Asia Media and the Sub-Regional Secretariats to amplify the call to visit South-east Asia.

Focus ahead will be on accomplishing even more key measures under the Post-Covid-19 Recovery Plan for ASEAN Tourism. These include developing regional cruise tourism and the promotion of new and lesser known destinations in the region.

Sandiaga recognises that connectivity

improvements – not just within South-east Asia but also from markets outside of the region – are crucial for ASEAN member states to achieve these joint tourism goals.

In the case of Indonesia, direct flights to and from India are still lacking despite the latter being the “lowest of the low-hanging fruits” for tourism.

Philippine Tourism secretary Christina Garcia-Frasco said tourism heads have agreed to work on boosting air lift by identifying airports that can be used to operate additional direct flights for the purpose of driving tourism flow into both key and emerging destinations.

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EDITORIAL

Karen Yue Group Editor

S Puvaneswary Editor, Malaysia/Brunei

Mimi Hudoyo Editor, Indonesia

Rachel AJ Lee, Assistant Editor, TTGmice, TTGassociations

Serene Foo Editor, TTG Content Lab

Melissa Anne Tan Sub Editor

Redmond Sia Creative Designer

Lina Tan Editorial Assistant

CONTRIBUTORS

Alastair Newport, Feizal Samath, Kathryn Wortley, Marissa Carruthers, Tiara Maharani, Rosa Ocampo

SALES & MARKETING

Pierre Quek
Publisher and Head Integrated Solutions

Chimmy Tsui
Publisher and Head Integrated Solutions (China)

Shirley Tan Senior Business Manager

Seth Leow Business Manager

Cheryl Lim Advertisement Administration Manager

PUBLISHING SERVICES

Nur Hazirah Web Executive

Katherine Leong Circulation Executive

TTG ASIA MEDIA

Darren Ng Managing Director

For sales & marketing enquires, please contact traveltradesales@ttgasia.com

CONVERSATION

Attention to Asian detail

RIU Hotels & Resorts is replicating its European success in Asia-Pacific, says Petra Gauthey, director of business development Asia. By Jeeheng Yew

How was 2022 for RIU?

It is a fact that 2022 has been a fruitful year in which we have finally put behind the Covid-19 crisis in most of our destinations. We have registered record figures, both in terms of occupancy and average rates, surpassing the ones of 2019. The buoyant demand made it unnecessary to launch (stimulating) offers.

What are RIU's plans for Asia and the surrounding region this year?

The Asian market is key for the RIU chain. We have put in a great deal of effort into the region over the past years, opening two brand new hotels in the Maldives in 2019 and another in Dubai in 2020.

At the end of 2019, we started to think about improving the quality of our establishments even more. In 2020, we went ahead with renovation plans for RIU hotels in Mauritius, and chose to demolish them in order to create new buildings.

The new hotels (in Mauritius) will be part of the Riu Palace and Riu Classic lines, and have 700 rooms in total. They will have main dining rooms and two

themed restaurants each, as well as a spa. Guests at both the Riu Palace hotel, which will be for adults only, and the Riu Classic will be able to enjoy the Splash Water World water park, which will be located in the latter.

What is RIU doing to encourage its established European and American markets to travel to Asia-Pacific where there are RIU properties?

Within the European source markets, RIU has been an established and well-respected brand for many years. Therefore, when we opened our first hotel in Sri Lanka in 2016, we were able to drive sales to this new destination with our established network of contacts.

Market confidence in the RIU product enabled us to quickly establish our hotels in Sri Lanka, Mauritius, Zanzibar, the Maldives and Dubai. Our extensive network of tour operators, travel agents, and other industry partners were able to easily sell our hotels to their customers.

We would like to highlight that, at the

moment, the European source markets are the biggest volume drivers to our Asia and Indian Ocean properties. They represent well over half of our total business in this region.

In the past year, there has been a surge of interest from North America for the Maldives and Dubai. Considering the strong position and recognition RIU has in the market, we are confident in the growth potential to Asia.

Will RIU beef up its sales and marketing presence in high potential Asian source markets as well?

We are aware of the significant influence the Asia-Pacific markets have on the tourism industry. At the moment, the all-inclusive concept, which is one of our specialties, is extremely valuable for these traveller markets.

With our experience working with the Asia-Pacific markets, we cater special offers in our hotels, including a selection of Asian dishes, as well as events and celebrations for the Lunar New Year, Diwali

and the Sri Lankan New Year.

