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TTG ASIA

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Great to be green
Hotels' intensifying environmental-focused pursuits are creating improved experiences for guests

Ski vacations heat up
Asian holidaymakers are chasing excellent pow at ski resorts, feeding a strong rebound for winter holiday bookings

Silversea's Asia rising
Silversea Cruises has marked Asia out as a critical region for both customer sourcing and ship deployment

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Building back air access

Asia-Pacific's aviation sector continues to trail behind other geographical regions in terms of recovery, even as the last of the remaining few travel barriers are lifted. On the bright side, new routes are surfacing, inspiring new travel possibilities

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Walking the good talk

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We have crossed the mid-year mark so swiftly. Time flies especially fast when you are busy attending to pent-up travel needs and catching up on years of lost business. Back in April, the World Travel & Tourism Council published an industry performance report stating that the travel and tourism sector was "catapulting" into 2023. What a welcome verb!

The sector is expected to reach US$9.5 trillion this year, just five per cent below 2019 pre-pandemic levels when travel was at its highest. Thirty-four countries had already exceeded 2019 levels back in April.

And as we catapult through these critical months and return to the rat race, it is good to see that years of promising to build tourism back better have not given way to eager profit pursuits. The content we carry in this issue provides encouraging proof.

Hotels are intensifying their environmental-focused pursuits (yes, more than just cutting out plastic straws), which are leading to improved experiences for guests, be it through architectural designs that bring soothing nature indoors or meals that are big on flavour and small on emissions.

Silversea Cruises, in chasing its ambitions to be an ultra luxury cruise line with the best in class destination experiences, is distancing itself from same-old shore excursions and choosing instead to work with NTOs and real destination specialists to identify hidden gems and spread tourism deeper into destinations.

New Zealand's tourism players are more determined than ever to make regenerative tourism the core of what they do, providing travellers an opportunity to contribute positively to the country's environment and community development.

Building on its move last September to make tourism accessible to visitors of all physical abilities, Queensland has gone on to designate 2023 as the Year of Accessible Tourism. Demonstrating that it is doing more than just talk, the Australian state is pumping A$12 million into making sure accessible tourism goals are met.

Beyond singular destinations, UNWTO is moving into the third edition of its Best Tourism Villages initiative, established in 2021 to identify and support the world's most outstanding tourism villages that are able to drive rural development and local well-being. This initiative has recognised more than 70 tourism villages from almost 40 countries. Among these, only 14 are in the massive and culturally-diverse Asia-Pacific region. Hence, it is no surprise that UNWTO is especially keen for more tourism villages here to come forward for assessment.

All these initiatives and more, from developing destinations responsibly to support tourism dispersal to making tourism accessible to everyone, answer the increasingly urgent call for quality tourism – where tourism isn't extractive and benefits only travellers and businesses, and where consumers understand that their ability to explore someone else's home is a privilege and they must leave it better than how they had first found it.

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Travel Hall of Fame

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

At present, these exceptional organisations and their years of induction are:

- Singapore Airlines Limited (2002)
- Singapore Changi Airport (2002)
- Hertz Asia Pacific (2005)
- Royal Cliff Hotels Group - The State of Exclusivity & Fascination (2006)
- Sabre Asia Pacific Pte Ltd (2009)
- Lotte Tour (2011)
- Hong Kong International Airport (2013)
- Raffles Hotel Singapore (2013)
- Regal Airport Hotel (2015)
- Banyan Tree Spa (2015)
- Qatar Airways (2016)
- Thai Airways International Public Company Limited (2016)
- Thailand Convention & Exhibition Bureau (2016)
- Royal Plaza on Scotts (2018)
- Royal Caribbean International (2018)
- Best Western Hotels & Resorts (2019)
- Travelport (2019)

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

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BEHIND THE NAME

Charlotte Harris

Managing director, Charlotte Travel

You joined your parents in running Charlotte Travel in 2014. What keeps you going forward?
If I was asked this question pre-pandemic, I would have quickly answered that there are still so many places on my bucket list to check off! My love for travel feels so much a part of my DNA as my parents have been travelling with me starting from when I was four months old.

It's a carefree feeling to be able to book a flight at a moment's notice, experience a place, and then come back to our clients and let them know why that place is so special.

I will say the pandemic has taught me so much about perseverance and leadership. Being a part of a family-run business has meant that everyone moves forward together, and what drives us is that deeply held belief to deliver our best to our clients and to each other.

How have your travel habits changed since the pandemic?
What was once an easy, almost second-nature reflex of visas, passports, tickets and seat assignments etc has been replaced by scrupulous checking for forms, airline updates, downloading required apps, and ensuring the smallest details are take care of. However, on the upside, people are now more cautious, focused on details and appreciating the destinations that they are visiting. Travel used to be taken for granted but travellers are now more focused on sustainability.

Tell us about your bucket list escapes.
Maldives – I saved this for my honeymoon which sadly got impacted by the pandemic.

Rwanda – gorilla trekking is so high on my list. I love nature, safaris and animals, so I feel this would truly be a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Saudi Arabia – my parents lived in Saudi in the 80s; their stories have always fascinated me. They recently returned with even more interesting stories of the upcoming developments and changes in the country. I have an Anthropology degree, so the culture and changing of lifestyles between generations, especially in this up and coming destination, fascinates me.

Who has had the biggest influence on your career?
Jackie Harris, my mother. She has set a high standard, which has served as a guide to this industry – from humble beginnings to starting and running a business as a woman and as a working parent. Not forgetting my close circle of friends within this industry who truly understand what it takes to thrive in this industry.

APPOINTMENTS

Amanda Hyndman

Bob van den Oord

Juergen Kreipl

Katie McAlister

Sanjay Kumar

Amanda Hyndman
Mandarin Oriental's new chief people officer, Amanda Hyndman will oversee the development of human resources strategies that support the growth of the brand and colleague career development.

Bob van den Oord
New chief executive officer for Langham Hospitality Group, Bob van den Oord, will lead the company's growth, enhance operational efficiencies and develop guest experiences in his new role.

Juergen Kreipl
Four Seasons Hotel Jakarta has named Juergen Kreipl as its general manager. A seasoned hotelier with over 30 years of experience, he recently served as general manager of InterContinental Genève in Switzerland.

Katie McAlister
Helming as president of Cunard, Katie McAlister brings to the company her commercial and operational experience as well as digital transformation expertise and strategic oversight. She was recently chief marketing officer at TUI where she has worked for 20 years.

Sanjay Kumar
Sanjay Kumar is the new director of operations at Espire Hospitality Group and will focus on optimising operations, streamlining processes, and driving overall efficiency within the organisation.

GROW

Cultural intelligence in a multicultural workplace

The ways in which our cultural frames shape our thinking and behaviours are largely unconscious and difficult to change. Cultivating your cultural intelligence fine-tunes your radar for cross-cultural pitfalls and diversifies your approach to exercising influence, leading to better outcomes for yourself, your team and your company.

Doing this justice in a multicultural environment requires careful consideration of the following points.

Direct vs diplomatic

One of the chief distinguishing factors between cultures is the extent to which people communicate directly with one another. This is referred to as low-context vs high-context. In low-context cultures, people say what they mean. In high-context cultures, there is far greater emphasis on meaning being inferred from context. As you optimise your influencing skills, regulate how blunt your requests are accordingly, shifting the emphasis from clarity and completeness to diplomatic phrasing as required.

Motivating teams

People from high power-distance societies have greater respect for hierarchies, while in low power-distance societies, individuals aim to distribute power equally. Understanding this is important, as influencing people has a lot to do with making them feel like their contribution is valued and that they are involved in reaching the common goal.

When providing incentives, there are two factors to bear in mind: masculinity vs femininity and indulgence vs restraint. People from masculine cultures are more likely to be driven by achievement and desire material rewards for their success, while those from feminine cultures value cooperation and modesty, and look for ways to improve their quality of life.

Meanwhile, team members from more indulgent societies appreciate instant gratification and regular displays of appreciation from management. Those from more restrained societies, however, may feel alienated by overt gestures.

Criticism and conflict

Moments of criticism or conflict provide a unique opportunity to exert influence. Be mindful of individualism vs collectivism in this regard. Individualist cultures are I-centric, while collectivist cultures are we-centric. Members of individualist cultures may welcome conflict and debate, as it stimulates diversity and staves off groupthink. Members of collectivist cultures, however, may prefer to pursue collective goals, share ideas and find consensus. Active, empathetic listening is also an important influencing sub-skill. It's not always easy to discern how someone's culture impacts how they feel about a given situation, but the first step towards understanding this is to maintain an open mind and respond rather than react.

Leadership style

Consider the extent to which fostering rapport should form part of your repertoire of influencing skills. Influence by transaction relies upon top-down, hierarchical structures, while influence by transformation sees leaders mobilise their troops through encouragement, support and empathy.

In business, individualist cultures place greater emphasis on cognitive trust, whereas collectivist cultures favour affective trust based on emotion, character and intentions, and positive relationships.

This article by EHL Insights was first published in full at https://hospitalityinsights.ehl.edu/influencing-skills-lead-in-mutlicultural-workplace.

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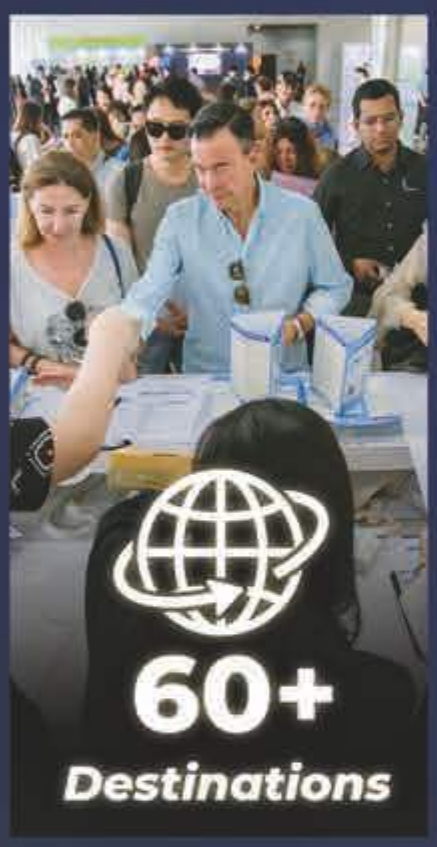

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Expedia Group shows B2B growth

Expedia Group has announced new partnerships and tech features aimed at expanding its network following a strong quarter for its B2B segment where it delivered 55 per cent in revenue growth compared to 2022.

