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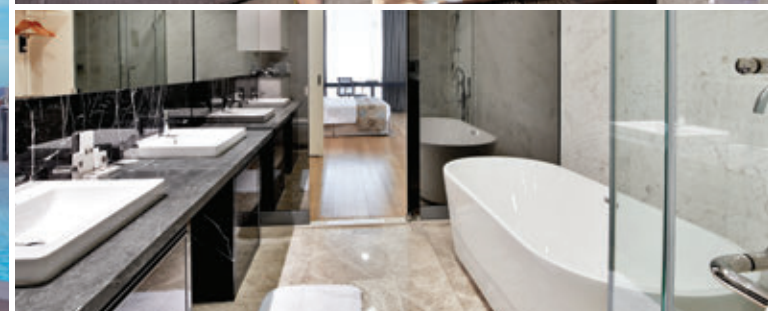
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editor's note



We picked the cover picture of this issue as it illustrates the joy of living and relates to France, where a new president, Emmanuel Macron, has just been elected as the magazine goes to bed.

The occasion was the christening of Uniworld's *Joie de Vivre* by actress Joan Collins (see Gasp! page 40) who is known to love Paris. Who does not?

But Paris lost 1.5 million visitors last year due to terror attacks, Francois Navarro, managing director of Paris Region Tourist Board, who was in Singapore in May, told me. It's not that people don't love it anymore; in fact, Paris hasn't lost its charm and has lots more to offer these days: the Seine riverbanks have been newly-redesigned; there's new spectacular architecture, for example the Louis Vuitton Foundation by Frank Gehry; famous department stores such as Galeries Lafayette and Printemps are

now opened seven days a week.

Today, travel & tourism's greatest concern is the divide between the 'globalists' and the 'nationalists'. There's even 'anti-tourism' sentiments in cities such as Barcelona. How did we ever get to 'close' from 'open'? If protectionism and anti-tourism were to triumph, without doubt the free movement of trade and travel & tourism will be thwarted. If the industry itself isn't mindful of the need to send the message that it won't be cowed by terror, or by narrow-minded fearful people, then it has lost a battle.

I'm glad Uniworld went ahead with the christening despite earlier concerns whether it was the right time and thing to do. The joy of living must go on.

Raini Hamdi, Senior Editor



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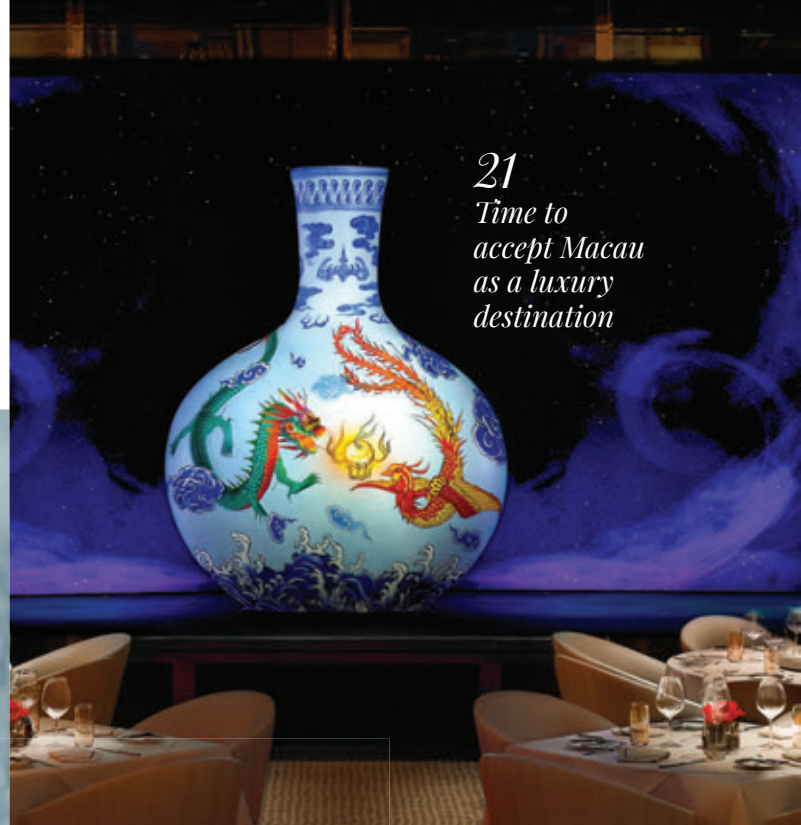
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*Holiday like
never before*



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*Time to
accept Macau
as a luxury
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JUNE 2017

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*Up where
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BEST PARTY BY CHAIRMAN KWEK

JW Marriott Singapore South Beach officially opened its doors on March 27 with the party of the year attended by over 800 invited guests. They are still talking about that mermaid (see right), forest of lights in the Grand Ballroom, live jazz and classical music and, of course, the F&B at Akira Back, Beach Road Kitchen, Court Martial Bar and NCO Club.



◀ From left, Marriott International's Craig Smith, Hong Leong Group/City Developments Limited's Kwek Leng Beng, Singapore's senior minister of state for national development and trade & industry Koh Poh Koon, IOI Group's chairman Lee Shin Cheng and JW Marriott Singapore South Beach's Derek Flint

HOW TO CHRISTEN A SHIP: UNIWORLD

How to christen a ship? Get Dame Joan Collins to do it, as Uniworld did for its latest super ship *Joie De Vivre*. Guests, including luxury planners from around the world, witnessed the occasion in style, with *vivre*, fun and laughter flowing as easily as the fine champagne.



Steve Dunlop



◀ Left, Dame Joan Collins, The Red Carnation Hotel Collection's Beatrice Tollman and Uniworld's Ellen Bettridge



Still bouncy on the whole

Buyers interviewed at ILTM Japan shows that the luxury travel market on the whole remains resilient despite uncertainties such as the new policies of Donald Trump, Brexit and elections in several Eurozone countries this year. By **Julian Ryall**

Luxury travellers are looking for the reassurance of the old and the excitement of the unique and the new.

European destinations will be relieved to hear that the perennial favourites of London, Paris and other cities across the continent popular with the international jetset are back in vogue after a difficult year in 2016. Not everyone steered clear of Europe out of concern at a series of terrorist outrages last year, but sufficient numbers did so that their absence was felt by the industry.

Simultaneously, a degree of competition may be emerging among well-heeled travellers seeking an experience so far off the



Maridav/Shutterstock.com

getting a lot more enquiries about outdoor and nature experiences,” Chiang told *TTG Asia Luxury*. “They are looking for an adventure, but they do not want it to be too rough and they want to be able to go back to their comforts at the end of the day.”

Sri Lanka has recently captured their attention, thanks to some impressive national parks, UNESCO-recognised heritage sites, wildlife, beach towns and, appealingly, a culture of drinking tea. The end of the civil war has also enabled major hotel operators to return.

Other new destinations include Morocco, Jordan and Dubai.

“They are looking for something that is exotic and very different from their day-to-day lives,” Chiang said, adding that there has also been an upsurge in enquiries into the possibility of travelling to Iran.

Similarly, Middle East travellers are looking to impress their friends with their far-flung experiences, said the operations manager for an exclusive Dubai-based travel operator.

“The younger ones, in particular, like to use social media to show their friends where they are and what they are doing, which can very quickly turn that place into the must-visit destination for the year,” said the official, who declined to be named because his company handles the travel requirements of several Middle Eastern royal families.

That trend resulted in the influx of Middle Eastern travellers to some of the more exclusive islands in the Philippines last year, he said, while Hong Kong is “on their radar” this year, along with touring vacations in Indonesia, safaris in southern Africa, the resorts of the Maldives and Seychelles and even South America.

“

We have seen steady growth for the past few years, but I think this year feels a little different. We have already had a lot of requests and reservations, so I think it's safe to say that it's going to be a good year.

Evelyn Chiang,
brand manager,
Travel In Style,
Taiwan

“They are also becoming interested in Japan, partly because it is so different to anywhere else they may already have visited in the world, but also because of the consistently high levels of service, the quality of the food and accommodation, but also the shopping opportunities.”

Kathie Callum, agent sales manager for Oku Japan KK, agreed that Japan is rising in popularity with high-end travellers.

“These are affluent professionals, typically from their mid-40 to their 70s, who want to dig deeper into Japan instead of simply following the ‘Golden Route’ from Tokyo through Kyoto,” she said. “They may have been here before, but they certainly don’t want to see the country through the windows of a bus; they want to get off, explore and see new things for themselves.”

This group of travellers is being encouraged to try Japan, she said, thanks in part to the sharp increase in five-star hotels across the country – the Four Season Kyoto opened recently and is just one example – while there also seems to be a broader commitment in Japan to develop much of the travel sector for the luxury end of the market.

More traditional Japanese hotels, however, appear to be struggling to take full advantage of the boom in the nation’s popularity, with several operators admitting that they need to learn how to best market their properties and unique offerings in what has suddenly become a crowded market. These hotels may have been happy to get by on a largely domestic clientele in years gone by, but they realise they need to do far more to promote their brand – and particularly through new media – if they are to bring in foreign guests.

beaten track that their friends have hardly even heard of the destination, much less sampled it.

“We have seen steady growth for the past few years, but I think this year feels a little different. We have already had a lot of requests and reservations, so I think it’s safe to say that it’s going to be a good year,” said Evelyn Chiang, brand manager for Taipei-based Travel In Style. “

Wealthy Taiwanese travellers have to look to Europe for their vacations – attracted by the shopping, fine dining and cultural events – and while there are still some security concerns, they are returning this year.