Our presence in different Asian markets is essential. We have offices in China, Singapore and India.

This year, as we traditionally do, we are planning to visit our partners in Australia, Malaysia, and South Korea, and start penetrating new markets such as Japan and Taiwan.



Petra Gauthey

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HIG

Forming key partnerships

From metaverse adventures to super app partnerships, Singapore tourism players are coming together to explore engaging ways to draw overseas visitors. By Serene Foo

Singapore is banking on unique, compelling content to market the city-state and connect with tourists in novel ways. Strategic partnerships with major tourism players were also inked to enhance the touchpoints of a traveller's journey to attract more overseas visitors to its sunny shores.

To celebrate the Merlion's jubilee in 2022, Singapore Tourism Board (STB) made its foray into the brave new world of the metaverse in a collaboration with Millennium Hotels and Resorts on Merlion on Vacation, an adventure that enables players to explore the city-state in Decentraland, a 3D virtual world platform, and win prizes.

STB also partnered with Warner Bros. Discovery to cooperate on entertainment and lifestyle content, leveraging on the latter's expertise in storytelling and global distribution network to present original localised stories to showcase Singapore worldwide.

Kickstarting with *Food Affair with Mark Wiens*, the HBO Asia Originals series takes audiences on a invigorating gastronomic journey through the city-state's diverse culinary scene, from haute to hawker fare.

Warner Music Singapore and Grammy-nominated Charlie Puth were also engaged in a creative tie-up – the singer-songwriter's first-ever collaboration with a destination. Apart from a private showcase, Puth featured his travels around the city-state in a video where he reimagined Singapore through his musical lens, exploring various unique sights and sounds, from iconic spots to hidden gems.

Klook and STB launched a partnership to drive travel recovery across South-east Asia and showcase Singapore as an inspiring destination of rich and innovative possibilities.



STB and Millennium Hotels and Resorts partner on Merlion on Vacation, a metaverse adventure to celebrate the Singapore icon's 50th birthday

Since June 2022, the leading travel and leisure e-commerce platform has been teaming up with over 20 in-market influencers and content partners to create engaging and immersive content, specially tailored for each market.

Additionally, Singapore is keen to enhance different touchpoints across the traveller's journey – from offering attractive online deals at the booking stage to ensuring ease of payment at local merchants – through key partnerships with major tourism stakeholders such as Ant Group, Traveloka, Agoda, Trans Digital

Media, CapitaLand Investment, Malaysia Aviation Group, Philippine Airlines and airasia.

For example, Ant Group expanded its cooperation with STB to make cross-border travel to Singapore more seamless and convenient with the SingapoReimagine with Alipay+ campaign.

To help local businesses reach new customers while creating more awareness of local tourism offerings, the joint campaign spotlights exclusive offers to users of the six Alipay+ partner mobile wallets when they travel to Singapore. Travellers with

these wallets can also easily and securely transact with local businesses that accept Alipay+.

At the same time, STB joined forces with lifestyle super app Traveloka and Trans Digital Media. The Traveloka partnership helps drive interest to a wider target audience and offers an easier booking experience for Singapore offerings in Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, and Vietnam.

The collaboration with Trans Digital Media spanned a wide array of businesses such as banking, retail and fashion.

WHAT'S HOT



Snowy fun

Asia's first snow, surf, and skate attraction, Trifecta, will launch in Singapore's famous shopping belt, Orchard Road this year. The exciting space will enable visitors to accomplish the hal-lowed trifecta of snowboarding, surfing and skating in one day and all under one roof. Facilities will be rounded out with unique F&B concepts and retail outlets.



Birds of a feather

Debating in 2023, the 17-hectare Bird Paradise will be the first of the new wildlife parks at Mandai Wildlife Reserve to open to the public. Home to 3,500 birds from over 400 avian species, the attraction offers visitors a chance to experience immersive and naturalistic mixed-species habitats, and explore eight large walk-through aviaries that reflect different biomes of the world.



Chocolate heaven

An experiential journey of delicious chocolates begins at the new Mr. Bucket Chocolaterie at Dempsey Hill. Visitors can try their hand at Singapore's first-ever build-your-own chocolate slab station and fill their own containers with the delicious treats from a dispensary. The curious can also witness the entire bean-to-bar process, as well as savour chocolate and cacao wine.



