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Power of the young ones

Youths are a segment to watch, as their travels are funded by generous parents, and they prioritise meaningful connections that support local communities

By Rachel AJ Lee

The youth travel segment is growing and has the potential to support tourism's positive impact on cultural longevity, sustainability and local businesses, but is often overlooked, said tourism players.

Many assume that youths lack disposable income, said Wendy Morrill, head of research & education, WYSE Travel Confederation.

In 2019, youths – loosely defined as a segment aged 18 to 29 – made up about 23 per cent of international arrivals, translating to 336 million travellers. This is equivalent to US$333 billion in tourism receipts, where 60 per cent of their travel budget is spent in the destination.

According to Morrill, this segment does not travel for weekends and short holidays. Instead, they seek "educational" experiences and "some form of cultural exchange". Trips are "purposeful and meaningful, both economically and socially", and can be formal, such as a study programme at a university, or informal such as a working holiday.

Pedro Lucena, partnerships manager with accommodation specialist Selina, told *TTG Show Daily* that young travellers at its properties have opportunities to make "meaningful connections".

"For example, in our Lisbon hotel, we have a meetup every Thursday, where locals come to the hotel to network with guests from all over the world," he said.

Lucena said such connections can lead to enriching local experiences too. For instance, the same property offers a workshop with a local craftswoman, where participants can paint a tile using a traditional Portuguese method dating back to the 17th century. They will get to fire their tile, and take it home as a souvenir.

Agreeing that youths drive demand for

Chanjira: youths learn valuable life lessons from their travels

purposeful travel, Chanjira Khadseesai, spokesperson for The Green Lion, said: "(On our programmes), these youths learn about themselves, learn how to support each other, learn how to share, and learn to respect other cultures. This is very important now."

The B2B company works with travel agents to promote meaningful programmes filled with local culture and volunteerism. Programmes run from a week up to six months for travellers aged 18 to 25 in 32 destinations.

"Most of our travellers are from Europe on their gap year break, and their top three destinations are Indonesia, Thailand, and Costa Rica. Their average programme length is around four weeks," she shared.

Youths obtain their travelling stipend from their parents, who are more open-minded these days about letting their children experience meaningful travel, Chanjira added.

While gap year breaks funded by parents are common in Australia, the UK, and parts of Western Europe, Michael Ebert, director of Tourism Adventure Group (TAG), said the rest of the world is slowly catching on.

TAG supports youth travellers visiting Australia and New Zealand with trip planning. The group also supplies accommodation and offers services to help working holidaymakers settle in.

Ebert elaborated: "We notice that these working holidaymakers would stick with one employer for six months, save up all their money, and (spend the remaining duration of their travel visa) travelling around the country. When they find a place they really like, they stay there for four or five months to experience what it's like being a local."

When asked whether Asian youths are doing the same, Ebert said the trend had weakened in recent years. He hopes that Asian demand will return soon.

For destinations and travel businesses keen to attract the youths, Carylann Assante, CEO of SYTA The Voice of Student & Youth Travel, said an even younger group – those aged 12 to 18 – is the one to watch now.

Assante said many of them travel to assess potential colleges and universities overseas, and will continue to explore destinations once they begin to study abroad.

This segment has strong spending potential too.

"We have a study that showed that while adults might spend US$500 in a week in New York City, students will spend US$1,000 because they will shop and buy gifts for friends and family," she said.

Morrill concluded: "Youth travel is a stable segment that will only continue to grow. This group will also make more responsible (and sustainable) choices, which can become life-long habits."

VIEW SHOW PICS & DAILIES HERE

Cambodia's sports lure

As Cambodia gears up to host the Southeast Asian Games (SEA Games) for the first time in May, it is pushing sports tourism as part of its *Visit Cambodia Year 2023* campaign.

Prak Vuthy, director of the Ministry of Tourism's overseas marketing and promotion department, said the games would serve as a catalyst to promote sports tourism nationwide.

"This year will see Cambodia host the SEA Games and ASEAN Para Games, which is a big thing for Cambodia," he remarked. Both events are expected to attract between 250,000 and 500,000 international tourists.

The SEA Games will take place from May 5-17, followed by the ASEAN Para Games 2023 from June 3-9.

Prak added that Cambodia annually hosts many sporting events that attract visitors from across the globe, including the Angkor Half Marathon in December. and Ultra-Trail Angkor marathon in February. Various international cycling events also take place in the country.

He added that Cambodia's southern coastline is also perfect for water activities, including sailing and yachting, with more sports-driven itineraries being drawn up. **– Marissa Carruthers**

Singapore ups the value ante with free experiences

Tan: a chance to truly experience Singapore

Following a successful pilot from October 2022 to March 2023 in Australia, India and Indonesia, the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) has now launched SingapoRewards globally. This is a programme that offers complimentary experiences in the destination for international visitors.

Available throughout 2023, starting from March 7, the programme provides visitors with a chance to try one of nearly 40 new or hidden-gem experiences for free. The experiences are curated across various precincts and categories – Novelty and excitement; Food and dining; Sustainability; and Wellness.

Examples of what international visitors can expect include discovering the origins of Singapore Dry Gin at the Brass Lion Distillery Tour, going on a behind-the-scenes tour of Changi Airport and Jewel, or taking on the job of a zookeeper for a day at the Mandai Singapore Zoo.

The range of featured experiences will expand, as STB evaluates and approves more programmes for SingapoRewards, STB CEO Keith Tan told *TTG Show Daily*.

STB will fund the programme and reimburse experience operators for their participation.

Tan expects these experiences to offer new perspectives of Singapore, even to returning visitors who are familiar with the city-state.