“I’ve also noticed that we are



Switzerland Tourism

Holiday like never before

Group tours to Europe remain an obvious holiday choice in China's growing luxury outbound market, but its richest and most experienced travellers want more. By **Prudence Lui**

There's little mystery behind the massive travel volume that China – a rising economic superpower and the world's most populous country – has generated in recent years. But with its growth, new traveller profiles and behaviours are emerging, which some luxury travel suppliers are beginning to latch on to.

In 2016, the number of overseas destinations visited by Chinese travellers grew to 151 and outbound travellers increased 4.3 per cent from 2015 to 122 million, according to a report by Ctrip and China Tourism Academy.

According to the report, the 10 destinations that saw the highest per

traveller spend are Argentina, Chile, Madagascar, Ethiopia, French Polynesia, Tahiti, Mexico, Brazil, Kenya and Reunion Island – with the single-person price tag on a South America route exceeding 50,000 yuan (US\$7,252.60).

Europe is notably missing from the list, hinting at possible shifts in travel appetites in China's upper echelons, and its negative image from last year's terror attacks.

Indeed, Derek Yang, CEO of Key&Fork, a new bespoke luxury player in Shanghai, observed: "People are no longer satisfied with group tours as many already have rich travel experiences. They are more into exotic destinations like Africa and South America for a more adventurous travel experience. These clients are well experienced with travel; how to surprise them along their trip would be a big challenge."

According to Yang, such bespoke brand of travel is still quite new in China despite many luxury agencies entering the space.

Century Holiday International Travel Group (Shanghai) vice general manager, Frank Gao, said: "Group tours remain the preferred mode for luxury travel and account for 65-70 per cent of our business (as) individual travel requires a lot of planning and there's the problem of language barrier."

Gao added that demand for luxury accommodation and in-depth tours has burgeoned for the 30-40 years age group, who also show preference for European destinations like France, the UK, Italy, Switzerland and Germany. But with the Chinese sensitive to politically instability and terrorist threats, "Aurora light and expeditions to Antarctica are becoming hot picks".

"Shanghainese like to visit cultural destinations in Europe with a rich history but sometimes choose to go back to nature at destinations like Kenya," Gao said. "Last year 5.65 million Shanghainese travelled

outbound, a surge of 43 per cent over 2015."

But with the addition of international connections and visa processing offices beyond main Chinese centres such as Shanghai, growth of outbound travel from second- and third-tier cities is looking set to outpace that from first-tier cities.

In a secondary city, Jadon Yang, marketing director of Shenzhen Xinyoutianxi Travel Service, likewise observed that Europe continues to be more attractive than South America.

"Priority is given to easy accessibility, so Europe is (a popular choice) given there are so many direct flights there. So far, South America is still not on the list owing to the long flight time and tough travel experience involved," he explained.

Moreover, many luxury travellers continue to view shopping as a must-do activity. Europe, being home to many designer brands, satisfies this desire. "The money they save from buying designer handbags in Europe can offset the price of their tour. Australia, a new luxury travel destination, hardly competes as it hasn't developed its luxury shopping so far."

Meanwhile at GZT International Travel Service general manager for Australia and New Zealand, outbound tour centre, Vicher Yu, said: "2016 wasn't a good year for outbound travel due to the uncertain international business environment and global economy."

While his clients like out-of-the-ordinary holidays, accessibility remains a key consideration.

"In Australia, our clients look for something other than Melbourne and Sydney. Tasmania is a new option but its airports lack international access. To offset this, we plan to send charter flights from South China to Hobart Airport when it completes its expansion next year and can handle wide-bodied jetliners."

Facing
Chinese ski instructor with guest in Grindelwald, Switzerland

The Chinese upmarket traveller...

- ✦ is beginning to develop a taste for small group or tailor-made tours
- ✦ is a seasoned traveller craving for more exotic travel experiences
- ✦ still has a weakness for Europe and its designer labels

“

People are no longer satisfied with group tours as many already have rich travel experiences. They are more into exotic destinations like Africa and South America for a more adventurous travel experience.

Derek Yang,
CEO,
Key&Fork,
Shanghai



Young and fearless

Europe is back on the radar of Japanese luxury travellers and one reason is the rise of a new generation of pleasure-seekers,
reports **Julian Ryall**

The year 2016 may go down in history as one of unprecedented turmoil and uncertainty – terrorist attacks in Europe and the Middle East, economic worries associated with Brexit and the rise to power of Donald Trump in the US – but high-end Japanese travellers appear to be shaking off a reputation for being skittish over a destination long after an issue has blown over.

They are, of course, still being careful in the cities and resorts that they do select, but their determination not to permit fear derail their desire to travel is perhaps best underlined by their willingness to return to European cities such as Paris, London and Rome.

“People were afraid last year and instead of going to Europe, they chose to travel closer to home,” said Ryoichi Hashimoto, CEO and president of Kobe-based travel agency Bloom & Grow, interviewed at the International Luxury Travel Market (ILTM) Japan in late February.

“We were surprised at the popularity of Taiwan last year, while

Bali and Kuala Lumpur were also attractive to our clients,” he said. “But so far this year, it is clear that demand for Europe is recovering.”

Tsutomu Hattori, founder of the Small Journey agency, said his business to Europe held up well last year but demand for luxury stays in European cities is rising again.

“We have a lot of repeat clients who are big fans of European destinations and we are very positive about the outlook for the coming year,” he said.

And while there are plenty of die-hard Europhiles in the upper echelons of Japan’s travelling public, there is also a growing number who are seeking something new.

“There is a change in the emphasis of high-end travellers here now,” said Ikuyo Kawabata, tourism and commercial officer at the Embassy of the Republic of Fiji in Tokyo, who was also attending the ILTM event in Tokyo.

“What people want is expanding the opportunities for the luxury market,” she said. “They want something that is different, that is

“

This is an opportunity for us to promote...the concept of the sharing economy (to Japan buyers)

Amr Younes,
vice president of revenue optimisation,
Luxury Retreats,
Montreal

exotic and undiscovered. They don’t want to visit a place their friends have been before. And that means that they plan their journeys very carefully.

“We are looking at a new generation of Japanese consumer





The Japanese upmarket traveller...

- ❖ may be part of a growing new generation who is less fearful and want to spend, not save
- ❖ is returning to Europe after shying away last year
- ❖ prefers destinations that can be reached by direct flights

with a different lifestyle. People are willing to spend on an experience instead of saving.

"They want one-off honeymoons, they want to do something memorable on an anniversary trip, or they are older people with money who want to enjoy life," she added.

Daisuke Nakano, Japan sales manager for The One & Only Resorts, was in complete agreement, pointing out that his sales were up 28 per cent last year and he is forecasting another 20 per cent increase for 2017.

"Europe was not great for us last year but it is recovering this year," he said.

"We found that people who would have gone to Europe last year instead spent their honeymoons in the Maldives or Mauritius, they went sightseeing and shopping in Dubai and turned to Australia for its beaches."

Australia is a growth destination because of Japanese travellers' unmistakable preference for direct flights and the fact that it is very close in terms of the time difference.

Mexico is another country that is on the radar for many Japanese, helped immeasurably by the introduction of direct flights by All Nippon Airways in February.

A number of other companies and destinations with unusual or off-the-beaten path offerings were attending the fifth ILTM Japan with the ambition of convincing local buyers that they could be the next hot-spot for Japanese travellers.

"We are a new market and we're not so well known, so it is important for us to meet buyers in Japan and see the potential of this market for us," said Lily Dahmayanti, director of sales for the Nihiwatu resort on the Indonesian island of Sumba.

"We want to emphasise that we are an island resort set in a beautiful landscape that is still pristine – a forgotten paradise, if you like," she said.

"Lots of Japanese have been to Bali, but Sumba is completely unspoiled and different, but we are also just a short flight away from Bali and there are now flights every day.

Above Europe's back: A Japanese tourist having a selfie moment while in London

"We have had Japanese agents visit us and they have all said how surprised they are at our island and resort so we are hoping they will pass that message on to their high-end clients; that for something completely new they need to go beyond Bali."

Luxury Retreats was also taking part in the Tokyo ILTM for the first time and hoping to convince buyers to consider a "new way" of travelling, said Amr Younes, vice president of revenue optimisation for the Montreal-based company, which handpicks high-end villas around the world and presently has more than 3,700 properties to offer.

"There are a lot of very affluent travellers in Japan and many of the people in that segment, we feel, would fit very well with our product," Younes said.

"This is an opportunity for us to build brand awareness and to promote understanding of the concept among the travel trade here of the sharing economy and how they can be a part of that," he said.



Travelling ambitiously

Issues such as demonetisation of India's currency have not dampened the appetite to travel among the rich, reports **Rohit Kaul**

Luxury travel players in India are brushing off issues such as the recent demonetisation of India's currency as factors that may dampen the mood of their clients to enjoy themselves.

For most, the market is not only here to stay, it will be much bigger.

An increase in the number of high net worth individuals (HN-WI's) in India, for one, will be the backbone of a growth in the luxury market size. The figure is expected to expand from around 200,000 in

2011 to over 1.2 million by 2030, according to Praveen Chugh, chairman, Business Travel, India, adding "this segment is catalyst to the growth at the luxury end of the travel market".

An economy that remains buoyant, along with exposure to the Internet and to world travel trends, will help grow this market in times to come as well, pointed out another luxury player, Via.com head of holiday products, Godfrey Pereira.