Need for speed

For the first time in South-east Asia, HyperDrive, a gamified electric Go-Kart circuit, will open its doors this year to racing enthusiasts. Transporting speed demons into the realm of virtual gaming, drivers can zip around the three-level indoor track, turbo-charge their racing experience or sabotage competitors within an interactive experience, heightened with light and sound effects.



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Malaysia gears up for travel

Tourism players up the ante with new offerings to attract inbound travellers. By **S Puvaneswary**



Air connectivity to Malaysia is improving; Kuala Lumpur International Airport pictured

Industry players in Malaysia are optimistic that 2023 will be a better year for inbound tourism as domestic, regional and international air connectivity gradually improves since April 1, 2022 when Malaysia reopened its international borders. Traditionally, regional tourists form the bulk of tourist arrivals, and this is expected to continue into 2023 due to good

regional air connectivity provided by Malaysia Airlines, AirAsia and Batik Air. For the South-east Asian market, Tourism Malaysia aims to effectively communicate the diversity of Malaysia's tourism product offerings, increase visitors' length of stay and local expenditure, and attract return visitors. According to Tourism Malaysia's marketing plan 2022-2026, the NTO

will work on joint promotions with local travel agents and OTAs to create and sell attractive travel packages, as well as forge smart partnerships with domestic and foreign airlines such as Royal Brunei, Scoot, Jetstar Asia and Philippine Airlines to increase market share of air travel into Malaysia. Inbound agents are also targeting the regional market with new itineraries.

Arokia Das Anthony, director, Essence of Asia Tours & Travel, told the *Daily*: "We have developed eco tours to Gopeng and Ulu Slim in Perak involving white water rafting and walking in the hot spring. These tours are catered to the youth market that is looking for activities and experiential tours beyond the capital city." Eyes Holidays has created soft adventure day packages involving treks and river cruises on Linggi River as well as ATV rides and jungle treks in Kemensah, Ampang, where guests can also enjoy a barbecue lunch of grilled meats and lobsters by a river, shared managing director Uzaidi Udani. Eyes Holidays is also promoting fly-cruises to the South-east Asian market, particularly cruises aboard Resorts World Cruises' *Genting Dream* from Port Klang to Singapore, Malaysia's Penang and Thailand's Phuket. With business from Vietnam, Thailand and Indonesia growing since borders reopened in 2022, Arokia expects 2023 to be an even better year for Essence of Asia Tours & Travel. He said: "The South-east Asian market is a low-hanging fruit that is ripe for the picking, due to the close proximity and improvements in air connectivity." Looking ahead, Uzaidi is keen to gain a bigger share of the cruise market from South-east Asia, particularly from Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines. "I believe cruises have a big potential as many people in this region have yet to experience it," he explained.

WHAT'S HOT



Fun for the family

The DoubleTree by Hilton Damai Laut Resort is a new beachfront resort that packs in an array of attractions that holidaying families will appreciate – an outdoor pool, spa, kids' club and mini waterpark, along with an activity offering of snorkelling, diving, banana boating and fishing. About an hour and 45 minutes' drive from Sultan Azlan Shah Airport, Ipoh, the property is also nearby a golf course.



Reef revelations

JSK Borneo Reef, located within Tunku Abdul Rahman Marine Park in Sabah, Malaysia, is the largest reef activity pontoon in South-east Asia. Its surrounding area is blessed with mesmerising reefs and corals. Activity packages are available, with options like sea walking, snorkelling and kayaking. Visitors can also have a go on an inflatable water park and explore an underwater observatory tunnel.



Dine well

Gordon Ramsay Bar & Grill has journeyed out of the UK to open its first overseas branch in Sunway City Kuala Lumpur. Opened in June 2022, the restaurant boasts an exquisite menu that is inspired by one of London's most iconic restaurants, Savoy Grill. It seats up to 150 guests at a time in a grand dining room with semi-private booths and a cocktail bar.



Penang's new stay

The 453-key Amari SPICE Penang sits in the heart of Penang's central business district in Bayan Lepas, and is connected to SPICE Convention Centre – perfect for business travellers and event groups. The hotel itself is outfitted for corporate gatherings, boasting a 240m² pillarless ballroom complemented by a spacious pre-function space and five function rooms. Other facilities include three F&B outlets, a spa, gym and pool.