"Our growth in B2B is largely due to the pace at which our tech has been adopted by businesses of all sizes who want to either break into travel or expand their current travel offerings. The demand for this business continues to be strong as evidenced by our new partnerships with Mastercard, SoFi, and some of our biggest hotel partners," said Peter Kern, vice chairman and CEO, Expedia Group.

Expedia Group's exciting new and expanded partnerships include Travel with Rewards with Mastercard, which is a loyalty points redemption programme to allow cardholders to redeem credit card loyalty points for travel bookings; and SoFi Travel, which will soon allow members to book flights, hotels, cars, packages, activities and vacation rentals through SoFi.

"Over the last decade, our B2B segment has grown phenomenally as we power online and offline travel programmes," said Ariane Gorin, president Expedia for business, Expedia Group, adding that the company enables "businesses of all sizes to succeed in the world of travel, and in an industry that is nearly US$2 trillion, there is plenty of room to grow".

Expedia Group is also committed to help more companies succeed in the world of travel with the following developments. Its travel operating system, Travel OS, will externalise its tech in the form of microservices to help any kind of travel company use its tech to enhance their business, such as fraud capability, which has now reached commercial status. Its service tech and revenue management API are now in beta-testing with partners.

In addition, Expedia Group's Guest Experience Score will be made available to travellers in 2H2023, where hotel partners can view their Guest Experience Score by logging into Expedia Group Partner Central.

In two years, Expedia Group has tripled the number of participating chains using Optimised Distribution, an innovation that provides hotel partners with greater control of their wholesale businesses.

New rate-management capabilities will be released later this year, allowing for more flexibility for a wider array of partners to leverage.

Expedia Group's first-ever fully unified loyalty programme, One Key will launch on July 6 in the US, and additional markets will follow in 2024. In addition to the Member Only Deals for hotels, cruises and activity partners, the programme will now extend these offerings to air partners, helping them increase visibility to One Key members. Member Only Deals for flights will first be available in the US for One Key members.

Expedia Group continues to invest in its Travel Agent Affiliate Program (TAAP), which powers more than 35,000 travel agencies across more than 30 countries with its booking platform built specifically for their unique needs.

TAAP has also launched several new capabilities including enhanced payment options, which provides travel advisors more flexibility and improved servicing with Live Agent chat to help travel advisors get answers to their questions faster.

Holistic disruption management for airlines

Sabre Corporation has teamed up with Plan3, an automated airline disruption management solution, to enable airlines to be more proactive when disruption strikes.

The new alliance will allow Plan3 to draw upon Sabre's extensive industry reach and deep domain knowledge in airline technology to help accelerate the adoption of its service, while enabling Sabre to quickly deliver a holistic approach to passenger disruption for its airline partners.

Plan3 will link via APIs and web services to augment native irregular operations and schedule change options available through an airline's Passenger Service System (PSS).

Plan3 is a unique solution in the disruption management space, utilising powerful automation to enable airlines to respond to thousands of unique passenger disruptions at once. Its unique 'issues dashboard' allows airlines to monitor and react to the disruption status of passengers at an individual level, flagging any travellers that will experience issues due to a disruption event.

Plan3 is PSS agnostic and content provider agnostic, meaning it can complement Sabre's own ecosystems and product offerings, as well as being used by airlines on other systems. Their smart reaccommodation solution is ideal for retail-focused airlines who offer customers various ancillaries through third-party partners.

Plan3 holistically looks at the customer's entire journey to make rebooking recommendations across flight, hotel, car, and more.

Using Plan3's 'option creator tool', airlines create holistic 'option packages' containing new flight options, as well as hotel rooms, meal vouchers, ground transportation and gift cards.

Option packages are then sent to the passenger for them to make their preferred selection, directly from their personal device.

The entire flow can be fully automated from templates, enabling airlines to respond to even the most complex of issues within just a few minutes.

Roomie expands into Asia-Pacific

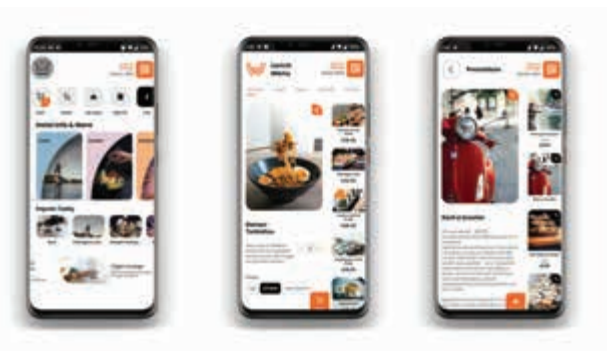
Roomie, a hospitality digital guest engagement platform, is intensifying efforts to grow its Malaysian hotel client base, as well as expand its services into Asia-Pacific.

The company's expansion plans will start in Thailand in early 2024 with the setting up of a representative office in Bangkok, followed by Singapore.

June Yap, senior vice-president of Roomie, shared: "Roomie delivers all the benefits of a hotel mobile engagement platform and addresses increasing labour costs and shortages at an affordable price with zero capital investment."

Roomie starts serving a hotel guest during reservation enquiries with its consolidated chat technology that is able to bring together chat messages from multiple chat platforms including Whatsapp, Facebook, or WeChat.

This service continues in-house, such as ordering room service, requesting for a service, obtaining information about a hotel, as well as live chat and movies on demand. Roomie's technology automates the back-end service processes to ensure efficiency.



Yap said that the platform is currently the only service provider offering outsourced shared services that reduces hotel's operating costs, increases guests' satisfaction and improves the hotel's revenue.

By adopting Roomie, hotels gain access to its 24/7 outsource human chat service agents to handle all reservation chat enquiries and in-house guests' chat communication.

The platform's Data & AI services help hotels to measure and benchmark their service performance and increase upselling revenue, while its Dynamic Remarketing database allows hotels to improve their direct bookings by tapping into Roomie's marketing database with more than 1.8 million travellers.

Roomie currently has around 60 hotel clients in nine states across Malaysia, said Yap. Having gone live in 2019, its marketing efforts were temporarily hampered by the Covid-19 pandemic.

With the resumption of travel and tourism, Roomie is on track to reach 150 hotels in Malaysia by end 2023, and is laying the groundwork for overseas expansion. **– S Puvaneswary**

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Building back air access

Asia-Pacific's aviation sector continues to trail behind other geographical regions in terms of recovery, even as the last of the remaining few travel barriers are lifted. On the bright side, airlines are rolling out new routes and inspiring new travel possibilities.
By Marissa Carruthers

Limited seats and high airfares have slowed travel recovery across Asia, with experts predicting traffic volumes will only return to pre-pandemic levels by 2024 as airlines increase frequency and routes.

According to figures from the Association of Asia Pacific Airlines, international traffic in Asia-Pacific sat at 52 per cent of 2019 levels in January 2023, with Asia recovering much slower than other regions, due to travel restrictions remaining in place much longer.

The figures revealed that South-east Asia's recovery in particular have tracked below the global average, with Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand lagging, while the Philippines and Vietnam were above average. Vietnam now sits well above pre-Covid-19 levels.

The Asian Development Bank reports that domestic traffic in South-east Asia could reach 100 per cent of 2019 levels by the end of 2023, while international traffic is predicted to hit 90 per cent. In 2Q2023, international seat capacity for South-east Asia hit about 76 per cent recovery, with the full reopening of China expected to aid recovery throughout the rest of the year.

"Airlines have been steadily restoring flights in the South-east Asia-China market since January 2023, when quarantine restrictions in China were lifted, but flights are often added to the schedules with very short notice," the report noted.

It added that by the end of 3Q2023, the South-east Asia-China market could reach 70 to 80 per cent, contingent on airlines securing approvals for additional flights. However, securing approval from Chinese authorities for additional flights has so far been a "slow and gradual process".

Mayur Patel, head of Asia at OAG Aviation, said that while current schedules show a 98 per cent recovery to pre-pandemic 2019 levels, a full recovery in global capacity is not expected before March 2024.

He added: "As consumers continue to search for fresh experiences, pent-up demand will carry on driving traffic to regional Asia-Pacific destinations over the next 12 months."

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Air Asia launched new services to various Chinese cities, such as Guilin (pictured)

Miguel Lagoa/shutterstock

Emirates is expanding its fleet, in preparation for additional capacity and new services

Patel said the reopening of China's borders and the anticipated travel boom will play a major role in the region's full flight recovery.

"Most regional travel associations and carriers are predicting traffic volumes to return closer to pre-pandemic levels, despite economic and geopolitical headwinds, by 2024," he noted. "As for the broader recovery, this will be dependent on how the outbound market from China recovers in the near term."

He said some of the bottlenecks lie in getting slots for foreign carriers approved