Last year's demonetisation has failed to deter the positive outlook of the trade. On November 8, the Indian government declared all currency in denominations of Rs500 and Rs1,000 illegal tender in the hopes of curbing the flow of black money in the Indian economy.

But, noted Chugh: "The Indian outbound luxury market kept

growing even after demonetisation. Travellers from the segment are continuing to explore destinations and products that are unique in appeal.

"The outlook for 2017 is very positive."

Karan Anand, Cox & Kings head - relationships, said the outbound luxury market from India is growing at a rate 10 per cent per annum, and as the Indian market matures and experiences luxury in the domestic market, the customer will aspire to engage with luxury products and services overseas.

"This creates its own demand and the Indian consumer is becoming as discerning as consumers from across the world," said Anand.

Indeed, John Boulding, CEO of Geneva-based Insight Vacations who was recently in New Delhi to launch the company's 2017 luxury gold portfolio, said that there has been a real change in the mindset of Indian high-end travellers in the past three to four years.

"Indian food was preferred in the past. However, today luxury travellers from the country want to try epicurean dining.

"They are opting for luxurious escorted journeys that offer engaging local experiences," said Boulding.

Boulding expects a 30 per cent increase from the Indian market this year.

"We are targeting this to be our best ever year in India. The reasons include a growing demand and introducing a right product at a right time," he said.

"We see more and more Indians travelling on our country roads programme where one stays in the smaller towns, experiencing real local life in places like Rome.

"We also see a good demand for destinations like Iceland and Scandinavia in 2017."

Recently, Insight Vacations launched a new e-learning pro-

The Indian upmarket traveller...

- ✦ is not deterred by local issues such as India's demonetisation
- ✦ is expected to continue to grow in numbers this year
- ✦ is a changing breed, seeking unique and customised experiences

gramme that has multiple courses to educate its travel agents about the various products offered by the company for India's luxury travellers.

Cox & Kings' Anand experiences similar trends. "Luxury travellers are looking at exclusive signature-style accommodation options and varied experiences.

"This market is a resilient market. Even during a downturn, we have observed that this segment of traveller is not affected. They are the discerning types and do not compromise on their luxuries as most of them are self-made individuals with a style quotient of their own," he said.

Among destinations that are seeing an uptake for Cox & Kings are the Seychelles, Maldives, Scotland, Ireland and Australia.

Added Anand: "In terms of experiences, it can range from a luxury rail holiday in Switzerland where you travel on those iconic trains that take you across the scenic locations in the region. Then there are cruise products in South-east Asia where customers book suites for the entire extended family for a complete vacation.

"Luxury destinations such as Champagne and Chamonix in France, and Gstaad in Switzerland, are among the well-known destinations for the Indian luxury traveller. Many of them travel to Italy to drive the world-famous Ferrari cars, which can be rented out. These are the sort of experiences that the luxury traveller is seeking."

Via.com's Pereira agreed. "For

Facing An Indian traveller cruising on the Red Sea, Israel

such travellers high-end cruises and experiences like whale-watching, diving with sharks and sky diving have become popular.

"For us, new sought-after destinations include Scandinavia and Bora Bora. The travel seekers are also looking to indulge in experiences like a igloo stay."

National tourism bodies are devising their strategies to tap the changing outbound luxury market in India.

"There are a number of luxurious properties coming up in Fiji. We will soon include a module in our training programme for Indian travel agents where we will educate them about the high-end offerings of our destination," said Matthew Stoeckel, CEO, Tourism Fiji.

“

We are targeting this to be our best ever year in India. The reasons include a growing demand and introducing a right product at a right time.

John Boulding,
CEO, Insight
Vacations,
Geneva



Mie soul of Japan



Mie Prefecture is the next hot spot for luxury travellers and **Julian Ryall** details some of its luscious offerings

It may be a slight detour off Japan's traditional Golden Route, which links Tokyo, Kyoto and Osaka, but more and more travellers are discovering that Mie Prefecture's reputation for being "the soul of Japan" is well-earned. The region is, after all, home to the most sacred shrine in the Shinto religion, as well as herds that produce one of the world's most expensive cuts of beef. The island where pearls were first cultured, where countless examples of Japanese traditions and heritage are evident.

And, with the recent upsurge in interest in Japan as a destination, hotels and attractions across Mie

have raised their game to meet demand from growing numbers of luxury travellers.

The region received another boost to its profile last year when it was selected to host the two-day G-7 Ise-Shima Summit.

"Officially, we were given about six months' notice that our hotel would be the venue for the talks and the leaders while they were in Japan – although there had been hints much earlier and we had already embarked on a thorough renovation of the hotel," said Yas Yamamura, manager of corporate sales for Kintetsu Miyako Hotels International, which operates the Shima Kanko Hotel.



Sean Pavone/Shutterstock.com

Those upgrades included a redesign of the sixth floor of the facility's Classic Building, which was taken over in its entirety by the US delegation. Several rooms were connected to create light and airy suites, with bathtubs having the most of the impressive view across Ago Bay.

The suite that was occupied by then-President Barack Obama now has a large presidential seal on the door and is much in demand among visitors.

In July 2016, Hiramatsu Hotels & Resorts opened its first exclusive property on the nearby island of Kashkojima. The hotel only has eight rooms, all of which overlook

Ago Bay and are furnished differently.

Some of the rooms have stone baths filled with water from natural springs far below the surface, while a luxurious outdoor *onsen* can be reserved by the hour. Utterly secluded, it has magnificent views and traditional oiled-paper umbrellas for anyone who wants to bathe in the rain.

Limited edition works by Yayoi Kusama line the reception and lounge; treatments at the Thalasso Spa are designed to promote balance of mind body and spirit; each table in the dining room is discretely partitioned for cuisine that relies heavily on the surrounding waters

Left Ise Grand Shrine **Above** Oharai-machi, an 800m road that leads to Ise Jingu inner shrine

for its inspiration. Spiny lobster and local abalone are, in particular, considered delicacies.

The region is also famed for its Matsuzaka beef, one of Japan's legendary wagyu brands, with only cattle bred and raised in a recognised district given the designation. Each cattle is raised for 900 days – 10 months longer than most beef – and famously fed beer to stimulate their appetites.

The description "melt in your mouth" has arguably become devalued by its overuse, but the low melting point of Matsuzaka beef and the high ratio of unsaturated fatty acids means that the product of these cattle genuinely dissolves

on the tongue.

Another natural wonder rooted in Mie Prefecture – albeit again encouraged by human hands – is found on Mikimoto Pearl Island, where Kokichi Mikimoto succeeded in culturing the very first pearl oyster in 1893.

In the early years of pearl culturing, no outsiders were allowed on the island. That changed in 1951 and the 48 million visitors since have included queens, princes, heads of states and captains of industry, all attracted by these beautiful translucent spheres.

There are some 100,000 different variety of oysters, although only six are suitable for culturing pearls. The pearlers of Mie generally use Akoya oysters, with the blacklipped oysters of Tahiti producing the black pearl and larger white-lipped oysters creating the large South Sea pearl.

Visitors are shown the process of culturing a pearl, with a wedge inserted into the mouth of the shell and a mantle of clear membrane placed alongside the round nuclei, made of polished mussel shell, that will eventually be coated in mother-of-pearl.

Elsewhere in the prefecture, travellers can sit down to a meal prepared by *ama*, women who free-dive off the coast for the fruits of the sea. Or, they can enjoy a tea ceremony or train to become a ninja in the city of Iga, the home of the legendary warriors.

But no visit to this part of Japan would be complete without a visitor paying respects at Ise Grand Shrine, the collective name for 125 Shinto shrines that serve as the spiritual home of the Japanese people.

Some of the most important building are off-limits to everyone except the Emperor of Japan, but an impressive museum provides explanations of the history, rites and significance of the entire complex.



Five luxé products

Stylish transfers by Airos

Tokyo-based Airos operates a fleet of 15 helicopters, ranging from three-seat Robinson R44s to seven-berth BK117s, for both short sightseeing trips over Tokyo and longer-term charters for wealthy customers looking for an alternative to trains and scheduled flights to get around Japan. According to CEO Kiwamu Tezuka, the com-

pany can meet arrivals at any of the major international gateway airports and transfer passengers to their accommodation. Tokyo has two heliports – including one on the top of the ARK Hills complex in the heart of the city – while more purpose-built helicopter facilities are being constructed in other popular destinations, including the mountain resort of Hakone. Alternatively, Tezuka said, his company is able to negotiate with hotels to provide a temporary landing space in their grounds.

Ryokan adds Hiramatsu Atami to portfolio

Hiramatsu Hotels & Resorts Atami is the latest addition to the portfolio of The Ryokan Collection. The property opened in October



2016 and has a focus on dining and art. The concept is an exclusive, high-end French auberge, following in the footsteps of other Hiramatsu hotels. In the rooms, all the furniture looks out to the sea to take maximum advantage of the ryokan's location and spectacular views. Luxury accents include Bvlgari amenities, Imabari towels and fine furniture by Otsuka Kagu. The hotel has just 13 rooms, each with their own *rotemburo* bath, terrace overlooking bamboo groves and ocean and floor-to-ceiling windows.

Probably the best sightseeing bus

While most coaches are fitted with seats for as many as 45 passengers, Isetan Mitsukoshi has turned the concept of bus sightseeing tours on its head by creating a luxury 10-seat coach. The vehicle has larger windows than a standard coach, no overhead luggage racks to add to the sense of spaciousness, leather upholstered seats in pairs that can be partitioned off from the other

seats and screens in the headrest of the seat in front, providing details of the journey or allowing the passenger to watch television or a DVD. The bus is fitted with Wi-Fi, provides drinks and snacks and has a sumptuously appointed restroom, with a large mirror and full selection of amenities.