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A brighter road ahead



Koh Phi Phi, one of the popular tourist destinations in Thailand

As travel picks up around the world, Thailand is hopeful for the future of tourism.
By Alastair Newport

As the number of tourist arrivals steadily creeps up towards pre-pandemic levels, leisure tourism in Thailand is enjoying a busy and lucrative new year that promises to continue, barring any more international health crises, for the foreseeable future.

The future looks so promising that the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) has revised its expectations for the year ahead,

upping the forecast for foreign visitors from approximately 20 million to 25 million by the end of 2023.

A large part of this revision is down to the recent decision by the Chinese government to ease travel legislation, where about half a million visitors from China hitting Thailand to participate in the Chinese New Year celebrations during end-January was expected.

The welcome development comes on top of a bumper year for Thailand that has seen a flurry of good news stories for the Thai tourism industry, including the continued expansion of the country's network of big-name international luxury hotels, the recognition of Phuket as the number one foreign destination for Indian weddings, and the legalisation of marijuana in the country.

Indeed, despite the confusing regulations of the controversial move by the government, marijuana has been the stimulus for the launch of numerous wellness experiences and one of the main reasons Thailand maintained strong arrival numbers during the winter months, traditionally a less popular time for long-haul travellers to visit.

Another notable development is the reopening of the Koh Kong Bridge at the Thai/Cambodian border, which is expected to spark an influx of Cambodian tourists. Thailand has long been a popular location for medical tourism, as well as holidaymaking and sightseeing for Cambodia.

It may be a far cry from pre-pandemic arrivals, which peaked at 40 million visitors in 2019, but with each passing month, there are more and more reasons to be optimistic about the future. And with new hotels, tours and attractions adding even more value to a country feted for its natural beauty, rich culture, and effervescent nightlife, it would not be long before Thailand is back to its best and beyond.

WHAT'S HOT



Stunning structure

With its retro-futuristic architecture, The Salil Hotel Riverside Bangkok makes an immediate and striking visual impression that sets it apart from the rest of the Chao Phraya pack. The 235-room property is also well-connected to local public transport, making it an ideal base to discover the whole city, from Sukhumvit to Silom.



Beach activities

Shambhala Beach Resort Koh Chang is exactly the kind of property Koh Chang has been shouting out for. The interiors are bold and imaginative, combining modern sensibilities with traditional elements. Guests will find plenty to do on-site, including sunbathing on the resort's private beach, knocking balls about on the resort's own golf course, or pampering sessions in the spa.



Modern touches

Launched in October 2022, JonoX Phuket Karon Hotel has been designed specifically for modern travellers. The hotel brings a fresh 21st-century experience with its app putting guests in control, allowing them to speak to the front desk, order room service, make travel arrangements, and book activities from their smartphones.



One for furkids

Located on Thailand's eastern seaboard, the 184-room Mercure Rayong Lomtalay Villas and Resort is pet-friendly and offers F&B, a pool, spa, fitness centre and meeting venues. Local attractions nearby include Old Town of Rayong, Khao Chamao – Khao Wong National Park, and the eco-tourism attraction of Tung Prong Thong Golden Mangrove Field.



Luxurious and chic

With the highest density of luxury brands in Thailand outside of the capital, raising the bar of Samui's property portfolio takes a lot. However, the arrival of Avani Chaweng Samui Hotel & Beach Club has done just that. Channeling vintage-chic vibes, the hotel is right on top of Chaweng Beach and moments away from the island's best shopping, dining, and nightlife.



Train romance

The new InterContinental Khao Yai Resort celebrates the spirit of travel with a back-story built on the romance of train travel. Train carriages – once abandoned and dilapidated – have been lovingly converted into luxury suites. The tale continues elsewhere across the property, from a check-in area styled like a ticket counter to the Tea Carriage, a restaurant set in a heritage railcar.

Asia in focus

Schubert Lou, chief operating officer of Trip.com, believes that the conditions for the recovery and growth of Asia's travel market are favourable, which is why the OTA is working towards becoming the number one player in the region. By **Rachel AJ Lee**

Which international markets are your best performing markets, and how are you growing your market share in markets that don't really use Trip.com?

Pre-Covid, we were aggressively expanding in two areas – Asia and Europe. For Asia, the countries are Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong, Thailand and Malaysia, while in Europe they were UK, France, Italy, Spain and Germany. Our fastest-growing market right now is Thailand, and we have seen a great growth in South Korea as well.