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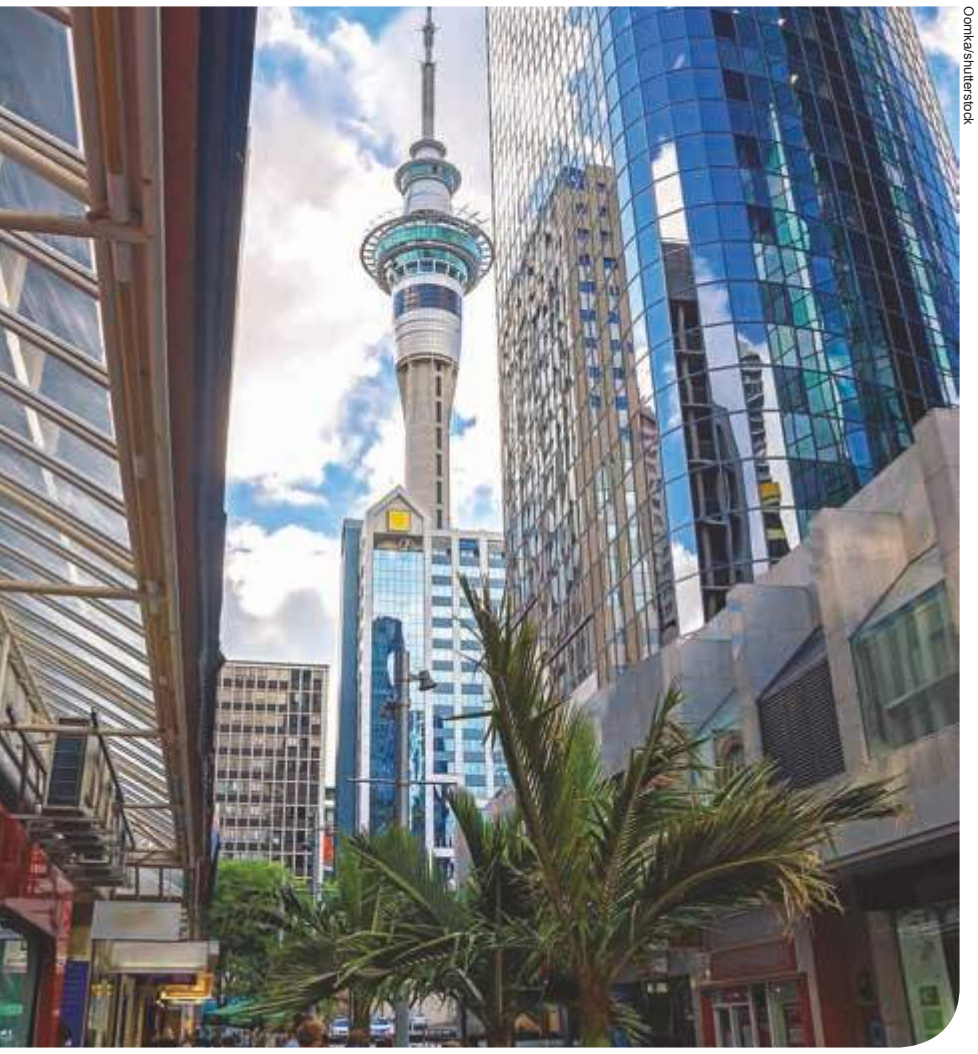
> As consumers continue to search for fresh experiences, pent-up demand will carry on driving traffic to regional Asia-Pacific destinations over the next 12 months.
>
> **Mayur Patel**
> Head of Asia,
> OAG Aviation



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Emirates resumed its longhaul Dubai-Auckland service in December 2022

by China. For example, capacity recovery has been distorted with Chinese carriers having a larger capacity share.

Pointing to Singapore as an example, Patel said overall capacity for June 2023 compared with the same period in 2019 has shown overall recovery of 54 per cent. However, the two large Chinese carriers, Air China and China Southern, have reinstated 81 per cent and 75 per cent of capacity respectively, while Singapore Airlines Group has only been able to reinstate 58 per cent of its capacity between Singapore and China.

"The Chinese regulators have been somewhat restrictive with the granting of slot allocations to airlines, especially to foreign carriers, which can be attributed to a phased approach for outbound travel that has been slower than anticipated by the market," he told *TTG Asia*.

Patel added that other regulators across the region are also imposing restrictions. For example, the Indonesia regulator is imposing restrictions on Singapore Airlines' flights from Singapore to Jakarta.

"This can be seen from schedules filing for which this city pair has only recovered two-thirds of the frequency from 2019 levels. In comparison, Singapore to Bali has recovered fully," he added.

On a brighter note, recent schedule announcements made by airlines operating in this region continue to show confidence, with new and additional services planned besides reinstating former ones.

Emirates unveiled plans to deploy a fleet of 85 A380s, taking the total to 95 by the end of next March.

Adnan Kazim, chief commercial officer at Emirates, said the airline operates about 3,080 departure flights a week globally and is currently exploring adding more capacity to markets, including China.

Furthermore, additional flights to New Zealand's Christchurch and Auckland as well as Australia's Sydney and Melbourne will take off on July 15, as well as Singapore on June 1, strengthening operations in the Asia-Pacific region, increasing competition and driving down fares.

Low cost carrier AirAsia is also pinning hopes on China pushing its rebound. In addition to the carrier flying to nine destinations in China, it recently unveiled new services from Kuala Lumpur to Quanzhou, Guilin and Chengdu, beefing up weekly flights between the two nations to more than 129.

Benyamin Ismail, AirAsia X Malaysia CEO, said: "As China is rapidly bouncing back, we expect to launch even more flights to the country, as well as increase frequency on the most popular and profitable routes within our network in the short- to medium-term."

Earlier in February, when the airline announced its resumption of China services, Benyamin said that its services to the country had seen "tremendous success", with over 1.8 million guests carried to and from China in 2019 alone.

As travel appetite ramps up, Hong Kong Airlines is stepping up operations, with new services between Hong Kong and China's Beijing, as well as Hong Kong and Japan's Fukuoka, besides reinstating services to Bali's Ngurah Rai International Airport and Shanghai's Hongqiao International Airport.

New entrant, Thailand-based full-service Really Cool Airlines, said in May that it plans to commence flying in 1Q2024. Its initial routes are likely to include Singapore, Tokyo, Hong Kong and Taiwan, with European routes to be added in 2025.

Patel said factors that would drive full recovery in the region included developing a dual-brand strategy to increase low-cost offerings while simultaneously tapping into the luxury market. For example, through the pairing of Cathay Pacific and HK Express, Qantas and Jetstar, and Singapore Airlines and Scoot.

He predicted a "significant" increase in demand for Bali, Vietnam, Thailand, South Korea and Japan.

"This surge in traffic can be attributed to a growing trend among travellers seeking out more personalised experiences and to explore new, previously unexplored destinations."

But he cautioned that the road to full recovery is not paved with roses, as airlines have to navigate major challenges such as shortages of staff, spare parts, and engineers, as well as the high cost of oil.

"With the price per barrel unlikely to fall in 2023, air fares will remain high, at least through the summer season," he remarked.

Hotels' intensifying environmental-focused pursuits are creating improved experiences for guests, be it through architectural designs that bring soothing nature indoors or meals that are big on flavour and small on emissions. By Karen Yue

Great to be green

A glimpse of Pan Pacific Hotels Group's (PPHG) Parkroyal Collection properties will easily conjure visions of an alternate universe where lush, leafy giant structures dominate the skyline.

This is the result of the brand's decision to make iconic and biophilic design a cornerstone of its architectural direction. Its first biophilic hotel, Parkroyal Collection Pickering in Singapore, is such a success that both its design and sustainable achievements have earned it numerous awards, media coverage and social media posts.

Parkroyal Collection Marina Bay in Singapore, the second property to open under the brand, is no shadow of its sister. Its sky-lit indoor atrium – said to be South-east Asia's largest – is home to more than 2,400 plants, trees, shrubs and groundcovers.

When Parkroyal Collection Kuala Lumpur opened in June 2022, it carried the brand's biophilic design promise, with a vertical garden facade and roof terraces showcasing 1,208m^2 of plants and trees.

The fourth development to come in 2026, the Parkroyal Collection Faber House in Singapore, will be another one to watch for fans of biophilic design. The 250-key hotel will form part of an 18-storey development in the heart of Singapore's shopping belt. Its stellar address aside, the hotel will draw eyeballs with its façade of intense outdoor greening and cascading water features, bringing much needed greenery to the district packed with malls.

"But these are more than just aesthetics," said Choe Peng Sum, PPHG's CEO, during a panel discussion hosted under the Hospitality Conference 2023 by SHATEC – The International Hotel & Tourism School (Singapore) earlier in March.

"All that greenery gives these properties a different quality of air and cools the air naturally. Reducing just two degree Celsius without the use of air-conditioning means substantial energy savings," he explained.

Furthermore, with these properties adopting stringent environmentally sustainable operations, such as waste and water management, beyond their pretty biophilic features, Choe emphasised that going green is a sensible business move.

Citing an example, Choe said securing the Green Mark Platinum certification from the Singapore Building and Construction Authority for his company's soon-to-launch Pan Pacific Orchard resulted in a S$120 million (US$90 million) green loan, up to three per cent additional gross floor area – which he said could mean an extra floor of guestrooms, and cash incentive to lower upfront cost of energy efficiency retrofits.

Indeed, PPHG's sustainability efforts flow through its entire portfolio. It works closely with parent company UOL Group and respective hotel owners to determine the ideal design for the property, and if possible, incorporate environmentally friendly systems.

A PPHG spokesperson told *TTG Asia*: "To invest in complete biophilic design with environmentally-friendly systems is not cheap, and not easy – it is crucial to have the hotel owners' buy-in and to believe in the returns, both in long-term cost savings and in securing strong brand equity."

Top-level commitment

At Meliá Hotels International, sustainability commitment has top-level involvement. Its sustainability directions are led by a Sustainability Committee formed in 2020, with two members of the Executive Committee holding seats.

The company's sustainability vice president, Lourdes Ripoll de Oleza, told *TTG Asia*: "This fact gives it the executive impetus at the highest level necessary to ensure that decisions are passed downstream to the operation. This committee maintains a close link with our Board of Directors as it reports directly to one of its committees."

At the same time, day-to-day operations are assumed by the Sustainability department, which reports directly to the executive vice president and CEO. Owners are also an essential part of the commitment, and they would "share their thoughts on sustainability, and address

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From left: Sofitel Singapore Sentosa Resort & Spa's lemon garden; Pan Pacific Orchard

concerns and potential actions that we can promote together".

Sofitel Singapore Sentosa Resort & Spa, which has started to establish a farm on its premises, has its sustainability strategy and goals championed by members of a task force comprising key departments such as housekeeping, engineering, human resources, culinary, purchasing, food and beverage, front office, sales and marketing communications. This task force supports the resort's cluster general manager Cavaliere Giovanni Viterale and general manager Robert Gauer.

Vehicle for education

Hotels committed to sustainability are realising that they can play a part in educating their guests on how to be sustainable back home.

Meliá Hotels International took advantage of Earth Day on April 22 this year to offer guests at its South-east Asian properties interesting activities rooted in sustainability concepts. Sol by Meliá Benoa Bali, Indonesia, for instance, hosted a beach Cleaning Blitz with opportunities for guests to join in, along with sustainable craft activities for kids where they painted bags and for adults to make torches using waste cooking oil.

Earth Day may be over by now, but learning opportunities at Meliá properties continue. Sol by Meliá Phu Quoc offers candle-making workshops using old candles; Meliá Phuket Mai Khao offers upcycled bottle painting; Meliá Bali runs a coral reef recovery project with local non-profit, Nusa Dua Reef Foundation, and invites guests to support it with purchases of coral plantation activities.