To qualify for SingapoRewards, one must be a short-term visitor arriving by flight and redeeming for the first time. Redemption is fuss-free and made via the programme's microsite or VisitSingapore app. **– Karen Yue**

TUI Blue eyes SE-Asia

Several openings are planned for the region while new signings are growing

By Marissa Carruthers

South-east Asia is providing TUI Group's TUI Blue brand with a hotbed of opportunities to grow the global hotel brand, according to its managing director.

As part of TUI Blue's grand vision to launch more than 300 hotels worldwide, it has set its sights firmly on the region.

"It's an important region for us," said Artur Gerber, its CEO and managing director. "We did a lot of research and it showed very clearly there is space for us in South-east Asia."

As part of its expansion plans, TUI Blue has set up business development offices in Dubai to focus on Europe and MENA, with another in Hong Kong for South-east Asia. TUI Blue The Passage is slated to open in Thailand this summer, with another to rise on the Cambodian island of Koh Rong in the coming years.

Gerber said the entry of TUI Blue is supported by the strength of the mother company's brand, with TUI Group known worldwide.

"A lot of partners already know TUI. For example, in Bali, a lot of hotels receive TUI tour operator guests, which means the industry already knows the brand. We believe we can bring many customers from Europe to the region," said Gerber.

"We already have sales systems in place across the world, so we have the opportunity to fill the hotels."

TUI Blue hosted a private event on the sidelines of ITB Berlin to engage with investors and current owners

In addition, TUI Blue is expanding into regions where TUI Group is not so well known. Gerber said this also presents opportunities for both TUI and the destinations. "We can help these regions get more attention from European customers because TUI, as the world's leading leisure tourism company, can carry out more marketing for these destinations. This is a clear benefit that we see," he noted.

TUI Blue's expansion is made possible through international partnerships, investments and franchises. Prior to the pandemic, the group shook up its business model after heavily investing in ships and hotels between 2013 and 2019.

"We're now looking for partnerships and investors and it's encouraging that we have signed many agreements in the last few months. There are still many possibilities to find partners around the world and in South-east Asia," Gerber said.

Chroma unveils new campaign

Filipino-owned Chroma Hospitality – comprising three brands Crimson Hotels & Resorts, Quest Hotels, and Timberland Highlands Resorts – has launched a new campaign entitled *The Time is Now* to encourage travellers, both leisure and for business events, to visit the Philippines.

The campaign dishes out travel perks for bookings made during the campaign period, which runs for a year.

Chroma Hospitality's vice president sales and marketing, Carmela H Bocanegra, told *TTG Show Daily* that in line with the campaign, the group will reopen Crimson Resort & Spa Mactan in Cebu, after a pandemic-induced closure. It will greet guests with redesigned facilities and a new Japanese restaurant. The property's events facilities will also be revamped later this year.

Bocanegra: more focus on European markets

Prior to the pandemic, the resort welcomed 30 per cent domestic guests, and 70 per cent from South Korea, China and Russia. This year, Crimson Resort & Spa Mactan will focus on western European markets such as France and Germany.

"Aside from roadshows, we are working with local wholesalers and TUI, and are trying to appoint a GSA here in Europe," said Bocanegra.

Further on in 4Q2024, Chroma will open its first property under its new brand, Grafik – the 256-key Grafik Baguio in Camp John Hay. The sustainability-focused hotel will feature three F&B outlets, a spa, and meeting facilities.

– Rachel AJ Lee

In brief

Sabah's new brand

Sabah Tourism Board's destination branding is now *Feel Sabah, North Borneo*. The brand stresses Sabah's location in the northern part of Malaysia's Borneo Island, and conveys a sentimental and historical message.

Minister of tourism, culture and environment Christina Liew said the brand would resonate with travellers who are more aware of Borneo or North Borneo, than of Sabah.

NCL deploys three ships to Asia

Norwegian Cruise Line (NCL) will, for the first time, deploy three ships – *Norwegian Spirit, Norwegian Sun and Norwegian Sky* – to Asia-Pacific in 2024 and 2025, tripling the cruise company's offering in the region. NCL's expanded presence in Asia-Pacific underscores its long-term commitment to the region, and acknowledgement of the region's importance to the company as both a source market and a destination.

Mekong gets new web boost

Mekong Tourism Coordinating Office has updated the official website of Mekong Tourism, putting in a range of digital elements for a variety of visitors – from travellers and journalists to academics and sustainable tourism advocates. The new-look mekongtourism.org aims to position itself as a major online starting point and research asset for travel and tourism in Cambodia, China, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam.

The Anam spreads its wings in Vietnam

Koerner (left) and Myter

There is no rest for The Anam team, which has just unveiled its second property in Vietnam's Mui Ne but is already embarking on the design and plans for yet another ambitious project in Phuc Yen.

Sharing details of the group's "next big project", Laurent Myter, group general manager, The Anam, told *TTG Show Daily* that a massive and "stunning" beach location in Phuc Yen, a two-hour drive north of Cam Ranh, will allow the construction of two resorts.

"One will be The Anam, and the second will be a global luxury brand. We are still looking into partnerships. It could be a St Regis, a Ritz Carlton or a Rosewood – essentially a very high-end product," said Myter, adding that government permits to build overwater villas there have been secured.

Martin Koerner, group commercial director, said the two resorts will be distinctly different, each with its own value propositions and unique services.

"Both our location and the resorts' configuration will give us private and exclusive access to the beach, which is an unusual aspect in South-East Asia," opined Myter.

In the nearer term, The Anam will take a deeper step into the business events sphere with the opening of Axy Plaza, a beachfront convention centre complex rising next to The Anam Cam Ranh. Said to be one of the largest event venues in the Nha Trang and Cam Ranh region, Axy Plaza will pack in a conference hall for up to 1,000 pax, a rooftop bar with panoramic views, and 10,000m^2 of shopping and dining facilities, plus the convenience of luxurious accommodation in The Anam Cam Ranh.