Trip.com has a very different philosophy for branding and marketing, and we believe in a very focused, targeted approach. We look at a couple of factors when it comes to branding. First, we consider whether our product market fit is ready for each market. We assess that by looking at the organic growth through a certain percentage of market share, which differs from market to market. Once you attain that market share, it is an indication that your product is being adopted by the market on a natural level, and that is when we start amplifying our branding efforts.

What region is Trip.com's focus moving forward?

Asia will be what we're focusing on. It is the most important region for Trip.com, and we need to increase our market penetration, and understand how we can dominate in the OTA space. We have the right people, the right team structure, and with Asia's current rate of recovery, we also have the right timing. We want to be the number one player in this space in a couple of years.

How has your sales performance been during recent online sale seasons like 11.11 and 12.12? Were sales on those days particularly high?

The 3.3 sale in Singapore this year was the very first one that we ran. It was well received, and we were pleasantly surprised with the response. With that, we started getting into a rhythm and having more frequent sale campaigns, and also increased the frequency from once in two months to monthly. Singapore was the first trial in March this year as it was a market that was ready for such campaigns, with the loosening of the travel policies. We also looked at the policy progression in other markets, and tailored the sale campaigns to each market accordingly.

Sale campaigns are further localised for each market. For instance, we ran a Pay Day campaign in Thailand, which focused on attractive 9 Baht travel deals. This is a combination of the local cultural understanding of 9 Baht being a good discount, as well as pay day, which worked really well for Thailand.

With the recent lifting of restrictions in China, does Trip.com anticipate more domestic travel and movement?

We are optimistic about the Chinese market. China travel bookings were boosted by Lunar New Year demand, where Trip.com Group has subsequently seen a huge increase in searches and the volume of travel bookings. We are looking forward to the upcoming spring travels with excitement and optimism as the recovery driven by pent-up consumer demand continues.

What trends do you see in the travel OTA space?

For one, we think there will be a lot of regionalisation in travel. People have been cooped up for two years, and domestic travel can only go so far. But with current geo-political conflicts, there will be an increased desire for rational, financially-sound travels, which will most likely be to nearby countries.

For example, in Asia, we think that travellers will go on more regional, medium-haul trips, or weekend trips. Because in Asia, a majority of destinations are within a four-hour flight.

The second trend will be the anticipation of the China outbound, and we hope that it will happen sometime in summer 2023. And when that happens, travel patterns will then be tailored to this crowd and their behaviours. We are seeing user behaviours changing in China, especially with their e-commerce purchasing patterns. We think that travellers will be more value-driven due to the current economic conditions and their income.

What are some new initiatives to support travel suppliers that rely on Trip.com's network?

We have been engaging with our partners a lot more and increasing our touchpoints with them, as we have a lot more data to support the recovery. We believe that product solutions will change, especially with the soon-to-happen China outbound travel, and are working with our partners on the right product offerings and pricing.

The second thing we have been doing is working closely with tourism boards and stakeholders to work on key messaging and branding for destinations to attract a traveller's attention. Economic conditions in the future may not be ideal, so we also have to be smarter in targeting customers.



Sustainability: a long-term goal as airlines recover



Airlines' sustainability push is limited by Sustainable Aviation Fuels supply and high costs

Airlines associations are pushing ahead with sustainable air travel efforts, but state commitment to facilitating Sustainable Aviation Fuel production and clearer emissions information at point of travel booking are needed to drive greater achievements. By **Karen Yue**

IATA has reiterated the importance of keeping sustainable growth in sight as the air travel industry rises from the ashes of the Covid pandemic and travel disruption.

Speaking at the Association of Asia Pacific Airlines' (AAPA) Assembly of Presidents in Bangkok in November 2022, Conrad Clifford, IATA's senior vice president and deputy director general, recalled IATA members' unfaltering efforts towards achieving net zero carbon emissions by 2050 since 2021, despite the travel crisis, as well as the recent adoption of the Long Term Aspirational Goal (LTAG) at the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) Assembly to achieve the same.

"We are extremely encouraged by the LTAG agreement at the ICAO Assembly. With both governments and industry focused on the same goal, the significance of LTAG cannot be overstated. But to achieve net zero CO₂ emission by 2050, government policy support in key areas of decarbonisation is critical. One such area is incentivising the production capacity of Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF)," said Clifford.

SAF is currently expected to account for 65 per cent of carbon mitigation in

2050. It will be the largest contributor to the industry's sustainability. Airlines purchased all available SAF in 2021 and have committed to over US\$17 billion of forward purchasing agreements.