Sofitel Singapore Sentosa Resort & Spa's farm, set up in 2022 as part of its food resiliency measures, has helped to provide more sustainable dining and cocktail options. A lemon tree garden now feeds the culinary and mixology teams. At LeBar, lemon leaves from the garden and watermelon tincture made from watermelon skin obtained from the kitchen are used to concoct a refreshing Sentosa Sling. The garden recently welcomed an Amalfi lemon plant, gifted by local Peranakan culinary doyenne Violet Oon.

"We are very much looking forward to an Amalfi lemon tree in the coming months. Additionally, our team has just planted a crop of vegetables and herbs on an adjacent plot of land facing the South China Sea," shared Viterale.

The property is also sharpening its farm-to-table offering. In March 2023, it was awarded the Singapore Food Agency Farm-To-Table Recognition (Highest Tier) with at least 15 per cent of local produce sourced across three or more food categories (Hen Shell Eggs, Leafy Vegetables, Beansprouts and/or Fish categories).

"This inaugural award reinforces our resort's commitment to supporting local producers and at the same time, ensures we are part of a resilient food supply chain that is in alignment with the Singapore Green Plan 2030. In addition, it ensures higher quality and fresher ingredients due to a shorter period of transportation and enables the chefs to showcase uniquely created menus that highlight local flavours," said Viterale.

Further, it partners with food tech brands such as Very Dairy and OnlyEg to create innovative yet healthy menu offerings.

At PPHG properties, guests learn to live day-to-day with reduced environmental impact. Those staying at Pan Pacific Orchard are able to refill their bottles with fresh drinking water from in-room filtered water dispensers, while long-staying guests at Parkroyal Nay Pyi Taw can grow their own plants in a plot at the Organic Garden.

"While many of our investments and efforts run in the background and are not visible to guests, we find creative and engaging means to incorporate sustainability into the guest experience," said the PPHG spokesperson.

> **Our owners are an essential part of (our sustainability) commitment.**
>
> **Lourdes Ripoll de Oleza**
> Sustainability vice president,
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As Silversea Cruises returns to business, it has marked Asia out to be a critical region for both customer sourcing and ship deployment. Adam Radwanski, managing director for Asia-Pacific, tells Karen Yue why

Sign of Asia rising

There is so much happening at Silversea Cruises right now. Let's start with your Nova-class ships that are launching this year. Why is this exciting?

The Nova-class ships are revolutionary for a number of reasons. There are a lot of unique technology developments – all thanks to (parent) Royal Caribbean Group's innovative approach to cruising.

This class adopts an asymmetrical design, lending to public spaces that are unheard of in other ships. In a normal symmetrical ship, everything is balanced. So, you'd find the pool in the middle of the ship and so on. With Nova-class ships, common spaces are designed to optimise vastness of space and to open up into the destination. For example, the pool is located closer to the side, giving guests the impression of infinity view of ocean and sky while they are swimming.

In keeping with our intention to optimise space, we use a lot of glass walls and floor-to-ceiling windows across the ship, instead of regular windows and portholes, which altogether create a completely different ambience onboard.

Another important design element is that the Nova-class ships are designed horizontally, which means entire floors are dedicated to public spaces and facilities while others to accommodation. With this, we can create significantly more interesting suite categories especially in the forward and aft sections. The Otium Suite, located in the premium aft corner position, is one of our newest, finest and biggest suites. It comes with a private Jacuzzi and a huge balcony from which guests can enjoy unprecedented 270-degree view of the destination they are arriving into.

We are also very proud of the Nova-class's sustainability features. *Silver Nova*, the first ship in this class, is powered by liquefied natural gas (LNG) as its principal fuel source. There are a lot of other technology details that enable us to cut emissions by 40 per cent (compared against our current class of ships). This is a revolutionary achievement in our efforts towards sustainability and our journey to 2050 net zero emissions target as a group.

It is hard to put into words all that are exciting about the Nova-class ships as well as the experiences that are awaiting our travel partners and guests. They will just have to come and see it for themselves.

Are you planning now for the first trade partner familiarisation on the *Silver Nova*?

The first couple of sailings have sold very well, so it would be very difficult for us to carve out space for our trade partners.

One of the key challenges we face in planning familiarisation is that we are launching *Silver Nova* in the middle of a very busy Mediterranean season. *Silver Nova*'s many open spaces make it the perfect ship for warm climate sailings, so it has been very popular with our customers. Plus, we've put her on some very beautiful itineraries.

Of course, we are working on making sure our partners are able to experience *Silver Nova*. For those who cannot experience it yet in person, we have amazing training materials and webinars to acquaint them with it. However, as *Silver Nova* is starting to become our flagship product, we most definitely want to have our luxury network partners onboard for a true experience.

How far ahead did bookings come in for the *Silver Nova*?

Bookings are in mostly 12 to 24 months ahead, which is fantastic because it gives us a strong prediction of how well the cruise can perform.

In Asia, booking windows vary. The Singapore market usually books eight to 12 months in advance, while the more mature cruising market of Australia books two years out.

***Silver Nova* will be homeported in Singapore along with your other ships for the next few seasons. Will you tell us more about the company's view of Asia as both a destination for luxury cruises and customer source market?**

Silversea is growing double-digit each year in terms of capacity, and we want to make Asia a part of our strategic growth. We want to make sure we have all the right resources, people and tools to grow our presence here. We want to support our travel agent community with the right product for their Asian guests. And we are doing all of that this year.

The Asian customer that we are looking for is the affluent person who appreciates the style, ambience and elegance of the Silversea product.

Finn Partners published in March a piece of research that looked into how China's affluent travellers intended to travel once they could. Surveyed Chinese travellers said they would take longer trips, and seek slower, restorative travel as opposed to one packed with activities. These are exciting findings for us because these are all that we stand for.

I must point out that alongside our Asia growth strategy stands our continued deliberate approach towards sourcing guests from all over the world. There are a lot of companies that rely heavily on the US market, recognised as the biggest and wealthiest cruising market in the world. Silversea has a different position on this. We are, dare I say, the most international cruise line in the world. Our guests love that they can make friends with truly multinational people onboard, and we are very proud of this.

Now, to answer the second part of your question – Asia is also strategic for our deployment. For our 2024/25 season, we will have the biggest deployment ever in Asia. We will have 21 turnarounds in Singapore – four of them on *Silver Nova*; four of them on our second newest ship, *Silver Dawn*; and the rest on various ships including *Silver Moon* and *Silver Muse*.

Many of our customers have missed being in Asia during the travel closure. To give you an idea of how much demand we had for our Asian sailings, we recently completed our Japan Cherry Blossom season with almost full sailings and earned incredibly high scores on guest satisfaction.

Silversea has a three-year partnership with the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) to grow the luxury cruise industry. How crucial are such tourism board partnerships to Silversea's regional business goals?

Working with a tourism board is becoming really critical because of our ambitions. We want to be an ultra luxury cruise line with the best in class destination experiences. What we can certainly do alone very well is, you know, build a great ship and deliver on excellent onboard experience. But to deliver a great destination experience, we need very close cooperation with the local government, tourism board and businesses.

Instead of relying on big international DMCs to provide our shore excursions around the world, we are detaching ourselves from them and sourcing for smaller partners and working more closely with local tourism boards for truly unique and incredible experiences that our well-travelled customers will appreciate.

There are more and more tourism boards and governments that are seeing the value of courting high-end travellers, so we are very open to engaging with like-minded agencies.

Which other governments are engaging Silversea in the same manner?

Hong Kong is one, and we had a high-level dialogue with Japanese government agencies in June, involving the wider Royal Caribbean Group.

Japan makes a very interesting case study for cruise tourism development. Tourism is concentrated around the big cities of Tokyo, Osaka and Kyoto. During peak seasons, these cities are packed. They are stunning and offer lots of fun, of course. But once you jump onto our ship to visit other parts of Japan, you will discover a whole different experience just by calling at small coastal towns. They are quaint, authentic, beautiful, and have hardly any tourists.

There are so many destinations in Asia that can benefit from this form of travel, as they have numerous coastal gems and islands waiting to be seen and appreciated.

> **"Cruises have the ability to disperse tourism deeper into a destination in an easy way – easy because you can visit 10 or 12 coastal cities without having to pack and unpack."**

Thailand Travel Mart Plus 2023 showcases a variety of products offering fresh and quality tourism experiences with a focus on sustainability

To the land of smiles

UNWTO's effort to support rural development through tourism birthed the Best Tourism Villages initiative in 2021. Of the 70 tourism villages inducted into this stringent programme so far, 14 are in Asia. Karen Yue spots six that you can support through your tours

Wholesome villages

Dazhai, China, inducted 2022

Dazhai village in a mountainous part of northern Guangxi, China has developed a tourism forte built upon its thousand-year terrace farming culture and Red Yao ethnic community.

Visitors are able to learn how the village, which dates back more than 2,300 years, turned its barren hillsides into terraced farmland through informative sessions on traditional farming and wetland science, and participation in farming activities such as ploughing, harvesting and rice drying.

There is also an opportunity to join in ethnic cultural experience activities such as Red Yao embroidery dances and traditional festivals.

Kampung Batu Puteh, Malaysia, inducted 2021

After 40 years of having its rainforests chopped down by large companies in search of logs, Batu Puteh in Sabah, Malaysia finally gained a new lease on life in 1996. The government created a small protected Forest Reserve around the village while a group of local youths took it upon themselves to create avenues for sustainable income from tourism while conserving their traditions and protecting the remaining forest ecosystem.

Their effort resulted in five key products and four tourism associations across the village by 2020. In 2003, the village tourism associations joined forces to establish the Community Cooperative KOPEL, with the goal of training and building local capacity to conserve the surrounding ecosystem and local culture while generating income for the community through a variety of tourism products and activities.

Visitors to Batu Puteh can participate in tree planting and forest restoration works, spot local wildlife in the rainforests, and stay with local host families as part of the Village Homestay Program, which drives tourism dollars into the pockets of village residents.

Interact with Thai Hai's Tay community

Nglanggeran, Indonesia, inducted 2021

The people of Nglanggeran village, located 25km from Yogyakarta city in Indonesia, have pooled the best of their resources – its natural landscape and expertise of its resident farmers, plantation workers and ranchers – to create a community-based tourism product.

Nglanggeran is home to Gunung Api Purba, an ancient volcano that is also part of the UNESCO Global Geopark of Mount Sewu. Visitors can trek up the volcano to study its geological formation and take in the picturesque views.

Its population supports local homestays, providing visitors with an authentic stay in the countryside where they can experience an *etawa* goat farm, learn about chocolate processing, hand-painted *batik* and traditional way of life, among others.