Axy Plaza will welcome its first event this July – a 600 pax corporate gathering – but the full complex is expected to only come into operation end-2023/early-2024.

Koerner believes that Axy Plaza is a good fit for international conferences and conventions, complementing incentive travel events and gala dinners that are already drawn to The Anam Cam Ranh.

– Karen Yue

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HIG

Feeding travel desires

Japan has identified three niche tourism areas to focus on to spur industry recovery. By **Kathryn Wortley**

Daily Travel Photos/Shutterstock

Adventurers are encouraged to experience Japan on a deeper level, such as by hiking the historical Nakasendo Trail; Magome-juku, one of the post towns pictured

Japan is focused on promoting adventure, sustainable and luxury tourism to international markets as it seeks to quicken the pace of its travel rebound.

The country's tourism experts are confident that post-pandemic visitors from overseas have a greater interest in enjoying the outdoors in a responsible way, which is stimulating the development of related experiences, alongside growth in offerings for the high-end sector.

"The pandemic has changed the thinking of people all over the world, so we expect more demand than ever for sustainable tourism and have developed Japan's own sustainable tourism guidelines," Minister of land, infrastructure, transport and tourism, Hiroo Ishii, said at the Tourism Expo Japan in late 2022.

Each region of Japan is promoting sustainable travel management based on its own characteristics, Ishii added.

In Mie prefecture's Toba Bay, which is renowned for its *ama* (female pearl divers), experiences now include learning about the relationship between fishing and the community, and catches can be brought back to *ryokan* (local inns) and be prepared by staff to avoid waste.

Adventure tourism, meanwhile, includes offerings that enable travellers to experience Japan "on a deeper level" by "discovering the local culture and nature," according to the Japan National Tourism Organization, whose recommended activities include cycling through the foothills of Mount Aso in Kumamoto prefecture and hiking the historic Nakasendo Trail that connected Kyoto and modern-day Tokyo in the 17th century.

Dark sky tourism is being marketed to inbound travellers for the first time following accreditation of Kozushima, Tokyo prefecture, in 2020 and Bisei, Okayama prefecture, in 2021 as International Dark Sky Places.

Remote destinations such as Kagoshima prefecture's Yoron, a small island north of Okinawa, have also produced stargazing guides for visitors. According to Yoron Tourist Association, it is even possible to see the Milky Way from the island's shores.

In the sphere of luxury travel, the Japan National Tourism Association is encouraging high-net-worth individuals to book longer stays so they can "explore local areas and their attractions in greater depth."

New top-notch accommodation options in the country include the Fufu Nikko near Tokyo, which has 24 individually designed suites overlooking the forest, each with its own private indoor or outdoor hot spring bath.

WHAT'S HOT

River adventures

Gunma Prefecture-based outdoor activities company Canyons launched its Water Day Wednesday campaign in 2022. For only 5,000 yen (US$39) per person, guests can try their hand at canyoning or rafting in Minakami, an area known as "the Water Shangri-La of Japan". The experiences are available in English during the area's green season (May to October) and reservations are required.

Co Eastside Ltd

Nature escape

Nature and wilderness enthusiasts are likely to enjoy a stay at newly-opened Tapkop located in Akan-Mashu National Park in eastern Hokkaido. The luxury villa was built using salvaged larch wood and stands on some 30,000m² of land. Guests can take in the scenery or relax in the outdoor bath that is surrounded by the forest and draws underground water from the Kushiro River.

Forest walk

Luxury hotel Halekulani Okinawa's new wellness experience enables guests to immerse themselves in the rich culture, heritage and natural beauty of northern Okinawa's Yanbaru region, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It encompasses guided sensory and meditative walking through the endemic species-rich forests of Yanbaru National Park.

Green living

Hotel Indigo Karuizawa's sustainability efforts help reduce CO_2 emissions at every step. The common area buildings, including the lobby and F&B spaces, were constructed using Nagano-grown pine while the restaurants use locally-sourced ingredients. Situated amid the town's abundant nature, the accommodation is intended to offer a green escape for travellers.

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More to the Maldives

Famous for romantic getaways and honeymoons, the Maldives is gaining popularity as a family destination. By **Feizal Samath**

Better known for decades among island destinations for romantic getaways and honeymoons, the Maldives has recently been attracting families quite successfully.

According to Abdulla Ghiyas, president of the Maldives Association of Travel Agents and Tour Operators (MATATO), one in three visitors to the destination is part of a family group.

"The family travel segment is a growing feature of the Maldives," he added.

He noted that most new resorts in the destination have child-friendly and child-care facilities, while older villas have been refurbished to cater to this segment.

RIU, for instance, offers two resorts in the Maldives that promise luxury getaways that are also welcoming for the little ones. Guests can enjoy a premium vacation at the all-inclusive Hotel Riu Palace Maldivas, located on the private island of Kedhigandu. Over a convenient footbridge on the neighbouring island of Maafushi stands sister resort Hotel Riu Atoll, where there is the RiuLand kids' club and children's pool. Children have access to a daily programme of activities and entertainment.

Petra Gauthey, director of business development Asia with Riu Hotels & Resorts, added that special guest programmes are also designed for celebratory seasons, such as Christmas, while customised activities such as barbecue parties, cocktails and excursions can be arranged by the resort's staff.

Fairmont Sirru Fen Fushi, another prime example of a resort that puts families at the centre, offers activities for guests of all ages.

"While parents enjoy a relaxing spa treatment or beachfront cocktail at Onu Onu Bar, children are invited to a yoga class, specially designed for little guests, or learn to paint a coconut at our Art Studio," said general manager Marshall Orton.