"The problem is the limited supply and high costs. In 2021, only 125 million litres of SAF were available on the market. That was less than 0.05 per cent of the total fuel used," explained Clifford.

"I urge Asia-Pacific governments to look at stimulating SAF production," he said, adding that government incentives for SAF could result in 30 billion litres of production capacity globally by 2030.

He cited Japan and Singapore as exemplary in their approach to SAF, where governments actively involved the industry in the consultation process and promoted domestic SAF production.

Clifford: carbon offsets are a necessary gap-filler when SAF supply is still lacking



"We urge other states to take similar steps, and to support the efforts to develop a global framework for a Book & Claim system for SAF," he said.

The Book & Claim system enables travelling consumers to claim the CO₂ reduction that their purchase achieves even if their aircraft lacks SAF access at the airport. This is achieved by directing their SAF purchase to another aircraft elsewhere with access to SAF.

Speaking to *TTG Show Daily* separately, Clifford said the Book & Claim system has been instrumental in enabling public participation in sustainable travel. Through the system, companies are able to support sustainable business travel and urge their airline vendors to use more SAF.

"But it is more than just the corporates that are driving the use of more SAF.

In Europe, the general public demands that too," he added.

Clifford acknowledged the benefits of

having emissions listed with flight searches, such as on Google, as that has allowed consumers to make informed decisions on sustainable travel.

"We have developed a global standard for the industry to measure emissions, and that helps to reduce confusion when consumers look at different sites," he shared.

The airline industry's sustainable efforts are also supported by the ICAO Assembly's reinforced commitment to the Carbon Offsetting and Reduction Scheme for International Aviation (CORSIA) as well as goal to stabilise emissions of international aviation at 85 per cent of 2019 levels.

When asked about the effectiveness of carbon offsets compared to emissions minimisation right from the start, Clifford told *TTG Show Daily* that air travel's sustainable efforts currently could not be without carbon offsets.

He explained: "Carbon offsetting is important at the beginning, especially when we have this massive gap in SAF supplies. We need carbon offsets to ensure airlines are meeting their (emissions) targets. Carbon offsets is a gap-filler and certainly not the ultimate answer, but it helps at this point."

Securing confirmations

Business events around the world have pretty much resumed, but new challenges such as last-minute registrations, a shortage of logistics and operations staff, as well as sky-high travel costs have surfaced, posing new challenges to event planners. By **Rachel AJ Lee**



Event planners need to show customers the benefits of committing early to their event



“We are better prepared now, but in order to move forward, we need to focus on what is most important for delegates, such as making connections.”

Patricia Cheong
Managing director Asia,
International Conference Services

Last-minute registrations for overseas business events continue to be a challenge for event organisers post-lockdown, and PCOs and PEOs are deploying various methods – from working on more flexible arrangements with venues to highlighting the

higher costs of travel – to encourage early confirmations.

Patricia Cheong, managing director Asia, International Conference Services, shared with *the Daily* how a recent medical congress saw its registration surge to 1,100 in the last three weeks before the event, up from the expected 700.

Cheong noted: “Over the last two years, people have held on to their conference registrations to the very last minute as it is quite risky in the sense that the event may be cancelled, or if they contract Covid. Either situation could mean they would be unable to obtain a refund.”

Moreover, companies’ internal budgets have been cut, which means that attendees may have trouble justifying their travel to their management or have to wait longer for the approval of their travel budgets.

“Speakers are also in the same situa-

tion, which then becomes a chain reaction, and makes it challenging for PCOs like us,” Cheong added.

Richard Ireland, CEO, Clarion Events Asia, observed: “Events have always experienced late registration patterns but in the post-lockdown environment, this has certainly increased.”

He attributes this to delegates who are usually senior executives, stating that these individuals “want flexibility in their schedules and tend to book late”.

To deal with last-minute sign-ups, Cheong shared that she works closely with the venue to enable more flexibility in accommodating changes in attendee numbers on shorter notice, or prepare for a hybrid option from the beginning and encourage attendees who register at the last minute to participate online instead.

Cheong added: “We have also encouraged some of our association clients to consider making the in-person registration price the same as the virtual price, which makes it less risky for the attendee if they have to switch to an online attendance.”

“Also as organisers, we need to be open and transparent about the progress of the event and publicise who is attending, speaking, exhibiting as early as possible,” Ireland pointed out, to spur customers to commit early.