Norwegian Joy docks in Kobe

Norwegian Joy, the latest launch by Norwegian Cruise Line, has commenced operations from China this summer, taking in the Japanese port of Kobe. The 3,900-passenger vessel is aimed at the Chinese market but is part of a larger expansion of the cruise operator's business in the region. The vessel will have world-class entertainment, fine international dining, unrivalled duty-free luxury shopping at sea and a new range of first-at-sea on-board activities, the company said.

Japan's most luxurious sleeper train

The Twilight Express Mizukaze, Japan's most luxurious sleeper train, will commence its maiden voyage on June 17. The train is operating two- or three-day trips departing from either Kyoto or Osaka to Shimonoseki through either the Sanyo region on the Pacific coast of Japan, or the Sanin region on the Sea of Japan. Tickets went on sale in December and, in spite of the price, the initial allocation was quickly snapped up. The cheapest berths go for ¥250,000 (US\$2,235) and a suite that takes up an entire carriage costs ¥1.25 million. Demand is expected to remain high, although tickets should become more readily available over time.



Top Hiramatsu Hotels & Resorts
Left Mitsukoshi Premium Cruiser

Up where we belong



A 10-year Genting Integrated Transformation Plan is nearing fruition and may at last see the Malaysian resort gain its fair share of luxury travellers, reports **S Puvaneswary**

Above Resorts World Genting

Resorts World Genting in Malaysia has long been attracting Asian tourists from the region thanks to its cool climate, family-friendly attractions and shopping.

In mid December 2013, Lim Kok Thay, chairman and chief executive of Resorts World Genting, announced the company's 10-year Genting Integrated Transformation Plan. This plan would see on the integrated resort on Ulu Kali mountain undergo a decade of redevelopment and refurbishment. Hotels would be expanded and refurbished, a new cable car system

would be built, while shopping outlets, dining establishments and entertainment offerings would also be added – all in a bid to attract more guests.

Luxury planners are pinning hopes on one of the highlights of the 10-year project, construction of the world's first Twentieth Century Fox World, to help prick the interest of their clients to visit Resorts World Genting. The 10ha family-friendly attraction is set to open in the second half of this year and will feature attractions that revolve around movies such as *Ice Age*, *Rio*, *Night at the Museum*, *Planet of the Apes* and *Aliens vs Predator*.

ong

Jagat Rashid/Shutterstock.com



Lim's vision was timely, as Resorts World Genting had to compete with other resorts in the region such as Singapore's Marina Bay Sands, launched in 2010. At the time, other existing integrated resorts were also investing heavily in new cutting-edge products. City of Dreams Macau, for example, premiered the spectacular show *The House of Dancing Water* in September 2010 in a bid to create new buzz for itself.

On a recent visit, the transformation of the old Genting to the envisioned one is apparent, and fortunately, development is taking place without disturbing much of the natural environment that makes

the resort unique.

In the past, Resorts World Genting appealed less to Europeans as there were no products strong enough to garner their attention, said high-end travel planners.

But that may soon change. With the soon-to-open Twentieth Century Fox World theme park, inbound planners handling European markets are keen to put it to test.

Diethelm Travel Malaysia managing director, Manfred Kurz, said: "The branding (of the new theme park) itself will definitely create attention among Europeans who are planning their holidays to Malaysia. There are also new high-end products such as five-star hotels and fine-dining restaurants. For Europeans, it is an opportunity to visit Malaysia's highlands, where the weather is cooler and there is a lot of greenery around."

The other cool-weather Malaysian resort, Cameron Highlands, is "not such a great product because of logging and there usually is a queue if travellers want to visit the tea plantation on weekends", Kurz pointed out.

Arokia Das, senior manager at Luxury Tours Malaysia, concurred that the new theme park at Genting may be a draw for Europeans.

He said: "We experimented by promoting the destination at ITB Berlin about five years ago, but there was no interest from European agents then, as there was nothing to draw their attention. There were five-star, luxury properties such as Maxims and Genting Grand, as well as good restaurants, but there was little else that interested the Europeans. They are not interested in the casinos.

"I predict that it will be very different once the theme park opens. There are also new nature-based products there, such as nature walks, and a nursery with pitcher plants. The resort has also become a birdwatcher's haven, and is recognised as an Important Bird Area

“

For Europeans, it is an opportunity to visit Malaysia's highlands, where the weather is cooler and there is a lot of greenery around.

Manfred Kurz,
managing director,
Diethelm Travel
Malaysia



by Birdlife International."

While Europe is still a largely untapped market for Resorts World Genting, inbound planners have no doubt that the integrated resort will appeal to high-end Asians once the theme park, along with Genting Highland Premium Outlets and SkyAvenue mall, is operating fully.

The integrated resort has a hospitality desk at Kuala Lumpur International Airport, making it convenient and accessible for Asian luxury travellers who fly into Kuala Lumpur to be transferred to Genting. As well, Resorts World Genting owns a fleet of high-end luxury cars including the Mercedes Benz S300 which it uses to ferry guests. The journey from the airport to Resorts World Genting takes approximately less than an hour.

The drive up the mountain from Kuala Lumpur is a picturesque one, winding its way through 130-million-year old rainforests. The transfer is luxurious and smooth as the road leading up the mountain has been well-maintained by Resorts World Genting. There are two security checkpoints, also managed by the resort, before reaching the destination.

Arokia said: "I forecast a 15 to 20 per cent year-on-year growth from the Indian luxury segment. For Indians, Resorts World Genting is more well-known than the nation's capital, Kuala Lumpur."

Adam Kamal, CEO, Olympik Holidays, concurred: "Resort World Genting's marketing efforts to attract the luxury segment through new products and services, all within walking distance, will help cement Malaysia's appeal to high-end tourists and will go a long way towards branding Malaysia as a destination for high-yield tourists."

Adam lamented that while Malaysia does have luxury products, "the country has always been marketed as a value-for money destination in order to attract mass tourists".

Five luxé products

Show some classy LTITUDE

The LTITUDE Restaurant, Bar & Lounge, located within Genting Club, personifies country cottage elegance. Its ambience exudes comfort, class and heritage – think plush leather sofas, stone, glass and wood.

The place is ideal for chilling out and enjoying handcrafted cocktails concocted by world-class mixologists. If mixed drinks are not your client's thing, the bar offers more than 400 bottles of premium wines, liquor and spirits. For a bite, the fine-dining restaurant sports an open-kitchen concept and serves up plates of Mediterranean, Japanese and Chinese cuisine.

Scan the highlands with Awana Skyway

The Awana Skyway, which opened in December last year, is a 2.8km-long cable car system that takes guests from the Awana station to the SkyAvenue station located at the newly-opened SkyAvenue shopping mall. It also makes a stop at the Chin Swee Temple Station.

The entire journey is a comfortable 11-minute ride in a well ventilated and spacious gondola. For a more thrilling ride, guests can opt for any of the 10 glass-bottomed gondolas.

Regardless of the 99 gondolas one chooses, the ride is a scenic one offering passengers a bird's eye view of Chin Swee Temple, the future Twentieth Century Fox World Malaysia theme park, and the verdant treetops. Mobile phone users can also charge their phones in the

gondolas as each comes equipped with two USB ports.

A new avenue for gourmands, shopaholics

The recently opened SkyAvenue shopping mall which spans more than 130,000m² offers five floors of shops, six cinema halls, entertainment areas, and a multitude of restaurants to choose from.

One of its concourses is home to one of Malaysia's biggest and most spectacular LED shows – similar to the one in New York Time Square – spread over three floors in height.

Within the mall is a floor dedicated exclusively to luxury brands, and this shopaholic heaven is scheduled to open in stages from 2H2017.

Retail therapy at bargain prices

For more shopping choices, the Genting Highlands Premium Outlets is set to tempt your clients with over 150 designer brands at discounted prices.

Malaysia's second premium outlet centre is located next to the Awana Transportation Hub just opposite the Awana Hotel.

Commune with nature

Nestled within Genting Highlands is a lush 130-million-year-old rainforest with rich biodiversity. The area is recognised as an Important Bird Area by Birdlife International.

Activities are available for guests to soak in the rainforest. These include Fashion Forest, a full-day guided nature walk programme that offers free Internet connectivity for participants to scan the QR Codes on the trees and learn more about their species. There is also herping, a programme conducted at night to look for creepy crawlies such as snakes, insects and frogs. If that sounds bizarre for your high-end clients, there's always the more genteel bird watching during the day at Awana Genting.



Above Awana SkyWay
Bottom LTITUDE





Silver Spoon

Burger & Lobster



By S Puvaneswary

Since its debut in Asia last December at SkyAvenue, Resorts World Genting, London chain Burger & Lobster has been warmly received in this region, judging by the popularity of this chic casual place.

AMBIENCE

The first thing that greets me is a three-tier, nine-tank display of live lobsters – some of which hold the ‘Big Boys’ that can weigh up to 4kg – air-flown weekly to Malaysia from Nova Scotia, Canada.

The decor comprises traditional lobster crates which are replicas of the ones used in Nova Scotia, while old oak and aged vitreous ceramic Portuguese tiles at the well-stocked bar area near the semi-open kitchen adds to the illusion of a European tavern.

Seating is a mix of dining banquettes and booths. Soft incandescent lighting over each table adds to the general cosiness. Piped-in popular Western music helped me to relax while waiting for the food.