Its youths are also very much involved in tourism activities, leading to stronger buy-ins from the community and support of new initiatives.

Even as tourism develops here, contributing to other sectors like cocoa production, it does not replace existing occupations in agriculture, craftsmanship, and others, ensuring resilience in times of crisis.

Purple Island, South Korea, inducted 2021

South Korea's Purple Island is over 1,000 years old and recognised for its natural wonders – it is designated a UNESCO World Natural Heritage Site and home to the Shinandadohae Biosphere Reserve, which comprises the Shinandadohae National Park and the Korean Mudflats Provincial Park.

Its birth as a tourism destination in 2015 was led by the aging residents of Banwol and Bakji islands, who were determined to save their villages. They built the Purple Bridge, painted their houses purple, and planted Asta chrysanthemums, magnolia lilies and lavender – all to ensure Purple Island is in full bloom all year round.

Visitors can appreciate a wide diversity of nature and culture, from learning how its traditional fishing heritage is preserved, exploring the Banwol Village Dang Forest, to walking the 1,462m Purple Bridge that connects the two islands.

Pochampally, India, inducted 2021

India's Pochampally village has been able to develop a tourism concept upon its reputation as the cradle of *ikat* hand-woven products and home to more than 10,000 skilled weaving families who have been maintaining traditional techniques for centuries.

The government of Andhra Pradesh launched the Pochampally Rural Tourism Project in 2007 to attract tourism keen on learning about its traditional weaving artistry.

The village also partnered with Microsoft and Chaitanya Bharti, a non-profit organisation, to develop a value chain and integrate it with the tourism industry. Skill development programmes, digital literacy initiatives, and support from various governmental and non-governmental organisations have created more and better quality jobs.

Thai Hai, Vietnam, inducted 2022

Four generations of Tay community reside in this UNESCO cultural heritage village, preserving their traditional culture, including language, customs, rituals, ceremonies and attire that now provide a precious insight for visiting travellers.

Visitors can join in traditional spiritual festivals, during which villagers, armed with specific cultural knowledge and language skills, act as tour guides; experience a homestay in a traditional stilts house; and learn about Thai Hai's Vuon Ao Chuong Integrated Farming Systems as well as its practice of having each household specialising in unique products, such as traditional cakes and handicrafts, to ensure quality and diversity.

Learn how Dazhai Village transformed its barren hillsides into rich farmland

Support the youths who are instrumental in Kampung Batu Puteh's transformation

Experience life in the countryside at Nglanggeran

Explore Purple Island's natural landscapes and fishing traditions

Appreciate Pochampally's traditional ikat weaving techniques

Asia is home to some of the most desirable resorts for destination weddings. Some are stunning for their iconic venues for champagne toasts and endless feasts, while others offer curated guests experiences and opportunities to support local communities. By Karen Yue

Time for love

Lux* South Ari Atoll, the Maldives

Weddings with small footprint on the environment and big impact on the local community can be achieved at Lux* South Ari Atoll in the Maldives. At this resort, 10 per cent of proceeds from wedding packages go into funding education for underprivileged children at one of many orphanages the resort supports, such as UNICEF Maldives, Fiyavathi Orphanage and Kuda Kudhinge Hiya. The couple and their guests can also choose to visit a local orphanage, at a supplementary fee.

Alternatively, the wedding party can choose to support the oceans and restore the marine ecosystem by adopting a coral frame. They will receive updates on growth progress every six to nine months.

The Anam Cam Ranh, Vietnam

Rising on Vietnam's scenic Cam Ranh peninsula, The Anam Cam Ranh is an elegant sanctuary, where its architecture is inspired by a regal era of the region. Imperial-style roofs, lanterns, big-bellied water vases, decorative pools, customised mosaic floor tiles and stone pathways lend a fairy-tale atmosphere to wedding celebrations.

Wedding planners will be able to house many guests joining in the celebrations, thanks to the resort's selection of 77 villas as well as 136 rooms and suites.

The resort's many recreational facilities, from a 3D cinema to a golf putting green, allows wedding parties to weave in fun options in between days of champagne toasts and grand feasts.

Ayana Estate, Indonesia

For couples prioritising variety of celebration experiences and party venues, the massive Ayana Estate in Bali is a top choice. The 90-hectare property is an integrated resort comprising four luxury hotels – Ayana Villas Bali, Ayana Segara Bali, Ayana Resort Bali, and Rimba by Ayana Bali – along with a selection of 15 lavish, dreamlike wedding venues indoor and out.

Some of the iconic locations onsite for wedding receptions include the Rock Bar, set within sight of the Indian Ocean's sapphire waters; Kisik Pier, the only private pier in Bali that welcomes celebrations of unions; and Sky, a venue that appears to be suspended above the Indian Ocean.

Couple and their guests can expect to experience Ayana's legendary five-star service. While a wide range of wedding packages are available, Ayana Estate is also known for its ability to personalise experiences and bring romantic ideas to life.

The St. Regis Maldives Vommuli

This luxurious retreat is located on an exclusive, nine-hectare island in the Dhaalu Atoll of the Maldives, and welcomes island buy-outs for celebrations that demand the utmost privacy.

With island buy-outs, newly-weds and their guests will enjoy full access of the island's facilities along with the St. Regis brand's renowned butler service. The Butler Service Team stands by to curate fully personalised experiences for every guest, from a liberating dive to rejuvenating spa treatment, allowing one and all to have a memorable sojourn beyond the celebration of love.

After vows are exchanged, parties can gather at Decanter, the resort's underground wine cellar, where wine-pairing dinners can be arranged. Alternatively, The Whale Bar and Grill offers a magical dining destination at sunset.

Cape Fahn Hotel, Koh Samui

Set on a private island in the Gulf of Thailand and surrounded by some of nature's best sights, Cape Fahn Hotel has witnessed some stunning weddings, including that of a Thai celebrity in 2018 when it first opened.

The hotel with 22 private villas can be hired completely for private celebrations, and offers two different wedding ceremonies – a Thai Buddhist ceremony complete with blessings from monks and a 30-minute Thai long drum procession; and a Christian ceremony set on a secluded cliff's edge overlooking the ocean.

The signature wedding venue here is the Wedding Terrace, where breathtaking ocean views stretch out to the horizon. After ceremonial proceedings, dinners can be hosted at Long Dtai, which specialises in Southern-Thai seafood that is built on sustainable sourcing.

Sofitel Singapore Sentosa Resort & Spa

Want a laidback wedding amid nature and yet be within easy reach of big city conveniences? Sofitel Singapore Sentosa Resort & Spa is the answer.

Located on the southern edge of Sentosa island, the resort is set on 10.9 hectares of lush greenery with outdoor palatial spaces and a panoramic view of the South China Sea. It welcomes intimate celebrations as well as massive parties where resort buy-outs come in handy. Parties can also choose to secure just one of the two accommodation wings at the 215-key property.

Wedding planners have the luxury of choice in terms of event spaces, from two pillar-free ballrooms and their adjacent outdoor spaces to the sunset deck at The Cliff and any of the four Villa du Jardin. The resort's standalone Celebrations and Events Centre, which has its own driveway and drop-off point plus a bridal suite next door, is a perk for parties demanding privacy.

As a pet-friendly resort, furkid ringbearers are welcome.

Wedding feasts can be customised, and the resort can facilitate halal food catering through a Muslim vendor.

For celebrations across days, guests can be treated to an indulgent private spa and pool party at the Sofitel Spa, or a lively mixology workshop at the outdoor pavilion lounge, LeBar.

A true welcome to all

State governments around Australia have rolled out targeted initiatives to change perceptions and help tourism businesses to provide greater destination experiences for visitors of all abilities. By Rachel AJ Lee

Queensland has designated 2023 to be the Year of Accessible Tourism, part of the Towards Tourism 2032 strategy to provide better destination experiences for visitors of all abilities, as well as provide legacy outcomes – including built infrastructure and skills development for tourism operators – across the state in preparation for Brisbane Olympics 2032.

Annastacia Palaszczuk, premier of Queensland, said: "Almost one in five people have a disability and spend about A$8 billion (US$5.2 billion) on tourism services annually. Dedicating 2023 to The Year of Accessible Tourism will drive change and create opportunities for both industry and travellers and create a legacy our State can be proud of."

The strategy gets A$12 million in government funding, of which A$1 million has been designated to raising awareness of accessibility needs and services, another A$1 million to promoting accessible Queensland visitor experiences, and the remaining A$10 million is set aside for the Accessible Tourism Fund for small and medium businesses to build infrastructure and install technology to assist travellers with an impairment.

Queensland's minister for tourism, innovation and sport and minister assisting the premier on Olympics and Paralympics sport and engagement, Stirling Hinchliffe, said: "These grants will support upgrades of accessible visitor infrastructure and technology that will further enhance Queensland's reputation as an all-abilities destination of choice. More and more people with a disability and their families are looking for travel options that can cater to their needs.

"We want this year to be the transformation that creates an enduring legacy for Queensland as an inclusive, world-class visitor destination."

The Accessible Tourism in Queensland project is already operational in Brisbane, the Gold and Sunshine Coasts, Fraser Coast, North and Far North and Outback Queensland.

Differently-abled visitors are able to experience Gold Coast beaches, with Burleigh Beach offering accessible beach matting, mobi-chairs and beach wheelchairs; explore underground lava tubes at Undara Volcanic National Park; and get up close to marine life on the Great Barrier Reef on a day cruise to the floating platform at Agincourt Reef which has a chairlift for easy water access.

Moreover, as part of Queensland's submission to the International Olympic Committee in mid-2021, the state is committed to promoting greater inclusion, diversity and accessibility in the planning and delivery of the Brisbane 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games.

Initial strategies include enhancing accessibility through urban planning and accessible tourism by embedding universal design principles in regional plans to enhance urban amenity and public transport solutions, and increasing career pathways by partnering with the industry to create new and innovative jobs for people with a disability while encouraging business owners to embrace inclusion.

Although Queensland may be leading the charge, other states including Tasmania, Northern Territory, and Western Australia are not far behind.

Sarah Clark, CEO of Tourism Tasmania, stated: "The accessible tourism market is fast-growing, and in Tasmania, there is an increasing understanding and appreciation of travellers' diverse needs and desires. It's a journey, and we've made some great progress.

"With accessibility forming part of the Tasmanian tourism industry's positive impact agenda, Tasmania's attractions, experiences and accommodation offerings are increasingly able to cater to accessibility needs and provide more information about how their tourism offering is inclusive for everyone."