He shared that Clarion implements time-based pricing to encourage earlier confirmations, as well as highlight to at-

tendees the risk of higher airfares and accommodation costs, “given that capacity constraints continue to exist on key routes”.

“Due to rising costs of travel, we are also encouraging delegates to start looking at travelling earlier, which means earlier planning,” Cheong noted.

Although Kenny Yong, founder and group CEO of PEO Fireworks Trade Media, does not deal with many last-minute registrations, a similar major complaint his exhibitors have put forth is that “hotel rates and airfares are skyrocketing”.

Other challenges Yong is currently experiencing revolve around logistics and operations, where venue owners, freight forwarders and contractors are “rusty post-lockdown”, while also dealing with a “manpower crunch” arising from “back-to-back” events.

To encourage earlier sign-ups, Yong works with official hotels earlier in the year to ensure attendees benefit from exclusive rates.

Overall, Yong is optimistic for 2023, as his company is already seeing floorplans that are 80 per cent filled, buoyed by the surge in demand for in-person events.

Ireland also pointed out that after a “very successful last few months” for Singapore, he hopes that the return to pre-Covid numbers will help “customers, partners and prospective employees feel confident about the long-term certainty of the events industry”.



“While late registrations present some challenges, other challenges of impacted supply chain and talent leaving the industry still exist.”

Richard Ireland
CEO, Clarion Events Asia

Bullish corporate travel recovery

Graham Pope, vice president of international sales, Cvent, talks about the ever-changing expectations in corporate travel for the upcoming year, and why it is necessary to balance technology, cost containment and sustainability to deliver a great customer experience



Corporate travel momentum will continue to grow in 2023

Today's best practices help to anticipate trends in the upcoming year. The industry is expected to not only grow consistently but also metamorphose into being a vanguard of technology advancements with one thing at the core: customer experience.

The year 2022 has been a year of optimism and rejuvenation for the travel industry, which once grew uninterrupted, but came to a complete halt due to the pandemic. The initial rebuild was slow, but today, travel momentum is continuing to grow strongly.

The UNTWO's latest World Tourism Barometer showed an increase of 182 per cent for international tourism in the first three months of 2022 compared to the previous year, with destinations worldwide welcoming an estimated 117 million international arrivals compared to 41 million in 1Q2021.

However, reaching the pre-pandemic levels may take a while, given the lasting impacts of Covid, or other macroeconomic factors that can interfere with a full recovery.

Corporate travel bounces back

A resurgence in the market, especially in

the hospitality and corporate travel industry, is clearly visible from where we stand today. Travel for business, leisure or bleisure (combining work with leisure) around the world is gaining momentum but with a whole new set of expectations and preemptions.

This offers an opportunity for hospitality professionals to tap into these prospects, win more MICE and Corporate Travel business and improve profitability. Hoteliers are going the extra mile to adapt to these changing demands of the travel managers who, in fact, are key contributors to their business.

The recent Travel Managers report from Cvent delves deeper into these newly emerged corporate traveller sentiments across the globe and ways in which the hotels can prepare themselves for a rebound.

Travel managers and their requisites

The report revealed that 90 per cent* of corporate travel managers are currently sourcing hotels for their organisation's travel programmes and most of them projected their organisations' travel spend to increase significantly in 2022. The trend is expected to continue for a

long time. To win this business, however, hotels must be aware of travel managers' preferences and requirements.

Health and safety remain a priority: Fearful of being stranded at another location, or contracting a new virus, business travellers are cautious while making travel decisions. Most are comfortable planning itineraries with the least exposure. Travel managers are booking properties that follow stringent Covid protocols and implement high standards of sanitisation and hygiene.

Budget accommodations are top of mind: Inflation has made everything expensive, including travel. However, currently travel managers are searching for hotels offering lucrative deals on stays. The willingness to pay a price is influenced by factors such as safety protocols, room size and work-supporting facilities, customer loyalty, discounts, and additional complimentary amenities.

No/low contact check-ins: Travellers are looking to minimise physical contact with people or equipment. Check-ins at hotels or registrations at events or meetings through mobile apps or face recognition technology, QR code, and such has become a new ask by travel managers. Keyless entry to hotel rooms is another

new technology keeping anxious travellers satisfied.

Hotels need to make a strategic shift

The report also revealed that 50 per cent* of travel managers state their organisations' programme considerations have somewhat changed since 2019.