MENU

The menu is simple. There are two cooking styles of lobster, steamed or grilled with clarified butter.

How’d you want your beef burger? Topped with lobster or served in the more conventional way with beef bacon,

cheese, and lettuce? The meat here is 100 per cent Australian beef.

Personally, I highly recommend the chilli lobster as it was a dish created by this restaurant for Asian palates. Coincidentally, the recipe has been shared with other Burger & Lobster restaurants.

My plate of chilli lobster also comes with slices of brioche for me to soak up every bit of the thick, spicy gravy. The lobster rolls are another must try. Steamed lobsters are mixed with sauces before being stuffed into a toasted brioche bun.

The dessert selection includes a unique durian tempura, as well as other regular offerings such as crème brûlée and banana mousse.

SERVICE

Excellent. The waitress who served us was friendly and helped me with my food selection. I didn’t have to wait long for the food either.

VERDICT

I will definitely go back, again and again. Everything was perfect.

Location Level 1, SkyAvenue, Resorts World Genting
Opening hours 11.00 to 23.00 daily
Contact details: Tel: (60) 3 6101 1118
 Email: customercare@rwgenting.com
www.rwgenting.com



Maxims



Above e18hteen

By S Puvaneswary

LOCATION

Maxims is one of six Resorts World Genting hotels, located on the peak of Ulu Kali Mountain, 1,865m above sea level. Due to its high el-

elevation, the resort of-fers year-round cool temperatures averag-ing 15°C to 24°C .

Maxims is ad-joining the Genting Grand and, from the hotel, one can see the world's largest hotel, First World Hotel, lo-cated within walking distance.

It is also located near attractions such as the new SkyAvenue mall, Arena of Stars – where international artistes perform – and the soon-to-open Twentieth Century Fox World Theme Park.

ROOM

I very much enjoyed the exclusive VIP suite room on the 18th floor,

located within Maxims' executive-level themed Garden In The Sky.

The Garden In The Sky concept runs through the executive floor levels (16th to 18th floor), where entire ceilings are covered in green-ery.

Even my bathroom had a verti-cal green garden across one side of the wall.

On the 18th floor are three suites, ranging from 75m² to 240m². My room was 96m², and comprised a bedroom and lounge area.

The smart TV set in the lounge was equipped with USB ports, al-lowing me to watch a documentary I had brought along with me.

What's special about my suite was the Vichy shower, Maxims be-ing the first hotel in South-east Asia to feature one. It is an interesting experience having a body mas-sage treatment in which guests can control the pressure and intensity of the water with the press of a button.

The room amenities are top rate, from Bulgari-branded toiletries to Frette bath linens and bathrobes.

FACILITIES

The exclusive restaurant on the 18th floor, named e18hteen, is a new addition after renovations were carried out last year. The restau-rant, complete with cocktail bar and poolside dining, has on offer an eclectic menu offering Chinese, Japanese, Western and fusion fare.

Other restaurants in the building include the Imperial Rama Restau-rant which serves Chinese and Thai cuisine; and Ming Ren, a Chinese restaurant that specialises in lamb dishes. Since all the properties within Resorts World Genting are linked, hotel guests have a choice of more than 100 F&B outlets available in and around the resort serving a variety of cuisines.

For guests residing on the execu-tive floors, a 24/7 butler service also provides services on request.

Note that while there is no spa at Maxims, guests can have a private treatment in their room or walk across to the M Spa at Genting Grand.

SERVICE

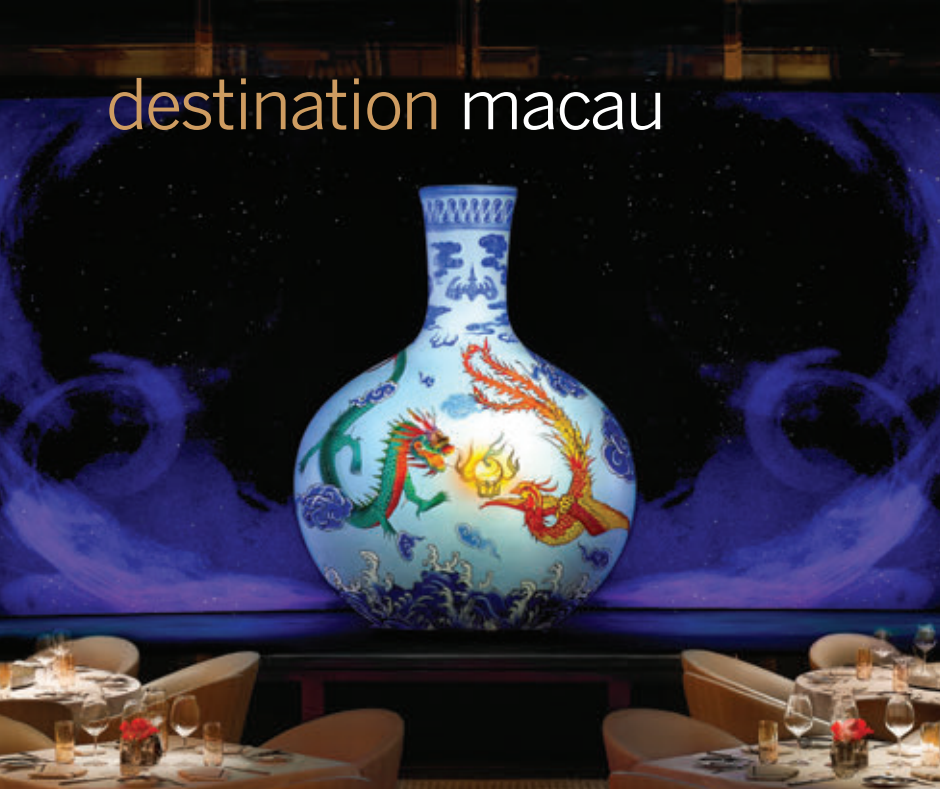
Everyone I encountered – from the personal butler to the restaurant staff – provided excellent service. It is also commendable that the waiters and waitresses at e18hteen were so knowledgeable about food preparation and ingredients used in the dishes.

VERDICT

I was so well taken care that I would definitely recommend a stay here. I was refreshed by the cool weather and priceless views of a 130-million-year old rainforest be-low. I'm so glad that this heavenly place is in Malaysia.

Name Maxims
No. of rooms 753 rooms and 92 suites
Address
Genting Highlands Resort,
69000 Genting Highlands,
Pahang, Malaysia
Contact
Tel: (60) 3 6105 2081
Email: customercare@rwgenting.com
Website: www.rwgenting.com

destination macau



FIRST PERSON



Raimi Hamdi
revisits
Macau after
a decade
and at last
believes it is
a destination
for leisure
lovers

Lay to rest whispers that when Macau mentions the word 'VIP', it refers mainly to high rollers at casinos. During my visit in April, I wasn't anywhere near the gambling tables, let alone a high roller, yet I felt I was a VIP.

The reason for this may sound so basic. Everywhere I went, service levels were way above my expectations. Whether they were locals from Macau, staff from other Chinese cities, Filipinos, Portuguese or another foreign nationality – listen to this everyone: Overall, Macau's service is excellent.

For me, this is the heart of why Macau is ready for luxury leisure travellers. When there is a service culture, a place is no longer 'dead' or bereft of life, boring, fake, which Cotai was to me when I visited it 10 years ago when The Venetian opened. It's not just because more luxury hotels have since opened on this reclaimed land that joins the islands of Coloane and Taipa, giving its name Cotai, but because the people who are working there are helping to shape a certain service identity that is needed to complement the stark hardware. As to what that identity is, think happy and hungry workers, the two H's that, when combine, can shoot service to the moon.

By now too the hardware has also developed nicely. Luxury brands be they plush hotels, top fashion labels, watch and jewellery houses, etc, are all there, which also accounts for the fine service as these players naturally come with their SOPs and training on genteel performance. But if Cotai were just one massive emporium, then I agree luxury planners could forget it. In reality, Macau can be fun even without the luxury shopping. It amuses me how each concession in Cotai tries to outdo each other, which is healthy competition. Sheldon Adelson who owns seven hotels including the Parisian, Venetian, Four Seasons, St

Time to accept Macau as a luxury destination



Top SW in Wynn Palace and St Regis Bar; **Right** St Regis shines with exceptional service. The hotel is now in Virtuoso's network, the first in Macau

destination macau

Regis, Sheraton Grand, Conrad and Holiday Inn – you can walk through all of them without stepping out-doors – builds a half-scale Eiffel Tower which, in addition to observation decks, features a Love Lock Bridge following in the famous Parisian tradition originating from the Pont des Arts bridge. There's a dazzling daily light show with music every 15 minutes from 18.15 to midnight.

In another plot, Steve Wynn brings to light his perfectionist character with no detail left unturned at the Wynn Palace (see review on page 24) where he builds a lake with jets that sprout water to the skies, mesmerising people with the colour and the synchronisation with music. This can be marvelled from the waterside or from the air via a Swiss-made cable car network that brings visitors into the resort. There, the huge lobby is virtually covered with floral creations by designer Preston Bailey, made from thousands of fresh flowers appearing every season.

Opposite Wynn Palace, Melco-Crown's City of Dreams, which houses Crown Towers, Grand Hyatt and Hard Rock, has its own feather-in-the-cap, *The House of Dancing Water* show. Even after some years, this still is a must see world-class act, performed in a purpose-built theatre that includes a pool that holds a record-breaking 3.7 million gallons of water, equivalent to five Olympic-sized swimming pools. This enables the most awe-inspiring dives and other acrobatics including a bike performance.