Mohamed Khaleel, CEO of both Pulse Resorts and Manta Air, said the Maldives is evolving – it is no longer just an ultra-rich and honeymoon paradise.

His companies are, therefore, moving with the times to market different products now. "We can cater to a market range of US$100 to US$20,000 per night," he said.

Confident that the family travel segment will continue to grow for the Maldives, Minor International will launch Avani+ Fares Maldives Resort in 1Q2023 – a product that is very much geared towards families, revealed group CEO, Dilip Rajakariar.

The Maldives' move to lure families is necessary, opined Ghiyas, as room inventory has expanded and properties have to offer more to grow bookings. Reliance on traditional honeymooners and high-end travellers alone will no longer cut it, he said. – *Additional reporting by Karen Yue*

RIU Hotels & Resorts

Family bookings for RIU's resorts in the Maldives peak during the July, August and December European school holidays

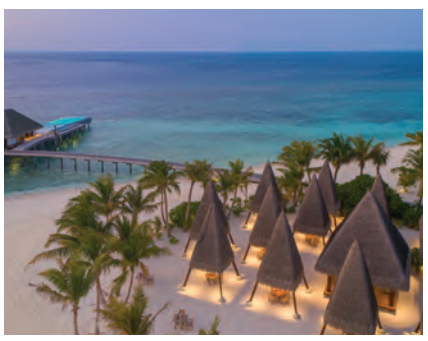
WHAT'S HOT

One for all

Lux* South Ari Atoll offers multi-generational travel in the Maldives, catering to guests of all ages. The property features babysitting services, a kids club, a separate activity studio for teenagers, and underwater discovery programmes for little ones – from coral planting to diving school. Even the spa has a separate programme for children.

The place to play

The family-friendly Cheval Blanche Randheli rolls out a warm welcome for little ones with a collection of specially designed amenities and gifts. For fun, Le Carrousel is a 500m² space that takes in an indoor playroom, outdoor playground, shallow pool, shaded pergola and water slide. Teenagers will find comfort at Le Paddock, with drawing walls, virtual reality helmets, creative and sports areas.



A bonding retreat

Heritance Aarah is a premium all-inclusive family resort that presents a host of activities and excursions for all ages. Families can bond over water sports and culinary discoveries. An outdoor kids club keeps little ones entertained while parents rest and relax at the resort's medi spa. Stay well together by choosing either the Family Beach Villa or Family Pool Beach Villa.

Tropical escape

Amilla Fushi Maldives has everything to keep families happy – from multi-bedroom residences to spacious overwater villas or beach villas on the private island. Spaces are carved out for young guests to play in, such as a kids club and a teens' section. The resort also boasts one of the most comprehensive activity programmes available in the Maldives.

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PAN PACIFIC | DISCOVERY

An essential industry

Hurt by terrorism, the pandemic and an economic crisis in recent years, Sri Lanka is eager to shake off the dust and rebuild its tourism industry for the sake of its people. By **Feizal Samath** and **Karen Yue**

Sri Lanka's tourism industry is supported by local pillars – the country's sons and daughters. Across tourist hotspots like Negombo, Sigiriya, Habarana Tissamaharama, Yala, Beruwala, Bentota, Hikkaduwa, Ella and Arugam Bay, the bulk of manpower facilitating accommodation, transport, F&B, wellness and other areas of hospitality is made up of locals, observed JourneyScapes' managing director Devindre Senaratne, who is also a hotel owner.

In addition, most hotels in the country draws more than 40 per cent of their manpower from the local community.

In the suburban resort town of Ella, for example, where there are 900 hotels, guesthouses and homestays, tourism is the lifeblood of the community, where nearby villages supply fruit and vegetables to hospitality operators.

As Sri Lanka's tourism industry flourished, so did local businesses and families.

Unfortunately, recent years have battered the industry – the 2019 Easter Day bombings, the ongoing pandemic and last year's economic crisis. It has been a struggle for Sri Lanka to rebuild its presence among international travellers.

Richard Nuttall, CEO of SriLankan Airlines, told *TTG Show Daily*: "The challenge at the moment is not so much (that people are unaware of the) attractions of Sri Lanka. The issue is the international media that always seeks to sensationalise matters. Yes, the country has gone through some economic troubles but it isn't unsafe to come here as a tourist. Even at the worst times of our (recent trouble), Sri Lanka is still safer than some capitals (of the world)."

Acknowledging that news of resource shortages have scared off some travellers, Nuttall said a proper system is now in place to ensure everyone – especially hospitality operators – get what they need to "to get on with business".

Chamintha Jayasinghe, co-founder of luxury travel curator Ayu in the Wild, said: "Some imported items, like wine and cheese, may not be easily available here now, but that is only due to an import curb to preserve foreign currency reserves. This does not affect Sri Lanka's ability to feed tourists, who can continue to enjoy dishes and beverages made with fresh local produce."

Agreeing, Nuttall emphasised: "We need tourists to understand that they are not taking food away from Sri Lankans. Rather, tourists expenditure can allow more Sri Lankans to generate more income to feed their families."

Thomas Wynesshutterstock

Arugam Bay, Sri Lanka

Tourism is slowly returning. Arrivals in 2022 reached 700,000 and the country's tourism planners are expecting a million guests by the end of this year. It is still a far cry from 2018's 2.5 million arrivals.

Over at wellness resort Santani, which was named by Time magazine as one of 100 best places in the world, its 20 rooms are running full these days.

Sri Lankan entrepreneur and founder of the resort, Vickum Nawagamuwage, said guests do not experience any of the negative publicity that Sri Lanka suffered during the economic crisis last year.

"Tourism can galvanise the whole country and its people, and help earn more foreign exchange," he said.