Moreover, Tasmania has partnered with Vacayit to provide 50 in-depth audio guides about its restaurants, farm stays, distilleries, cruises, markets, festivals and

Get up close with the animals at the Adelaide Zoo

Tourism Australia

heritage sites on the free Vacayit app. Produced for blind and low-vision travellers, the guides combine rich sensory descriptions and engaging storytelling with helpful travel advice. These can also be read as transcripts for people who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Tasmania's spectacular tracts of nature, evident from its 19 national parks, can be enjoyed by travellers of all abilities. Motorised wheelchairs and scooters are already permitted on tracks like the Russell Falls track in Mount Field National Park, and Cradle Mountain Rainforest Walk. Some parks also offer all-terrain TrailRider wheelchairs for complimentary hire (though bookings are required in advance), enabling travellers to explore more rugged tracks.

However, to make tourism more accessible across the entire industry, Tony Quarmby, executive director marketing at Tourism NT, said: "It needs to become a part of every business' DNA. There shouldn't be a special place on a website or a standalone accessible itinerary – it should be integrated into everything that tourism businesses do and put forward to the consumer."

Input is also obtained from the community. For example, Tourism NT's sample five-day itinerary in the Top End was created with the assistance of Sarah Skopellos, a manual wheelchair user and disability advocate who has lived in Darwin for 30 years. Another five-day itinerary in the Red Centre was created with the help of Justine Petrick, who has experience as a carer for an immediate family member with wheelchair needs, and vast knowledge of the National Disability Insurance Scheme and aged care system.

"Our goal at Tourism NT is not to have accessibility as a standalone pillar but rather a part of everyday operations for NT tourism businesses. It goes another level in understanding the guests' needs and also their expectations; whether that be accessibility needs, sustainability concerns or ethical practices; it's about tailoring each interaction with our customer," added Quarmby.

That is why the latest Northern Territory attractions have been built with accessible tourism in mind.

These include Wintjiru Wiru by Voyages Indigenous Tourism as well as Light Towers in Kings Canyon Resort. Other tourism products that have long provided accessible tours include wildlife encounters such as Crocosaurus Cove in Darwin, Outback Tour Services' Uluru tours, and Ramada Suites by Wyndham Zen Quarter Darwin, which has a ramp access to the deck and a hoist for getting in and out of the water.

Tourism Western Australia's managing director, Carolyn Turnbull, added: "Accessible tourism has always been a priority, and we have undergone an accessible tourism strategy that was developed and finalised last year.

"More importantly, that will be at the forefront of our 10-year visitor economy strategy, which is currently being developed; it will be a big part of our strategic platform moving forward."

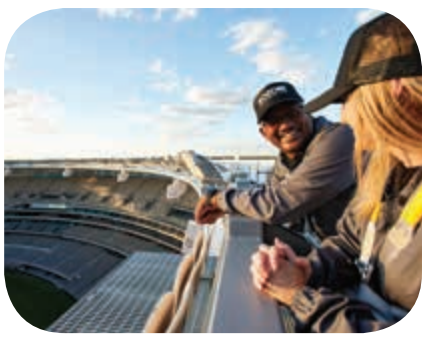
Tourism Australia

Walking in the National Botanic Gardens in Canberra

> **Tourism businesses are often the first port of call when visitors come to stay and play. What better way to build a more welcoming and inclusive Queensland than through our accessible guest experiences. We know that many tourism operators will jump at the chance to improve their visitor offerings through this support package.**
>
> **Brett Fraser**
> CEO, Queensland Tourism Industry Council

What's hot | Equal access

By Rachel AJ Lee



Up on the roof

Perth's Optus Stadium has Halo rooftop tours that provide breathtaking views of the stadium, 42 metres above ground, while Vertigo is the latest rooftop experience where visitors and tour groups can walk along a new platform projecting five metres beyond the edge of the stadium roof, allowing the more daring to lean out from the rail-less platform towards the playing field.

The new platform is accessible to all ages and abilities, with lift access available for those that require it. Other accessible experiences available through The Ozone include behind-the-scenes tours and Aboriginal experiences.

Surf's up

Lets go Surfing was started by Brenda Miley out of the back of a Kombi van in 1995 as an idea to encourage more women to surf.

Today, it operates in four locations throughout New South Wales – Bondi, Byron Bay, Ballina, and Maroubra – and has expanded its surfing classes and programmes to help everyone catch some waves.

Differently-abled guests are welcome, and instructors will modify their class accordingly to match their student's ability. Their main wish is for their guests to enjoy the ocean, and have an amazing time.

Desert night show

Wintjiri Wiru is a cultural storytelling experience at Uluru, developed in partnership with the Anangu community. The light and sound show depict aspects of the Mala story, backed by drone, laser and light projection technology.

Visitors can enjoy the show on a sustainably-built platform atop a desert dune – accessed via a boardwalk – with panoramic views of both Uluru and Kata Tjuta on the horizon.

Options include the 1.5-hour-long After Dark that comes with pre-show light refreshments, and the three-hour Wintjiri Wiru Sunset Dinner.

Feed the dolphins

Just a 75-minute ferry ride offshore from Brisbane on Moreton Island is the Tangalooma Wild Dolphin Feeding Experience, included in selected accommodation and day cruise packages.

Each evening at sunset, the playful, wild bottlenose dolphins arrive, where guests will have the unforgettable experience of feeding them by hand.

The island has a beach wheelchair for beach activities and dolphin feeds. The entire Tangalooma Island Resort is also wheelchair-friendly, and accessible hotel rooms with lift access are available in Kookaburra Lodge.

Gnsha Bruev/shutterstock

Dubai cityscape

Gearing up for success

Dubai has gone all out to develop its tourism offerings, with a focus on sustainability, in the hopes of attracting more travellers from Asia. By Marissa Carruthers

Dubai is on track to becoming one of the most visited international destinations of 2023, welcoming 4.67 million overnight visitors in 1Q2023 – and it has its eyes firmly pinned on the Chinese rebound to further bolster arrival.

According to figures from Dubai's Department of Economy and Tourism (DET), this marks a 17 per cent uptick on the same period last year, positioning Dubai as the fastest recovering destination globally, with the nation achieving 98 per cent of pre-pandemic levels.

DET's director general said this has been achieved by rolling out aggressive marketing campaigns worldwide, as well as attracting a string of major international business and leisure events.

"As we look ahead to further accelerating momentum in our tourism sector, the pillars of sustainability, gastronomy, trade, and technology will form the foundation of our future success," said Helal Saeed Almarri. He added that as Dubai prepares to host UN climate change conference, COP28, Dubai is focusing on promoting sustainable tourism.

During 1Q2023, South Asia accounted for 16 per cent of total international arrivals, with North Asia and South-east Asia taking in six per cent, and Australasia one per cent. In fact, South Asian arrivals have almost reached pre-pandemic tourism levels.

India was Dubai's top source market, attracting 612,000 visitors in the first three months of 2023. China came in at 11th place with 94,000, the Philippines 18th with 57,000, and Australia 19th with 56,000.

Mohamed Al Rais, deputy managing director of Al Rais Travel, said the Asian market continues to grow, with all eyes pinned on China's full rebound, which is predicted for the 2H2023. He added that with Dubai slated to host COP28 from November 30 to December 12, the company's main focus is on promoting sustainable tourism.

"We are trying to increase awareness of sustainable tourism, with a focus on sustainable travel, accommodation and other related segments within the market," he said, adding this is also increasingly what travellers are demanding.

In addition to hosting the UN climate change conference, Dubai will welcome a series of major international events in 2023 that are expected to attract more international visitors to its shores. These include Dubai Summer Surprises, Dubai Esports and Games Festival, which Dubai Tourism expects to be a hit with Asian nations, and Dubai Fitness Challenge.

Anabela Radosevic, manager of B2B sales and service at Arabian Adventures, said desert safaris, private city tours and morning desert adventures remain popular activities with the Asian market, in particular Japanese, South Korean and Chinese visitors. Arabian Adventures has sales offices in Japan and China.

"Asia remains a top source market for Arabian Adventures in its capacity as a DMC, offering end-to-end destination services to international travel trade partners, as well as Dubai desert safari and UAE city tour offerings, cruise handlings and events services," said Radosevic. "Of all Asian markets, for Arabian Adventures, Japan has been showing the strongest recovery post-pandemic, followed by South Korea and China."

Attractions are also eyeing up Asian visitors. Madame Tussauds Dubai, which opened in 2021, said India is currently its strongest market from the region, while Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines are growing source markets.

"An increase in visitors from Asia is definitely evident since travel resumed. We are excited to welcome more visitors

What's hot | Live it up

By Marissa Carruthers

Stay and dine

Boasting 795 keys spread across 43 stories, Atlantis The Royal opened earlier this year on the Palm Jumeirah. Boasting 90 swimming pools, including a rooftop sky pool that looks over The Palm, and a vast wellness centre and spa. There are also 17 restaurants and bars, including La Mar by Gastón Acurio, Nobu by the Beach, and Dinner by Heston Blumenthal. The lobby bar is also home to the largest jelly fish tank in the world.

Peek into the past

Holding the title of the UAE's largest heritage museum, Al Shindagha presents the perfect place to delve into Dubai's history, heritage and culture. Located in the Creek area, the museum features more than 20 pavilions that offer a unique insight into the Emirate's history and its development over the years. Pavilions at the open-air venue include a perfume house, traditional crafts, traditional jewellery, culture of the sea, a poetry house and Al Maktoum Residence.

Perfect for events

Building on the legacy of Expo 2020 Dubai, Expo City has opened as a future-centric sustainable mini city, bringing back many of the entertainment offerings that pulled people from across the globe in 2022. This includes the flagship Al Wasl Plaza, the Garden in the Sky observation tower, the Surreal water feature and several main thematic pavilions. It also boasts world-class conference facilities that will host COP28.

More than just books

Another iconic addition to Dubai is the Mohammed Bin Rashid Library, built on the historic Dubai Creek in the shape of a traditional Islamic lectern. The library holds the title of the region's largest, spanning 54,000m² and taking in nine floors. It houses several specialised collections, carrying more than one million titles in multiple languages. It is also home to various exhibition rooms, a café and bookstore.

TasfotoNL/shutterstoc

Tourists in the ancient covered textile souq Bur Dubai in the old city centre

as this trend continues," said Samantha Joffe, marketing manager at Madame Tussauds Dubai.