Over at Galaxy Macau, which has six hotels including JW Marriott, Ritz-Carlton, Banyan Tree, Okura, Galaxy and Broadway, there's the world's longest sky-top adventure river ride at 575m, also the world's largest sky-top wave pool along with pristine white sand beach.

And on and on it goes.

Clients yearning for the old Macao will not be disappointed. I thoroughly enjoyed my revisit to the UNESCO-inscribed old town. It was a sunny day and the ruined facade of St Paul's church on the hill towers handsomely over the narrow cobblestone streets below lined with stores selling Portuguese cookies, Chinese pharmacies and homegrown fashion brands. I had dinner at a Portuguese restaurant called A Petisqueira in the Old Taipa area which was packed and had to turn away guests without a reservation. A taste of Macau couldn't be more authentic or real than at this restaurant. While in Taipa, head also to Taipa Houses Museum, a series of colonial houses built in 1921 which have been turned into museums.

The number of good restaurants has also expanded along with all opening of the branded hotels in Cotai. A memorable one for me was SW at Wynn Palace which serves steak and seafood, but during dinner the light darkened, the music faded and an aperture opened,



Top Tiki Pool at Sheraton Grand, complete with day view of Parisian's Eiffel Tower

Bottom Viola Frey Amphora, one of the many art pieces at Wynn Palace

and out popped a short one-of-a-kind visual animation that made dining there even more delightful. And not everything is just expensive fine dining. Bene, an Italian trattoria at Sheraton Grand Macao Hotel Cotai Central, did it for me with its crisp golden pizzas and even steaks, served by a team of motivated staff led by a captain named Rich.

Virtuoso has just signed on its first ever Macau hotel, St Regis (see review on page 28). "They must see Macau as a growth market, so we're really pleased," Janet McNab, managing director of both the St Regis and Sheraton Grand, told me.

Not all is great of course about Macau. Blue sky days are few and far between (none during my stay). There are few direct flights and while the first class on Cotai Jet ferry to/from Hong Kong was comfortable, it was a pain having to drag luggage over a long distance to get a transfer to/from hotel. A new bridge between Hong Kong and Macau is still in the works.

But there is enough appeal now to put aside these inconveniences and educate well-heeled clients – families, gourmards, spa-lovers, fun-seekers, luxury hotel lovers, avid shoppers – that Macau can please them for a few nights. It's time to accept Macau as a luxury, not just gambling, destination.



St. Regis Macao Cotai Central



A Metropolitan Suite (**left**) and the foyer of St. Regis Macao

By Raini Hamdi

LOCATION

Right in the heart of the Cotai strip, giving convenient access to new attractions such as the Parisian, and upcoming ones such as MGM Cotai.

AMBIENCE

Unlike many luxury hotels in Cotai with large, decorated lobbies, many of them jaw-dropping, I arrive into what looks like a small atrium of an elegant home, with a curved staircase and a beautiful light installation on the ceiling. Although this is the world's largest St. Regis, with 400 rooms, a common thread that runs through the hotel, which I soon discovered, is a real attempt to create intimacy and elegance, whether in rooms, F&B or other areas.

ROOMS

My St. Regis Suite, at 106sqm, is large but is designed such that it feels homely and comely, fit out with real quality. Floor-to-ceiling windows in the living room give superb views of the The Parisian and its half-sized Eiffel Tower. I can't resist a photo,

fooling every family member and friends that I'm in Paris.

Throwing myself into the St. Regis king-size bed in the next room, an argument ensues with self: *Why can't I just stay here and watch movies all day on the super-sized screen, then luxuriate myself in that inviting tub in the bathroom???*

Name St. Regis Macao Cotai Central
No. of rooms 400
Address Estrada Do Istmo, S/N, Cotai, Macao SAR, PRC
Contact
Tel: (853) 2882 8890 Email: stregis.macao@stregis.com
Website: stregismacao.com

FACILITIES

Luckily, there is a push factor: the Iridium Spa at the hotel. If you have not heard, it uses products rich in minerals from gemstones. It can use plain cereal for all I care, the fact is I'm having a

gem of a massage by a young, caring Chinese lady therapist.

The St. Regis Athletic Club with more Cotai views, TechnoGym machines and yoga, pilates and aerobics classes beckons, but I'm feeling too well from the spa besides it's time to get ready for dinner. Perhaps tomorrow, after some serious lazy time by the hotel's poolside.

Dinner tonight will be at hotel's restaurant, The Manor. Once again,

the restaurant feels intimate as it is divided into three different settings, an indoor garden, a dining room and a wine gallery, and two private dining spaces. The imported prime cut meats and seafood are cooked to perfection.

Completing the evening is a drink at the stunning St. Regis Bar.

SERVICE

A huge factor why the hotel feels storied and gracious stems from the service of its staff. Somehow, it manages to appoint people of the same DNA – warm, friendly, polite, genteel, speak polished English, eager to please and to interact with you if you wish, very intuitive.

I'll never forget the good manners of Raymond Wong, assistant concierge, or breakfast service staff Anna Wu who remembers I like a second cup of espresso.

VERDICT

My first ever stay at a St. Regis has left an indelible impression of the brand on me. I never believed that large can be personalised, gracious and intimate. Now I do.



Wynn Palace Cotai

By Raini Hamdi

LOCATION

Located in the Cotai strip, this handsome hotel which opened in August last year is said to be “the culmination of Steve Wynn’s more than 45 years in hospitality, setting a new standard for luxury”.

It’s all true.

AMBIENCE

The ooh’s and aah’s start right on arrival at the entrance hall, where tourists are clicking their cameras away and no wonder. Before them is an 8.6 metric ton flower display in the shape of a carousel, made of, listen to this, 83,000 roses, peonies and other species. It seals the ambience of Wynn Palace as magnificent, gloriously lavish and quite unique.

Name Wynn Palace Cotai
No. of rooms 1,706
Address Avenida Da Nave Desportiva, Cotai, Macao SAR, PRC
Contact
Tel: (853) 8889 8890 Email: Inquiries@wynnpalace.com
Website: wynnpalace.com

ROOMS

My room, a Fountain Suite, dazzles in its yellow/golden hues. Its brightness and richness makes me feel energetic. Mirrors make what already is a large room (107sqm) larger. The

design is sleek and uncluttered. My mind digests the perfection as the eyes scan top quality modern furnitures, luxurious furnishings (bed is covered in fine Egyptian cotton linen of 507 threadcount, apparently the highest in Macau) and high-technology (Bang & Olufsen Bluetooth audio system, touch-screen control for lights, drapes, TV and temperature, etc). There’s even a private spa room with audio experience. The best seats to view the Performance Lake are in my



Barbara Kraf

Above Wynn Palace Fountain Salon Suite

living room.

The suite’s only imperfection is there’s only one toilet for such a huge room.

FACILITIES

I love great decor and am amazed at the resort’s beautifully-crafted 4,497sqm spa and array of restaurants, particularly the fine-dining ones. The most beautiful of them all to me is Andrea’s, alas, I’m not so much into regional Chinese which it serves. SW, which serves succulent steaks and seafood, is so good that I return the second night for more.

Other facilities include 9,555sqm of gleaming retail space, 30,019sqm of casino space, a collection of art, including Jeff Koons’ *Tulips*, and a Swiss-made cable car system that features 34 gondolas and are also great seats to watch the Performance Lake and the Cotai area.

The only facility that fails to match all this impressiveness is the gym which, though lined with the best machines, has no view, feels cramped and is without a touch of luxury – see how quickly one gets spoilt?

SERVICE

Dinner service at SW and breakfast service at Cafe Fontana are superb, with friendly and attentive staff, however, at reception and casino, I encounter some language difficulties. But overall, service is excellent.

VERDICT

This is a work of love. There is vision and insistence on quality and perfection. It makes me see a good side to casino operation, as surely this revenue is what enables the amazing decors, artworks, seas of flowers, shows, ultra-luxurious accommodations and so on.



KeongDaGreat/Shutterstock.com

Kek Lok Si Temple lights up with a fireworks show in Georgetown, Penang

When Georgetown in Penang was granted World Heritage status by UNESCO in 2008, it boosted the profile of the whole Malaysian island globally, as well as attracted the attention of luxury travellers.

The UNESCO branding has helped a lot in promoting the destination to overseas markets, said Manfred Kurz, managing director of Diethelm Travel Malaysia. "The recognition is important as travellers trust an internationally recognised brand more than they would a tour operator and it also makes it easier for us to promote the destination," he said.

According to Albert Lafuente, director of sales & marketing at Shangri-La's Rasa Sayang Resort & Spa and Golden Sands Resort,

The pull of Penang

Georgetown's place in UNESCO's World Heritage list and Penang's other attractions such as its food and more upmarket offerings are winning a few nods among luxury guests. By **S Puvaneswary**

Penang is a "haven for those who appreciate rich cultural heritage and world-renowned cuisine, on top of it being a beautiful tropical destination".

Complementing the UNESCO status for Georgetown is the fact Penang keeps evolving in a way that appeals to luxury travellers.

Lafuente said: "Penang underwent a major transformation recently, and could now offer more environmentally-orientated activities."

Hotels like Shangri-La's Rasa Sayang Resort & Spa join in this push by creating tours that allow guests to absorb the history and heritage of the city fully.

Shangri-La's tour includes stops for street food that Penang

heritage haven penang

is known for. It also visits one of Asia's tallest observation decks and takes visitors on a hike on Penang Hill. The tour ends at the Habitat, which gives them a 360-degree view of the island's verdant canopy and beyond.