To encourage even more travellers to return, Sri Lankan authorities have removed the need to show proof of Covid-19 vaccination.

WHAT'S HOT

A healing destination

Let go of stress, anxiety, worry, fear, or anger by joining the wellness programme, *Inward Journey for inner peace*, a one-hour meditative session offered by Vipula Wanigasekera to tourists. Conducted at the hotels where participants are residing in, these sessions combine yoga, Ayurveda and meditation.

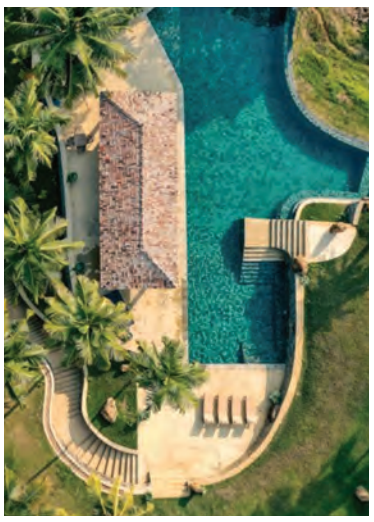
Hot place to chill

Named the The Best Bar in Sri Lanka 2022 and taking 42nd spot in the Asia's 50 Best Bars ranking, Smoke & Bitters is a surprising find on the Hiriketiya coast. It sprawls across a coconut grove, with charming fairy lights in the trees that sparkle after sunset. Laidback lounges, a cosy pavilion, two-deck tower, dining hall and bar provide plenty of space for friends and family to gather over delicious smoked dishes and creative cocktails that are made with local ingredients.

Stay in Sri Lanka

Courtyard by Marriott Colombo is Marriott Bonvoy's third property in Sri Lanka.

The hotel offers 164 rooms with functional work areas and high-speed Internet access, empowering visitors to stay both connected and productive while travelling. It has three distinct dining venues and is equipped with banqueting facilities for hosting events and gatherings of varied sizes.



Live like royalty

Families and friends exploring Sri Lanka together can consider sharing one splendid roof of a private villa along the scenic coastline or nestled in the lush inlands. Luxury travel designer Ceylon Concierge by Ayu maintains a collection of high quality luxury villas, each personally inspected and approved by the agency's well-travelled founders. The portfolio comprises properties that range from rustic homes to designer mansions, each supported by a team of villa manager, butlers and chefs.

Tall tower

The Colombo Lotus Tower stands 350m tall and is reportedly the tallest self-supported structure in South Asia, and the second tallest structure in South Asia.

The lotus-shaped tower is used for communication, observation and other leisure facilities. It has a revolving restaurant on the fifth floor and an observation deck on the 17th floor.

Sustainable tourism at a critical juncture

Sustainability in the travel and tourism industry has become the most discussed subject, accelerated by the pandemic. However, Roi Ariel, general manager of Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC), says the industry needs accountability and greater public awareness. By **Jeeheng Yew**

The 2022 GSTC Asia-Pacific Sustainable Tourism Conference was held recently in September. What were the focal points at the event?

There were three principal themes: attraction & destination stewardship, MICE & hotels, and ecotourism & heritage.

We started the conference with a keynote speech by Caesar Indra, president of Traveloka, which joined the GSTC recently and has a few collaborations with us in 2022. We also had a session on sustainable development, looking into the Saemangeum reclaimed land project in Jeonbuk, South Korea as well as the sustainable tourism path that Sentosa Development Corporation of Singapore is taking.

Another special session and topic focused on the young generation in the tourism industry. It was very well received, as we had young leaders (as speakers), including Natalie Kidd, chief people and purpose officer of Intrepid Travel; Jason Lin, CEO of Talent Basket; Jennifer Lin, senior business development manager of Rezio; Shinobu Hayama, CEO of Journey for Change; and Halim Choi, programme officer of Jeonbuk MICE Bureau.

Where do you think the travel and tourism industry stands in terms of sustainability?

The term sustainability is now mainstream. We have all the framework in place; we have credible assurance programmes set by GSTC, our partner certification bodies and accreditation bodies. We are working in this ecosystem together so we have this foundation.

We are also working with governments to support training to increase knowledge on the skills and benefits of sustainable operations and businesses. We have OTAs that are promoting (sustainability) to their customers.

We are at a critical point here. There are many stakeholders that can (facilitate) change and are making the change.

However, from a consumer perspective, it is still difficult to find a sustainable provider. We need hotels and tour operators to start making this shift to become more sustainable, especially since this proper system has already been set.

It is now much easier to explain the benefits of making this shift: becoming more sustainable usually means cost savings, allows for better market benefits, and it is the right thing to do!

There is no doubt that sustainability is the keyword for our industry. How will GSTC assert its authority as the global body for sustainable tourism to better educate both the industry and the public on this subject?

That is a very good question. Clearly, there's still a lot of greenwashing, as well as misleading and false claims.

The UK's competition and markets authority as well as equivalent bodies and two European Union member states had recently begun investigating companies over eco-friendly and sustainability claims, to make sure that consumers are not being misled. A greenwashing lawsuit was also filed against KLM Airlines in court in the Netherlands.

So, it raises the topic again on the liability to organisations and companies when they make sustainability claims. The assurance of sustainability claims is very important, and it is one of the GSTC's core activities, which is eventually providing assurance for sustainable tourism. We do that through an accreditation programme for certification bodies as well as collaboration with standard owners.

I'm happy to see that different actions are being taken by regulators and private organisations to tackle that and to criticise those that make false or misleading claims.

It is also important to note that when we speak about sustainability in tourism, it is not just about the environment; it refers to a number of dimensions as set out in the GSTC criteria, including societal, cultural and economic aspects.