She added that visitors from the Asia region are excited to see international stars in the attraction, mainly Tom Cruise, Audrey Hepburn, and Taylor Swift's wax figures, as well as the dedicated Bollywood Zone with figures of Shah Rukh Khan, Katrina Kaif, Salman Khan and Ranveer Kapoor, and wax figures of Xi Jinping and Jackie Chan.

"China remains an important source market for both Dubai as a destination and Madame Tussauds Dubai, with strong growth potential and focus as travel resumes," she added.

In 2019, Dubai welcomed almost one million visitors, marking an almost 15 per cent year-on-year (YoY) increase.

In 2022, 177,000 Chinese visitors landed in Dubai. While this represents a 131 per cent YoY increase, China only lifted its Covid restrictions in January 2023 and tourism players are awaiting the big rebound.

Al Rais said that other than Dubai, AlUla in Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan are destinations that are traditionally marketed to Chinese visitors – he anticipates these will be among the first to benefit from the Chinese travel rebound.

In a bid to cement its title as the most visited destination of 2023, Dubai is continuing to provide simplified entry and stay measures for international arrivals, such as the golden visa, five-year multi-entry visa, virtual working, and retirement in Dubai programmes.

> **"As we look ahead to further accelerating momentum in our tourism sector, the pillars of sustainability, gastronomy, trade, and technology will form the foundation of our future success."**
>
> **Helal Saeed Almarri**
> Director general,
> Department of Economy and Tourism, Dubai

Springfield is a small town in the Selwyn District of Canterbury, in the South Island of New Zealand

Doing tourism better

New Zealand is on a mission to educate visitors on how to bring about a positive impact on their travels through the country, so as to ensure a better future for its tourism industry. By Rachel AJ Lee

Regenerative tourism is the direction which New Zealand has taken coming out of the pandemic, where the country's goal is to go beyond sustainable travel, and help visitors leave it in a much better place than when they first arrived.

Before the pandemic, New Zealand was at risk from overtourism, where in 2019, the country of five million was hosting 11 million visitors a year from 2016 to 2019, shared Cameron Hayes, marketing manager sustainability, Tourism New Zealand. While this meant that the tourism sector was thriving and there were many economic and social benefits, this enormous number was putting a strain on the environment and its people.

This led to the creation of *Tiaki – Care for New Zealand*, as New Zealand sought to build back better after the pandemic. *Tiaki*, a Māori word that loosely translates to care, conserve, and protect, is made up of five behavioural pillars (Protect Nature, Keep NZ Clean, Be Prepared, Drive Carefully, and Show Respect) that inspire visitors to travel safely and conscientiously.

Acknowledging the Tiaki promise is one thing; visitors are also encouraged to walk the talk, such as by giving wildlife space, not using a drone, keeping camping areas clean, not drinking and driving, paying attention to speed limits, not littering, and respecting Māori sites.

Local tourism operators are making it easy for travellers to do the right thing.

Dale Burrows, director, Franz Josef Wilderness Tours, told *TTG Asia*: "One of our efforts includes a push for predator-free New Zealand, to give the kiwis (birds) a chance. We have partnered with Zero Invasive Predators and Predator Free South Westland initiative by assisting with transport to areas along the Lake Mapourika and Kiwi Sanctuary shoreline.

"We also assist with responses they have had through their network of AI Camera and monitoring systems in the surrounding rainforest."

One of the company's achievements was working with the Department of Conservation on the Operation Nest Egg programme to bring back the rare Rowi Kiwi back from the brink of extinction into a stable pocket of 500 birds; and in the last year or so, Franz Josef Wilderness Tours has also achieved carbon zero.

Guests on their tours within the Westland Tai Poutini National Park will also be able to check traps, and learn about conservation efforts firsthand.

Burrows added: "Education is a very important part of Tiaki. We teach guests about the flora and fauna of New Zealand, and sustainable practices like leaving only footprints."

Similarly, Darren Gamble, tourism manager of Mount White Station in Arthur's Pass, is offering longer, immersive stays that show tourists how close the locals' relationship with the land is.

Gamble elaborated: "Visitors get to learn about beekeeping through the three-hour pollen-to-plate experience. They go out with the beekeepers to harvest the honey, then to the extraction, before trying some honey paired with wines. We also can take guests to see the sheep, shepherds, and 15 dogs they work with. There's also a deer paddock onsite."

By revelling in these experiences, Gamble pointed out travellers will be able to learn about what farmers struggle with, and show them how much effort goes into shearing a sheep to produce enough wool to make a sweater, as well as reconnect with nature to boost mental health.

Further up on the North Island, Sam Sutton, director, Rotorua Rafting and Rotorua Ziplines, is on a mission to plant 100,000 native trees, which will in turn rid 90 per cent of gorse (a yellow-flowering shrub that is a major invasive plant species in New Zealand).

He told *TTG Asia*: "We have a whole pest control network set up, and it's easy for clients to participate in. These include planting a tree, or supporting a programme that deals with predators. New Zealand has the fastest rate of extinction

Miles Holden

From top: Foraging for Māori ingredients; and experience culture at Te Pā Tū

Miles Holden

of our indigenous species more so than any other country (due to invasive flora and fauna introduced by early settlers)."

During the company's rafting tours, guides take time to point out the different flora and fauna and explain their purposes. They also explain why rats and possums are killed – because these introduced animals are destroying New Zealand's ecosystem. Possums consume 20,000 tonnes of foliage each night, while 68,000 native birds are eaten by introduced predators every night.

Sutton opined: "Honestly, I don't think there's another industry that's got more focus and buy-in from the operators in all aspects. In New Zealand, regenerative tourism is at the core essence of what everybody does."

Rene de Monchy, chief executive, Tourism New Zealand, stated: "Our vision by 2030 is that we want all visitors to New Zealand to be of high quality, which will lead to a more productive and regenerative New Zealand."

He noted that "high-quality visitors" go beyond "high net worth visitors", and includes travellers who are engaged with New Zealand's culture and nature, and undertake a range of experiences at different times of the year.

"Visitors to New Zealand who've been influenced by our work either on a consumer or trade level will spend more, visit more regions, and come in the off-peak seasons, and have higher efficacy for New Zealand after they leave.

"These visitors will enrich the wellbeing of New Zealand, help to create jobs, restore nature, and enhance our heritage building. That is very important to us," said de Monchy.

> **In New Zealand, regenerative tourism is at the core essence of what everybody does.**
>
> **Sam Sutton**
> Director,
> Rotorua Rafting and
> Rotorua Ziplines

What's hot | On nature's doorstep

By Rachel AJ Lee

Rachel AJ Lee

Cute furry alpacas

A visit to Shamarra Alpacas, a 20-minute drive from the seaside town of Akaroa, will provide guests with a healthy serving of fluffy cuddles, cute selfies, touch their fur, and gain knowledge as to why alpacas are only shorn once a year (to avoid overheating and infections from parasites).

The natural therapy of the great outdoors can be found here, with the farm offering incredible views of the Akaroa harbour and the surrounding peaks. There is also a shop on-site selling luxurious and sustainably-made alpaca wool products, with sales going back into alpaca care.

On the wild side

On the west coast of the South Island, Franz Josef Wilderness Tours organises kayaking adventures, boat tours, fishing charters, as well as off-road quad bikes and buggy rides.

For activities on the water, visitors can view wildlife up close on Lake Mapourika against a backdrop of soaring peaks, and are taken on a guided rainforest walk through the Okarito Kiwi Sanctuary.

Those craving for an adrenaline rush will revel in a wild ride on the Waiho riverbed which flows from the Franz Josef Glacier, and splash through puddles on the Jurassic rainforest trails.

The lodge life

Located in Arthur's Pass National Park set amid rugged peaks and remote valleys, Mount White Station opened for stays in September 2022.

On the 40,000-hectare property is a main station lodge that sleeps up to 28 people, as well as two backcountry huts – equipped with flushing toilets and showers, and powered by solar panels – elsewhere on the property for those who want to slow it down to bask in the remoteness.

Walks, mountain biking, and water sports on the lake can be enjoyed, as well as various cattle station pursuits such as as the beekeeping experience, wildlife spotting, or a 4WD tour.

Adrenaline rush

Rotorua Rafting offers spectacular whitewater rafting on the Kaituna River, where guests will experience paddling down Ōkere Falls, Kaituna Falls, and the highest commercially rafted waterfall in the world – the seven-metre-high Tutea Falls.

Another way to see the falls and the river is by soaring above on a zipline up to speeds of 40kmh. The 2.5-hour experience involves 632 metres of ziplines, one swing bridge, and a network of elevated boardwalks. Guests will also be offered Māori tea, and a chance to plant a native tree in their name to become a part of the company's reforestation mission.

Ski vacations heat up

Asian holidaymakers are chasing excellent pow at ski resorts, feeding a strong rebound for winter holiday bookings, discovers Karen Yue

FamVeld/shutterstock

Younger families are showing up for ski holidays

A growing appreciation for winter sports and a strong desire for holidays in the great outdoors and colder climes have fired up intense interest in winter and ski holidays among Asian travellers, especially those from tropical zones.

Expedia data shows ski holiday bookings last winter season (December 1, 2022 to March 31, 2023) out of Asia have climbed to 70 per cent of pre-pandemic levels (December 1, 2019 to March 31, 2020). With ski resort bookings showing an average duration of three nights at least, Expedia believes travellers are staying on longer to ski.

Luxury travel specialist, Scott Dunn, told *TTG Asia* that Asian enquiries and bookings for ski vacations have spiked 250 per cent in the last ski season, compared to the previous season in 2021/2022.

Koo Ying Ying, Europe travel specialist, Scott Dunn, said the intense interest could be due to travel restrictions being lifted, allowing Asians to get back to planning their long-overdue winter fun.

Asians are also drawn to wintry landscapes, like Lapland and Iceland, and the chance to chase down aurora visions.

"Snow has always been a really strong pull factor for guests from Asia, especially (those living in) tropical climate," said Koo. "Post-pandemic, we also see that more guests are craving fresh air and longing to be in the great outdoors. The snowy mountains are the perfect place for this, and they also present a very different type of landscape compared to what most of us are accustomed to, which is another factor we think has led to this spike (in winter travel demand)."