Other activities that luxury travellers can enjoy at the hotel include private cocktails and dinner in the balcony of one of its grand suites, fishing expeditions, island-hopping cruises and even helicopter tours of the island.

Diethelm also focuses on F&B and sailing. Said Kurz: "Penang is famous for its food, so it is one of the attractions we want to show visitors. Options include taking them to dine in fine establishments around the island, going to different restaurants every day."

Other activities that can be enjoyed by Diethelm's upmarket guests include sailing on a yacht around the island or to Langkawi as a day trip, or spending a night onboard the yacht. "There are secluded beaches where breakfast and lunch can be arranged for private groups," said Kurz.

Penang's high-quality accommodations are an additional pull factor, especially for repeat visitors.

Kingston Khoo, senior product development/contracting manager at Discovery Overland Holidays, said: "Those who are familiar with Penang like to return and stay at the Shangri-La's Rasa Sayang Resort & Spa or the Eastern & Oriental (E&O) Hotel."

Andy Teh, E&O Hotel's group director of sales & marketing, said the hotel's location in the core heritage area, along with its 132-year-old history, makes it the place to stay.

"Luxury guests have high expectations and we deliver them by training our frontliners to provide a high level of personalised service, engaging the guests from the moment they arrive," said Teh.

The other upscale hotel, Shangri-



Evgeny Ermakov/Shutterstock.com



grass-lifeisgood/Shutterstock.com

La's Rasa Sayang Resort & Spa, has reduced its room inventory from more than 500 to just over 300 to create the Rasa Wing.

The Rasa Wing embodies a resort within a resort concept. "The whole wing is a club wing and is perfect for the well-heeled, discerning guests that we welcome to the resort regularly. Guests have access to the Club Lounge and a private pool," said Lafuente.

The property also offers Shangri-La's luxury wellness village, Chi, The Spa.

Apart from the physical aspects, customised services are provided for luxury guests.

Lafuente said: "If a guest arrives in a private plane, we can easily arrange for a parking bay for the whole duration of the guest stay. Similarly, we can make arrangements for those who arrive via private yachts to dock in a nearby marina."

Their respective strategies have resulted in positive outcomes for the hotels. E&O Hotel has had an average of 8.3 per cent growth year-on-year in the past three years, according to Teh. As for Shangri-La, Lafuente said: "In 2016, the Rasa Wing occupancy grew by seven percentage points versus the previous year. In fact, the whole resort's occupancy grew at similar levels. To us it is an indication that people are willing to pay more for the exclusivity and the extra touches

Street food at Kimberly Street food night market in Penang

provided for them at the Rasa Wing."

Inbound operators are also seeing an increase in higher-spending guests to Penang.

Discovery Overland Holidays said it experienced a 15 per cent year-on-year growth in the market last year due to its participation in International Luxury Travel Market Asia and Americas in the past three years.

World Avenues Travel & Tours, which has been rebranding Malaysia as an upmarket destination in its bid to capture more quality tourists, recorded a six per cent growth in the number of these visitors in 2016 over 2015, according to executive director, Ally Bhoonee.

"In 2016, the Rasa Wing occupancy grew by seven percentage points versus the previous year...To us it is an indication that people are willing to pay more for the exclusivity..."

Albert Lafuente, director of sales & marketing, Shangri-La's Rasa Sayang Resort & Spa and Golden Sands Resort, Penang



The Edison George Town, Penang



From left The elegantly conserved entrance of The Edison; chic outdoor seating with The Lounge at the back

By Karen Yue

LOCATION

Superb location within UNESCO World Heritage Site Georgetown, with the storied streets of Jalan Muntri (where wealthy Chinese merchants and colonial officers once lived), Leith Street (also known as the Hakka Millionaire's Row) and Love Lane (where mistresses of aforementioned tycoons were conveniently put up) making up its surroundings. Today, these streets house quirky art galleries, chic wine bars and popular street eats.

AMBIENCE

At the peak of its lifetime, the conserved mansion that is the The Edison today was home to a wealthy tycoon and his offsprings across three generations. Its glory days are brought back to life with careful conservation of its doors, marble floors, printed floor tiles, main stairs between the two storeys and

wooden floorboards in guestrooms.

Even the main entrance, where I arrived into in a taxi, looks like it never left the early 20th-century. An ornate fountain with miniature Chinese arched bridges and figurines in ancient dress stands in the middle of the driveway, with the stately white-washed mansion in the background.

The interior takes a chic turn with two brightly painted chairs in the reception area and a courtyard with modern rattan lounges.

ROOMS

My 36m² Deluxe Premium Room on the second floor bears little sign of The Edison's heritage, adopting a modern décor instead. It isn't opulent but feels like how a five-star hotel room ought to be – fresh-smelling, furnished with a firm bed covered in smooth sheets, a large work desk and a couch, and with sufficient space between furniture. Wi-Fi comes free.

The colonial-style bathroom comes with gleaming white tiles and a dark-wood framed vanity and wardrobe.

FACILITIES

The Edison is an all-inclusive hotel

where all-day refreshments and occasional hot snacks are offered free to hotel guests in The Lounge. Built to resemble a homely kitchen with a 10-seat high dining table and cosy couches at the sides, I found The Lounge to be a soothing space for reading and writing, and for striking up conversations with fellow guests about the best eats in the vicinity.

At the time of my stay in December, The Edison was awaiting approval for a lap pool for guests.

SERVICE

The Edison is staffed by few smiley staff who are always at the front desk no matter the hour of the day.

VERDICT

By traditional definition, The Edison does not qualify as a luxury hotel since rooms are delightfully affordable, particularly now when the Malaysian ringgit is weak against most major currencies. However, it surely satisfies the comfort and elegance part of the definition, and I'd be glad to return to her embrace.

Name The Edison George Town, Penang
No. of rooms 35
Address 15 Lebuhr Leith, George Town, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia
Contact
 Tel: (604) 262 2990
 Email: wecare-gt@theedisonhotels.com
 Website: theedisonhotels.com



Matyas Rehak/Shutterstock.com

Open for business

The Middle Eastern nation is seeing tourism growth thanks to new air links and international hotels. But to get to the heart of luxury travellers, it still needs to convince them that it is safe.

By **Paige Lee Pei Qi**

International sanctions against Iran were lifted in 2016, and change is afoot for the tourism sector.

In one of the first moves by an international hotel operator, French group AccorHotels swiftly took over two hotels in the country in preparation for a tourism boom in Iran.

This is in contrast to the 1979 Islamic Revolution, where signs of Western decadence such as resorts were expunged from the country. Since then, the country has been bereft of international hotels until recently.

In yet another sign that Iran is opening up to international visitors and businesses, Iranian businessman Ahad Azim Zadeh signed a contract



with Spanish hospitality chain Meliá Hotels International to open the country's first five-star foreign-run hotel. Scheduled to open late this year, the Gran Meliá Ghoo resort is located by the Caspian Sea in the city of Salman Shahr.

Meanwhile, Dubai-based Jumeirah Hotel Group is also planning to open hotels in Iran in the near future.

These quality developments are helping to propel Iran's position forward as an upmarket destination.

In the meantime, up to 125 hotels operated by foreign and local firms have opened in the past year – more than the total number built in the last century. The government

has also pledged support for the flourishing sector to cope with the tourist influx.

According to Rodney Yew, managing director of Discovery Holidays Singapore, this wave of development displays a "vote of confidence" by the international hotels which in turn would inspire luxury travellers to visit Iran.

Yew, who has been selling Iran for the past two decades, said: "Visitors would be more assured of the service standards and quality of their stay with branded hotels, and this will give them the impression that the destination is ready for them."

Moreover, new upper upscale and luxury hotels also bring with them more facilities such as spas, restaurants, bars and pools, which would inject value into the destination while improving service standards at the same time.

The presence of new air links to Iran is also helping tremendously in boosting interest in the Middle Eastern destination.

Yew pointed out that the lack of air connectivity, which deterred potential travellers previously, is "no longer an issue" now.

Last October, Thai Airways International launched four-times weekly flights from Bangkok to Tehran. Earlier in June, AirAsia X also launched thrice-weekly flights from both Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok to Tehran.

"When you have new air links to Iran, it is definitely a good sign (which tells) potential travellers that tourism there is on the rise," Yew added.

However, given that the tourism industry is still in its infancy, and the overall infrastructure and services in many parts of the country have not been developed, Iran may not necessarily be seen as a luxury destination at this point.

Vivian Yeo, director, content marketing at Quotient TravelPlanner Singapore, said: "Our clients in



The image of Iran around the world is changing. Its many tourist attractions, historic, religious and spectacular, are once again being emphasised.

Olivier Jager,
CEO, ForwardKeys

general do not have much appetite for Iran and we have not observed any change with the lifting of sanctions."

Jess Yap, general manager at Country Holidays in Singapore, agreed, saying that her company sees Iran as a destination that appeals more to travellers who are keen to learn about the history of Persia rather than luxe travellers.

"Although there are all the modern comforts (in terms of) hotels and good food, one does not expect to be pampered on a trip to Iran. Moreover, I think the safety aspect will make people think twice before visiting Iran," Yap added.

Yew concurred that the notion of a luxury holiday is not typically associated with Iran yet due to lingering concerns that the country is still an unsafe destination.

"Iran is really interesting especially when it is so rich in culture and history, but one would not think of it as a place for indulgent holidays," he pointed out.