How has GSTC's work evolved?

(There has been greater) involvement from governments with regards to guidelines and enforcement. We are now working specifically on supporting businesses in the region or country to be more sustainable.

In Japan, for example, we run tens of trainings every year sponsored by the Japan National Tourism Organization. In Turkey it will soon be mandatory for tourism businesses to follow the Turkish version of the GSTC criteria, with a transition period until 2030.

Booking.com, Agoda, Traveloka, Makemytrip, Google Travel – and a few more in the coming months – work with GSTC on different levels. The foundation is to highlight sustainable hotels and tours on their platform to consumers, a segment the GSTC does not directly engage with. When customers learn more about sustainable brands through these OTAs, it helps to push hotels and tour operators to adopt more sustainable measures.

(Accommodation buyers) are also joining the scene. For example, TUI and American Express Global Business Travel (AMEX GBT) make it clear in their RFPs that they prefer sustainable hotels.

So, GSTC's collaboration with these three main stakeholders influences the travel and hospitality industry to become more sustainable.

How has the GSTC membership from destinations and hotel organisations evolved in the past two years?

I see three main trends. Firstly, destinations and governments have been introducing sustainability in a systemic manner over the past two years of the pandemic. This was very different from pre-Covid times where there was a general interest, moderate engagement, (and application of) some framework from the GSTC.

During the pandemic, many NTOs and DMOs invested a lot of effort into raising their skills, knowledge and cooperation to make their destination more sustainable. It is no longer just plugging the word sustainability into destination marketing campaigns, but pushing the agenda in a serious and systemic manner.

The second trend is the rise in hotels and chains joining GSTC and their sustainable tourism movement. Some of them are even updating their programmes (in accordance with) GSTC criteria.

Most notably, in March this year, the Singapore Hotel Association and the Singapore Tourism Board launched the Singapore Hotel Sustainability Roadmap with a goal of reaching 60 per cent of hotel room stock certified by GSTC-accredited certification bodies by 2025. It's a great example of collaboration between the government and the private sector. It has really pushed hotels to take this topic more seriously.

One of our important OTA members, Agoda, launched online training for Singapore hotels in October, using their CSR budget to support this (initiative).

The third trend is an increasing demand for business travel to be more sustainable. AMEX GBT is actively promoting and preferring hotels that are certified by GSTC-accredited certification bodies, as it recognises the importance of assured sustainability claims made by hotels.

Recently, we also had BCD Travel and CWT join GSTC as members. These three huge entities represent the majority of the corporate and business travel companies out there, and they mean business when it comes to sustainability.

What more can we expect from GSTC's work in 2023?

One core message to highlight in 2023 is the emphasis on the general usage of the sustainability standards as guidelines. Anyone can use the standards, which are readily available and free on the Internet, such as the one published by GSTC.

Apart from the GSTC Destination and Industry criteria, we are now in the process of creating the GSTC Attraction criteria and the GSTC MICE criteria which we expect to be published at end-2023 or early 2024.

A force for good

In response to travellers' growing determination to travel responsibly, tourism players are making sustainable, guilt-free options more identifiable and accessible, discovers **Karen Yue**

Keemala has a strict anti-animal exploitation policy while its guests activities foster a strong sense of community spirit among guests

(Responsible travel options) won't go away any time soon and will become a requirement among conscious travellers.

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

Making responsible travel choices is getting easier, now that many leading tourism suppliers are providing prominent labels that identify sustainable options.

Back in November 2021, Booking.com debuted what it said was a first-of-its-kind Travel Sustainable badge to help travellers identify properties that have implemented a combination of sustainable practices that meet the requisite impact threshold for their destination.

A study by the OTA found that 81 per cent of global travellers wanted to stay in a sustainable accommodation when they resumed their travel in 2022, while 73 per cent would more likely choose a specific accommodation if they knew it was implementing sustainable practices. The Travel Sustainable badge serves to support that desire, and a filter on Booking.com's search function helps travellers to more easily identify responsible options.

Sharing that foresight is Small Luxury Hotels of the World (SLH), whose Considerate Collection of responsible and sustainable hotels recently celebrated its first anniversary. When it launched in October 2021, the Considerate Collection had 26 hotels in 16 countries. Today, the network has 52 qualified properties listed on its website.

Mark Wong, senior vice president, Asia Pacific of SLH, said the creation of the Considerate Collection has allowed the company to identify many attractive and responsible hotels that "were not on our radar".

He noted that there are many responsible hotels around the world – particularly in Thailand, Indonesia and the Maldives here in Asia – and SLH can use its global reach to bring such properties to the attention of many conscious travellers and travel trade buyers worldwide.

The Considerate Collection is set for continued growth, evident in the number of hotels approaching SLH at an early stage of development for suggestions on incorporating sustainable features and experiences into their property, to ensure they qualify for induction into the programme once they launch.

Getting the green star

A stringent and scientific approach has been employed by these travel companies to determine who gets the coveted sustainable label.

For Booking.com's Travel Sustainable badge, qualifying attributes are determined and validated by the Travalyst Independent Advisory Group, and the OTA takes a step further by working with other industry experts to identify a set of the most impactful practices for a property to consider in five key areas: waste, energy and greenhouse gases, water, supporting local communities, and protecting nature.

This foundational framework is further broken down into 32 specific sustainability measures or practices that properties can implement, including everything from eliminating single-use plastic toiletries or switching to LED light fixtures to running on 100 per cent renewable energy sources or investing a certain percentage of profits into local community and conservation projects.

For SLH's Considerate Collection, properties looking to be inducted must do more than just end their reliance on single-use plastics. SLH partners reputable organisations like Greenview and Global Sustainable Tourism Council as well as subject experts and travel agents specialising in this field to provide it with guidance and ensure SLH is not "just greenwashing our approach", Wong told *TTG Show Daily*.