When asked if Olympic Winter Games in Beijing 2022 and Pyeongchang 2018 could have fired up Asian interest in ski holidays, Rachael Harding, CEO for East and South Asia & Pacific at Club Med, said any major events on the world stage could influence consumer behaviour. Through the two Winter Olympics, winter sports as well as the host country are cast into the spotlight.

"The fact that Asia had two Winter Olympics in recent years certainly put the region on the map as a winter playground (and inspired people to see Asia as an option) for mountain holidays," Harding told *TTG Asia*.

She added that the games had also created a new pool of young atheletes and led to more ski associations opening up in various countries across Asia.

"A big case is the formation of the Ski and Snowboard Association of Thailand in 2016. Thailand is now our most aggressive market to rebound," she said.

That said, Club Med mountain resorts have seen "this consistent trend for quite some time", where ski business now contributes a third of total business compared to just 10 per cent in 2015.

Demand is growing year on year and "completely outstripping the capacity that we have", remarked Harding.

Scott Dunn expects strong bookings to continue into the 2023/2024 season. "We've just opened bookings for the next ski season and there is already a healthy level of interest and bookings, especially from big families and groups of friends," shared Koo.

She believes that customers are moving fast to secure availability and rates "because key dates – such as the Lunar New Year, Christmas and New Year's Eve, and Easter – get booked up very quickly".

Not only is ski travel demand returning fast, Koo said traveller profiles are also getting younger.

"Traditionally, we often see families with older children, between 12 and 19 years old. Now, we see a trend of younger families with children aged four to 10 exploring ski holidays," she said.

Asians are open to snowy adventures all over the world. Expedia noted that Niigata, Japan; Zermatt, Switzerland; Banff, Canada; and Haute-Savoie, France are top ski destinations among Asian travellers. Among Scott Dunn's customers, France and Italy are hot favourites, while Canada and Switzerland are gaining popularity. New Zealand makes a fine choice too, according to Koo, as it has a great ski season between June and September.

Meet the Snow Mama

Emeline Tan, snowports director of SportsQuest and Singapore Ski and Snowboard Academy, blends her love for winter sports into work, where she has been organising ski holidays for 20 years

Does being an avid skier shape how you plan ski vacations?
Many of my clients are repeats and from referrals, drawn to the fact that I am a skier and know how to help them level up.

Ski holidays with me begin with ski lessons in their home country, so as to prepare them for the actual fun. I track their progress and follow up with more ski trips so they will not lose what they've learnt. My students call me Snow Mama.

How has interest in winter holidays changed over the years?
People living in tropical climate have always been more inclined towards winter holidays. But with the advent of social media, more are able to share their experiences, and that sort of content fuels even more interest.

We have seen at least 40 to 50 per cent increase in enquiries and bookings this year.

Many people now want to share winter experiences with their children. Young executives think snow sports are the coolest adventures, and local celebrities are wanting private trips. We even have seniors learning to ski upon retirement.

There is so much that a ski holiday can offer – a resort retreat, great F&B, and bonding over sports with friends and family.

What new things are you up to these days?
I recently partnered with a snow dome pop-up, Ice magic, on an Asian tour, with Thailand being the first stop; Malaysia is next. I am also granting consultation on developing ski holidays for other South-east Asia markets, as well as South Africa.

Do new skiers tend to choose destinations close by?
Yes, and they prefer less expensive resorts too.

What do your clients look for in a ski holiday destination?
Japan and South Korea are typically top favourites among Asian travellers due to distance and familiarity of food. Resorts in the US and Europe come next.

New skiers tend to prefer ski in/ski out resorts, especially smaller ones with more beginner trails, and the option of tour attractions during rest days when they recuperate their strength.

Experienced skiers, on the other hand, want to maximise their time on the slopes. They will take the first chair lift and last ride out. **– Karen Yue**

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Bar Le Chalet at Club Med Val d'Isère

Slopes and more

With seven ski mountain resorts in Asia and 13 elsewhere in the world plus three more set to open, Club Med has established itself firmly in the space of winter vacations. However, Harding said the mountains are not just for winter sports enthusiasts.

"The mountains are a beautiful place to escape the city. There is fresh air and the resorts offer a holistic wellness experience. We have a lot of activities that don't involve skiing and they lean into our different target audiences," she said.

At Club Med Val d'Isère, the company's first Exclusive Collection mountain resort in the heart of the French Alps, guests not into snow sports can spend their winter vacation learning how tomme de Savoie and Avalin cheese are made, exploring the old village of Val d'Isère, reclaiming their health at the yoga studio and gym, wining and dining through multiple F&B outlets on property, and joining in artistic events.

Easier vacations

Recognising that winter holidays are a little more complex to plan, Expedia has in recent years been working with ski resorts to provide packages and deals for customers, all to make ski holidays more accessible for international travellers. Ski packages may include room nights, breakfast, barbecue, ski lift and gear rental, shared an Expedia spokesperson.

Scott Dunn's travel specialists are trained to guide customers on their ski needs and propose the best destination and property based on their preferences. For adventurous guests, these travel specialists may even suggest heli-skiing and glacier hiking. The agency also boasts its own ski concierge team that will help customers secure lessons, passes, restaurant bookings, and transfers once the holiday booking is confirmed.

"We are also able to plan flight routings and itinerary suggestions to visit nearby European cities before or after a ski trip," said Koo, adding that pre-departure calls and briefings are provided to ensure guests are well-prepared for their winter break.

For families, Scott Dunn offers two Explorers Kids Clubs in the French Alps – one in Val d'Isere and the other in Courchevel. In Val d'Isere, for example, families can engage a nanny to pick the children up from the hotel in the morning, and help them with ski passes, lessons, attire and equipment.

"This equals less fuss, and allows parents to enjoy themselves on the slopes knowing that their kids are well taken care of," said Koo.

Scott Dunn Explorers Kids Club also curates other activities, besides winter sports, to keep little ones engaged for days.

Review

Lux* South Ari Atoll, Maldives

It is hard to be something wonderful for everyone, but this resort may well have uncovered the magic formula, discovers Karen Yue

Location

Occupying the entire expanse of the South Ari Atoll, a protected marine reserve as well as one of the largest islands in the Maldives, Lux* South Ari Atoll presents abundant space to do everything or nothing at all – plus opportunities to learn about and support marine conservation efforts.

It was all vacation systems go from the moment I landed at Velana International Airport. A resort staff got me checked in for my seaplane ride, and whisked me off to the resort's private lounge at the new seaplane terminal. This was a pleasant space, with comfy couches and oversized loungers for guests to rest and wait for their flight while fuelling up on healthy treats like homemade yoghurt and hummus with vegetable sticks.

A half-hour seaplane ride then delivered me right to the doorstep of breezy paradise. I love that it has its own jetty, allowing guests to disembark safely.

Accommodation

The resort has a variety of room types, with some designed for families.

I spent my nights in the Romantic Pool Water Villa, which rises over crystal clear waters. This comes with a spacious sun deck, a private pool, and steps that lead right into the sparkling lagoon. For guests hoping to catch up on their favourite films during their vacation, they will delight at the drop-down projector screen.

There are many things I love about this villa – the colour tones, spacious walk-in wardrobe, and its proximity to the main hub of the resort and yet isolated enough that I hear only the sounds of the sea.

A great way to enjoy the resort is to take the fuss-free, all-inclusive option, which grants guests access to six quality restaurants all day (extra charge only applies to signature menu items); discounted dining at two speciality restaurants, Umami Japanese restaurant and Allegria Italian restaurant); complimentary minibar that is replenished daily; use of fitness facilities and non-motorised water sports equipment, and access to fitness classes.

Facilities

The resort is like Mary Poppin's magic carpet bag. I see on its map an incredible list of facilities – eight restaurants, five bars, a 15-room spa with four special overwater treatment villas, Yoga Grove, gym, water sports centre, library, herb gardens, tennis courts, two shared swimming pools, two recreation zones for children and teens, and the Junk Art Studio & Gallery. Yet, everything is so well planned that the island does not feel congested.

For folks who like an action-packed resort retreat, Lux* South Ari Atoll will impress. It curates a roster of daily activities – some complimentary to guests, such as the Tree of Wishes Ceremony; and some with an extra charge attached, such as spotting whale sharks and coral planting with a marine biologist.

One activity that gets many guests out of their beds early in the morning is the Message in a Bottle treasure hunt, where prizes from plush toys and wine to a romantic dinner for two are up for grabs.

As part of the media programme, my fellow journalists and I were taken in by a jolly Maldivian mother who was bent on plumping us up with local delights. Named Amaa's Kitchen, this is a new guest experience that is delivered in a manicured herb garden that supplies produce to the resort's kitchens. Amaa – which means mother in local tongue – first welcomed us with handmade snacks and fresh coconut juice under a majestic banyan tree lit with fairy lights, and then gifted us with tales of her growing up days. Later, we were invited to join her in the kitchen to see how traditional cooking methods are still utilised.

Of all the fun things I did, my favourite was floating yoga. It was conducted on wobbly floating mats tethered to the sand bed. The activity demanded both mental and physical focus, which contradicted the master's instructions for me to surrender my earthly worries as I bent into positions alien to my muscles. But then there came an unexpected sliver of liberation when I settled into the Warrior Pose and was transfixed by the stillness of the sea that mirrored the azure skies. That memory gives me goosebumps.

F&B

F&B is a big part of parent company, The Lux Collective's DNA, and that commitment is demonstrated through eight restaurants and five bars at the resort.

The menu at every restaurant is different, and for even greater variety, themed dining events are hosted on different days.

For those with a sweet tooth, catch the ice-cream man who cycles around every afternoon offering free cones to anyone. Failed to catch him? No problem, as all-inclusive guests get unlimited icy treats daily at ICI ice-cream parlour. More than 30 different flavours are made in-house, and different ones are featured daily.

It is worth noting that the resort is the first Vegan Welcome Hotel in the Maldives certified by Vegan Welcome, a hotel cooperation for purely vegetarian and vegan hotels, bed & breakfasts establishments and event venues. A third of the resort's food options are vegan, and these healthy eats are aligned with The Lux Collective's Keen on Green programme that marries sustainable food sourcing with attention to wellness.

Verdict

Lux* South Ari Atoll can well be the perfect resort for everyone – couples in love, solo travellers longing for me time, and extended families wanting to bond. It is perfect for introverts, as there are so many scenic and serene spots where they could be alone for hours, but also for extroverts eager to make new connections through shared activities.

www.luxresorts.com/en/maldives/hotel/luxsouthariatoll

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