Know what the travellers want: Hotels and venues that quickly understand the changed preferences of customers and implement measures facilitating those will get an edge over those who continue to rely on old practices. The time is to bring back existing customers and create opportunities for new customers by offering them what they are looking for.

Innovate using technology: Technology is set to bring a positive change to the travel industry. Its potential is limitless and those who know how to leverage it are sure to succeed. Imagining robots receiving guests at hotel lobbies and escorting them to the rooms or meeting venues is not a farfetched thought now. Several properties are investing in AI (Artificial Intelligence) and ML (Machine Learning) guided technology to make the guest experience safer and more efficient.

Prosper with dynamic pricing: The preference of travel managers has shifted towards receiving dual or dynamic pricing from the properties. Around 62 per cent* of respondents across all markets surveyed say they're requesting dual or dynamic prices during their 2023 RFP negotiations. These strategies could open new doors for hotels, giving them the opportunity to vary pricing based on factors such as demand, availability, and customer loyalty.

Closing thoughts

The travel landscape has undergone a massive shift and is evolving every day, pushing the need for hoteliers to stay relevant to attract corporate travellers and event planners. There is a need to find the perfect balance between technology, cost containment and sustainability to deliver an experience that is safe for customers who are regaining faith in travelling and for organisations that are concerned for their employees to rebuild their customer connections by meeting face-to-face.

**All figures above are a consolidated representation of findings from Cvent's Travel Manages Report covering markets across Asia/ANZ/MEA regions*



Graham Pope is the vice president of international sales, Cvent. He has more than 15 years of experience in the events and software-as-a-service (SaaS) space.

Prior to joining Cvent, he spent five years as EMEA group commercial director at Global Experience Specialists.

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Asia's fresh flavours

Embark on a gastronomical journey at these five new restaurants in Asia that are sure to tantalise any tastebuds. By **Melissa Anne Tan**



Taste of Spain

Calle Ocho is a convivial tapas restaurant and bar located in Hong Kong's Causeway Bay. Inspired by Spain's historic Madrid de Los Austrias neighbourhood, it encompasses over 130 seats across two storeys on a corner site overlooking Victoria Park and Fashion Walk. The Calle Ocho menu features the humble Pan con Tomate, the playful Uni-Cone, a selection of indulgent Charcuteria, Spanish Suckling Pig 'Boneless' Terrine, a Vegetales section, and the indulgent and slightly salty 'Candela' Manchego Cheesecake.



Culinary traditions

Inside One Farrer Hotel lies a Chinese restaurant that delivers a delectable range of timeless dishes, innovative dishes, and great service. Jia He Grand Chinese Restaurant has much to offer – from hand-crafted dim sum to flambéed beef briskets, there is a wide variety of appetisers to try, as well as roasted meats and claypot dishes. Finish off the meal with a double-boiled whole pear with peach resin or chilled gui ling herbal jelly with bird's nest.



Authentically Thai

Benjarong has opened in Dusit Thani Laguna Phuket, serving up authentic Thai Cuisine crafted from unique recipes passed from generation to generation – an ode to Thailand's culinary heritage. A must-try is the lobster dish Mung Korn Lui Fai and the Yum Nue Yang, a Thai-style tenderloin beef salad. Ingredients are sourced locally from Phuket, Phang Nga, Krabi and the north-eastern region of Thailand, and collaborations with farmers and producers in different parts of Thailand help deliver the freshest ingredients to the table.



Bento delight

Magurokadan is the place to go for sushi lovers, known for its beautiful bara-chirashi. Imagine being served what looks like a jewellery box, only to discover a colourful assortment of raw fish (sourced from across the country), rice seasoned with red vinegar, kanpyo and shiitake mushrooms. Each order comes with three seasonal side dishes, a chawanmushi and a soup. Prices start from 2,500 yen (US\$19) depending on the choice of toppings. Magurokadan is located on the 12th floor of Daimaru department store at Tokyo Station.

Eat and craft

Tanah Liat is a pottery atelier and cooking lab by day, and is located in Renaissance Bali Nusa Dua Resort in Bali. Transforming into an arts-and-crafts-inspired restaurant in the evening, Tanah Liat's menu is packed with Bali-sourced seasonal seafood and plant-based cuisine. Guests can sit back and relax at the brick-walled indoor area and admire the pottery and arts made by talented local artists, or head outdoors for a breezy dinner by the garden where the chefs pick the freshest ingredients for your meal. For the adventurous, there are daytime pottery classes available too.



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