All Considerate Collection hotels undergo strict assessment across three levels – Environmentally Conscious, Cultural Custodians, and Community Minded.

"Our members have to take these pillars into their operational consideration to qualify and ensure that these are achieved both behind the scenes and in guest-facing experiences," shared Wong.

For instance, Amilla Maldives Resort, one of the newly-inducted Considerate Collection properties, boasts 31 ongoing sustainability projects since its debut three years ago in the Baa Atoll UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. One of its projects utilises 2,500 coconut trees on the island to produce coconut oil, vinegar, milk and cream, as well as turn the resulting waste into nutritious coco peat for its gardens and crafting needs.

The property continually comes up with creative ways to celebrate island culture, from founding the country's first and only Maldives Cultural Week in 2021 which promotes local musical, artistic and fashion talents, to holding weekly Maldivian dinners and cooking classes for guests to get an authentic taste of Baa Atoll and beyond.

It also takes pride in operating with a team made up mostly of Maldivians, many of whom hold management positions, as well as sourcing from local producers and engaging local vendors.

Low impact experiences

Contiki Tours, which runs 350 trips across six continents, is contributing to the movement too, by putting up programmes that enable conscious travellers to explore guilt-free and with minimal carbon footprint.

It made 100 per of its trips carbon-neutral since last year. It is a momentous decision, but also just one of the many milestones in the company's "long journey to sustainability", said global CEO Adam Armstrong.

"Our journey to carbon neutrality requires a lot of work. First, we have to measure, and that's a task in itself. For every trip we have to work out how much carbon we are emitting through transport, accommodation, dining and experiences. Then, there is a load of initiatives around reducing emissions and getting third parties to work with us. After that, we offset what we cannot reduce and invest in carbon capture initiatives," detailed Armstrong.

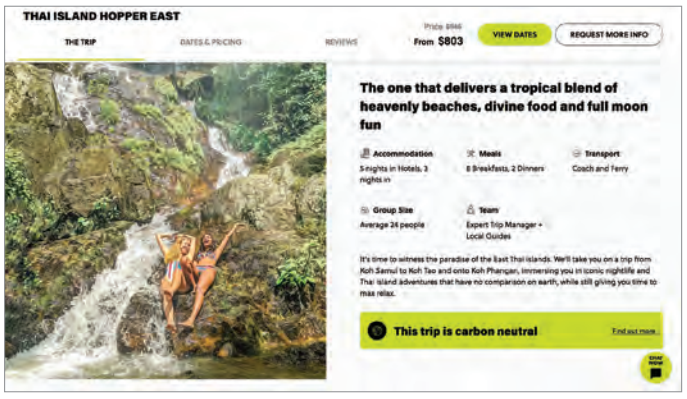
All initiatives are included in the ticket and no opt-in is required. Contiki has chosen to keep its carbon neutrality offering simple and accessible, as the young generation views such features as a basic consumer right, reflected Armstrong.

SLH's Wong said spotlighting responsible travel options is now basic business and no longer just a post-lockdown travel trend.

"It won't go away any time soon and will become a requirement among conscious travellers. In fact, our corporate RFPs now come with a request for our hotels to submit details on their sustainability policy and programmes," he said.

Contiki's Armstrong agrees, saying that data points to the growing importance of sustainable travel.

"Most Gen Zs prioritise sustainability and choose brands based on their sustainability credentials. They avoid brands with poor sustainability credentials. Going carbon neutral is therefore good for the environment and for the business," he said.



From left: All Contiki tours are carbon neutral now; Amilla Maldives Resort, located in the Baa Atoll UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, has 31 ongoing sustainability projects, including reef preservation

Rewarding incentives

As corporate incentive trips return, planners are spotting a stronger desire among top achievers to travel more responsibly and to leave their destinations in a better place than they were previously. By **Rachel AJ Lee**

dbtmiller1966/shutterstock

Incentive travel participants are drawn to meaningful and authentic destination experiences; water blessings in Bali pictured

A stronger desire to build back lives better post-lockdown has influenced people to travel more responsibly, and this in turn has shaped corporate incentive trip programming.

Zaim Muhammad, managing director at Dubai-based Red Berry Travel & Tours, said he has noticed an uptick in clients' requests for programmes that offer opportunities to preserve the local culture and to minimise negative impact on the destinations. There is also a preference for destinations where tours can directly support the local community. For instance, money will be spent at local restaurants, shopping will be made at small community shops, and local guides will be hired.

Along with conscious travel goals, big cities have fallen out of favour while requests for "mountain hiking and train journeys" having surged in recent months.

Sugeng Suprianto, managing director of Top Indonesia Holidays, echoes the shift away from big cities. His European and American clients are requesting for cultural experiences in Bali instead. In response, his agency has put forth walks in rice fields, where attendees can "burn some calories while learning about traditional rice farming", as well as water blessing rituals "that is very famous in Bali to help wash the bad luck away".

These activities are "immersive and meaningful", allowing travellers to learn about the local culture and "providing the local community with a sense of pride that their culture is being appreciated by people from other countries", Sugeng said.

"This is one way culture and traditions will continue to live on," he added.

Petrina Goh, director at CWT Meetings & Events, observed: "As people return to travel, it is all about coming back better... as a more informed traveller that is more conscientious about their impact on the community."

She has seen more take up for farm-to-table activities, where attendees would forage for ingredients, prep the meal together, and dine with local hosts. They take away a joyful memory, knowing that the activity is off-the-beaten-track, and the experience is local and meaningful.

Making the first move

For corporates wanting to be more impactful with their travel programmes but are unsure about taking the first step, incentive planners can provide direction.

Singapore-based MICE Matters' director Melvyn Nonis takes the initiative to discuss with clients how the content can be structured responsibly from the get-go.

He would recommend maximising the number of seats on coaches to save on costs and minimise carbon emissions; choosing set meals over buffets to reduce food wastage; providing reusable water bottles; and purchasing room drop gifts from locals.

On the travellers' end, Nonis would "remind delegates to be courteous and respectful to both the hotel staff and local guides given the shortage in manpower, be generous in tipping for good service, as well as (support) green efforts like reusing towels in the room".

While some clients like to visit orphanages and children homes, Nonis offers a more meaningful approach by planning lunch with the beneficiaries, making monetary donations, and bringing items the orphanage might need, such as stationery and clothes.

While conscious incentive travel is becoming more common, AB Sadewa, corporate secretary of Panorama and chairman of Panorama Foundation, found demand for sustainable travel to come mainly from "the US, Canada and Europe". There have been few requests from the Asian market.

The Panorama Foundation is a social body that focuses on sustainable tourism growth. It ensures its own tourism products are developed in compliance with Travelife standards, which are acknowledged by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council. Travelife itself is a system that helps tour operators and travel agencies manage and improve social and environmental impacts by complying with sustainability criteria.

"One of the ways we can encourage our clients to think more about responsible travel for their future programmes is by doing a post-event campaign that shows what their efforts mean to local communities," Goh suggested.

This can be in the form of farewell notes or pictures, or even a short study on how the trip has helped to boost the local economy or supported the charity.

Goh believes that tracking legacy is the responsibility of planners and event agencies "because this will help make their planning for future events be progressively more meaningful than the last". – *additional reporting by Mimi Hudoyo*

Sugeng Suprianto, managing director, Top Indonesia Holidays

Stunning stays

Check into these new hotels and resorts in Asia and the Middle East that offer comfortable and aethetically-pleasing accommodation. By **Melissa Anne Tan**

Winter in Japan

As the only Club Med mountain resort in Asia to offer spring skiing due to the long snowfall that lasts till May each year, Club Med Kiroro Peak offers a variety of accommodation choices with its 126 rooms, and facilities such as a traditional Japanese onsen, restaurant and bar, spa and wellness space, and more. Guests can enjoy the slopes and the resort's unlimited ski-in, ski-out access, and sign up for daily group ski and snowboard lessons, ranging from beginner to advanced.

For both business and leisure

Wyndham Grand Shanxi Xiaohe Xincheng provides business and leisure guests with an elegant and distinctly approachable experience together with premium service and personalised facilities. Situated 27km from Taiyuan Wusu International Airport and Taiyuan South Railway Station, the hotel features a corridor with direct access to the Xiaohe International Convention and Exhibition Center. The hotel is equipped with two 1,000m² conference spaces, six multi-functional halls, four restaurants, 367 rooms, fitness centre and pool.

Gorgeous mountain views

Located in Palampur - Himachal Pradesh, Rakkh Resort houses rooms and suites with stunning views of the snow-peaked mountains, and offers curated experiences that encourage a sense of community and bonding. Activities such as spa treatments, yoga, village walks, weaving, traditional cooking, paragliding at Bir-Billing, visiting the hilltop ruins of Kangra Fort, and the rock-cut Hindu temples of Masroor, await guests here. Facilities comprise F&B, an infinity pool, and event spaces.

Live it up in Dubai

Address Grand Creek Harbour, sitting on the shores of the Dubai Creek, is a 223-key waterfront hotel that offers a range of elegant rooms and suites to make any stay an experience to remember. Guests facilities comprise an infinity pool, spa, fitness centre, kids' pool and splash pad. Dining options are aplenty at this property – The Restaurant where international cuisine is served, Cigar Lounge, The Patisserie and the Luma Pool Lounge.

Experience culture in style

The 90-room lifestyle hotel is located in Singapore's vibrant ethnic district, Little India, a historic area showing off the best of the local Indian community with its spice shops, jewellery stores, saree specialists, flower vendors, trendy cafés and hip watering holes. Soak in and socialise over culinary exploration of Indian street food at GupShup, which serves up a delectable breakfast spread including an authentic Indian breakfast for guests.

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A welcoming community

By Caleb Richard Lai

Far East Hospitality Singapore's Audrey Chung (right, front) with her team

Tourism Cambodia's Prak Vuthy

Business Events Sarawak Malaysia's Amelia Roziman (left) and Gloria Pahang

Pullman Singapore Orchard's Rob McIntyre (standing) and Ibis Singapore on Bencoolen's Elinda Ong

Gyeongsangbuk-Do South Korea's Shin Bu-hyeon (centre)

Chroma Hospitality Philippines' Carmela Bocanegra (seated) and Rowella Fernandez

Taipei Tourism Office Germany's Arthur Xie (left) and Tourism Bureau Ministry of Transportation and Communications Taiwan's Joyce Ou-yang

TBO.com UAE's Alyona Gorlach (seated) and her team

A night with Kempinski

By Caleb Richard Lai

Business Finland's Kristiina Hietasaari (left) and Mervi Toivonen

The Indonesian delegation led by Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy's Sandiaga Salahudin Uno and Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia Germany's Arif Havas Oegroseno

Rovaniemi Finland's Sanna Karkkainen

Perak Executive Council (EXCO) Malaysia's Loh Sze Yee (left, fourth)

Malaysia Convention & Exhibition Bureau's Abdul Khani Bin Daud

Sabah Ministry of Tourism, Culture & Environment Malaysia's Christina Liew (left, second)

Finnair's Anssi Partanen

Trails of Indochina Vietnam's Ian Anderson and Heritage Line Vietnam's Andreas Schroetter

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