Nevertheless, according to figures released by travel intelligence analyst ForwardKeys, Iran is currently experiencing a growth in total international arrivals, which went up 18.4 per cent last year.

Olivier Jager, CEO of ForwardKeys, said: "Our findings support the conclusion that political change in Iran is making the country more approachable – an attractive place to visit and potentially do business.

"The image of Iran around the world is changing. Its many tourist attractions, historic, religious and spectacular, are once again being emphasised.

"I expect visitor numbers to increase, so long as Iran's airport can keep pace," he said.

However, current visitor numbers from Asia are still low. The main source regions for air travel to Iran are North America, Europe and the Middle East, which together make up 83.7 per cent of international arrivals in 2016.

Top left
Interior of
Golestan palace
in Tehran

FIRST
PERSON



Paige Lee Pei Qi jumps at the chance to experience Iran first-hand, despite the country's shattered image

Debunking a myth

"Is Iran safe?"

That was the unanimous thought echoed by many when I shared that I was heading there last November. Admittedly, I had my own reservations, given that Iran is relatively unknown as a tourist destination. It also didn't help that the news surrounding Iran had been largely negative, charged by topics like the Islamic Revolution in 1979 and the resulting hostage crisis; the violent crackdown on protests in 2009; and accusations of its nuclear weapon-building capabilities.

However, having visited the destination over five days, I realise that the stigma of Iran being a dangerous place was a far cry from the truth. Instead, I wish I had more time to spend in Iran.

To begin with, this nation lays claim to 19 UNESCO World Heritage sites, the most visited of which is Persepolis. Located near Shiraz in south-western Iran, Persepolis is home to an incredible array of artefacts and ruins that date back more than 2,500 years.

Another UNESCO site I visited was the Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque in Isfahan. Hailed as one of the masterpieces of Safavid Iranian architecture, I stood there captivated by the mosque's grandeur and its kaleidoscopic mosaic design.

Given that tourism in Iran is still in its early days, it was an absolute luxury to have ample space to move about without having to jostle with a crowd. It also meant that getting tickets to these tourist sites was done pronto. While I did encounter a handful of other tourist groups, the ratio of locals far outnumbered foreigners. It was also quite an unorthodox experience to have excited groups of locals clamouring around me for a selfie.

Soon it was time to make my way into the bustling capital city of Tehran, where I was eager to visit the Niavaran Palace in Shemiran. It was the last residence of the last Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, and the imperial family, until the Iran Revolution. The complex showcased a con-





All Photos by Paige Lee

“ Given that tourism in Iran is still in its early days, it was an absolute luxury to have ample space to move about without having to jostle with a crowd. It also meant that getting tickets to these tourist sites was done pronto.

siderable amount of European influence, and the private residence offered a peek into the opulent lifestyle of the Shah and his family.

The magnitude of opulence reached a crescendo when I set foot into the Treasury of National Jewels. Housed within the Central Bank of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the heart of the capital, the treasury is home to a dazzling collection of Iranian royal jewels and gemstones.

Every piece of this extravagant collection, which included elaborate crowns, tiaras, bejewelled swords and shields, is a reflection of the tumultuous history of the nation and spoke volumes of the Iranians’ storied culture.

But all is not gold or silver. To fully experience the vibrant and stimulating city, a visit to the Grand Bazaar is a must. Historic, expansive and dizzying, the bazaar seemed to sell almost anything and everything from spices to glassware, and jewellery to carpets. The frenetic atmosphere may not be to everyone’s liking, but it was integral to experiencing the local culture. Do not fret though, as there are many charming teahouses dotting the fringes of the bazaar for one to catch a breather.

I felt almost embarrassed to admit how limited my knowledge was about this nation before my trip there. I had encountered the warm hospitality of the Iranians first-hand, and was left fascinated by their long, storied history. That is why I am strongly urging you to experience the country for yourself, and when you do, remember to leave all stereotypes behind.

Clockwise from top left Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque in Isfahan; Naqsh-e Jahan Square, Isfahan; Isfahan Bazaar, one of the oldest and largest bazaars in the country; spices for sale in a shop in Tehran; Persian mosaic boxes for sale in the bazaar



Q FOR QATAR AND 'QUADRANT' THINKING

The first-ever quadrant-thinking Business Class where two seats can transform into a double bed for a couple, or four into a private cabin for a family or group of friends travelling together, has arrived.

Two years in the making, Qatar Airways' QSuite features the industry's first-ever double bed in Business Class, with privacy panels that stow away, allowing passengers in adjoining seats to create their own private cabin. Adjustable panels and movable TV monitors in the centre of four seats also allow people travelling together to transform the space into a private suite.

Qatar group CEO Akbar Al Baker said at the launch of the airline's new Business Class at ITB Berlin in March: "Today I am proud to unveil the future of premium travel with our new QSuite Business Class. Our unique and patented design is a world first in many ways and challenges industry norms by offering passengers more privacy, more choice and more personalisation. With these innovations, Qatar Airways has revolutionised the way we serve our Business Class travellers enabling our passengers to enjoy a First Class experience in Busi-

ness Class.

"On Qatar Airways, you choose when you dine, and the menu options are varied, with something for everyone. You choose when you rest, and when you want entertainment, we offer more choices than any other airline. It only makes sense to give you the choice to make your own cabin-within-a-cabin, creating double QSuites or quadrants."

The QSuite concept will be retrofitted onto the existing Qatar Airways fleet starting this month, at an estimated rate of one aircraft a month.

As well, Business Class travellers can sleep in exclusively-designed cotton sleeper suits produced by The White Company. Amenity kits feature Castello Monte Vibiano Vecchio products in a bag created by luggage brand Bric's.

In addition to the existing 'dine on demand' service, a new Business Class menu offers a selection of snack sharing dishes available throughout the flight.

The airline is launching a next-generation user interface of Oryx One, its entertainment platform, that makes it easier to surf content and choose from up to 3,000 entertainment options.



What's this little *Rascal* been up to now?

Rascal set sail in Indonesia early this year, making a grand promise that no two journeys will ever be the same onboard the Hamptons-meet-tropical luxe-styled *Phinisi* superyacht.

Living up to its moniker, the for-charter-only *Rascal* wants to bring "casual, barefoot freedom and fun" to your clients through its custom itineraries.

Expect off-radar island destinations, menus by Bali's famous Watercress restaurant, bespoke cocktails by Proof & Company mixologists, marine-life immersions and stargazing on the 118.9m² infinity deck, which can also function as a sunbathing platform or an al fresco moonlit cinema, according to a press statement.

Rascal is also the first superyacht in Indonesia that has all cabins above water, with each of the five spacious cabins boasting high ceilings, ocean views, en-suite bathrooms, a private terrace and audio-visual systems.

Monti jazzes up Singapore waterfront

Have clients who love jazz travelling to Singapore? Have them check out Monti, a new jazz lounge occupying prime position on the Fullerton Waterfront in its own building with an open-air rooftop terrace looking out to the Marina Bay Sands and the surrounding bay.

Seasoned industry veterans who are familiar faces in the local lounge circuit play live jazz music every night, mixing classic jazz with blues, soul, and even more esoteric styles such as skunk jive.

Leading the rat pack is Jeremy Monteiro, who curates Monti's music programme and performs as often as he can. The team also invites international, regional and new local acts that take the stage on a regular basis.

The main indoor space houses the stage and lounge seating. Those who prefer to take in the mesmerising night views of the city's skyline and surrounding bay area can wander up to Monti's open-air rooftop terrace that boasts a separate bar and cocktail seating.



RECH BY ALAIN DUCASSE MAKES ASIAN DEBUT

One of the most famous seafood restaurants in Paris, Rech, has opened its first international outpost at the InterContinental Hong Kong, in a newly-renovated space of the former Spoon restaurant by Alain Ducasse in the hotel.

Rech, which was founded in 1925 by Adrien Rech and reborn by Ducasse in 2007, showcases the finest seasonal fish and oysters

with the chef's personal interpretation and contemporary cuisine.

The menu is an invitation to dive into the big blue, from the freshest oysters from France to the signature pan-seared line-caught sole with new potatoes. The restaurant's aged Camembert, followed by desserts like XL éclair, vanilla or chocolate – made with chocolate from Ducasse's manufacture in Paris – complete the experience.

Most of the fish and shellfish at Rech comes from Europe, sourced in France (especially Brittany) from small, independent fishermen, strongly involved in the protection of natural resources.

Chef Stéphane Gortina, who has worked with Ducasse for over 11 years at his global restaurants and previously headed the Spoon kitchen, continues to lead the kitchen.

See Mont-Blanc like a head of state does it

A new Amazing Monaco VIP experience offers your clients a Mont-Blanc helicopter tour operated by Monacair, a company that serves visiting heads of states and the Monaco royal family.

From the comfort of a seven-seat H130 aircraft, guests are taken on a tour around the otherwise inaccessible peaks of Mont-Blanc. The mountain is the highest peak in the Alps and the 11th tallest on earth at 4,808m above sea level.

The tour, which runs from 10.30 to 16.00, includes lunch at Refuge of Tornieux, an alpine chalet built in 1892. From its terrace restaurant facing out to Mont-Blanc, guests can enjoy a meal of traditional bougnettes, raclette and other classic French dishes. A VIP transfer from any of the Principality's hotels is also included.

Price is a royal 8,000 euros (US\$8,481) per trip.



Bigger, better Plaza Premium Lounge at Hong Kong airport

The Plaza Premium Lounge (East Hall) at Hong Kong International Airport will be upgraded and expanded into a 16,000m² venue that can accommodate 410 guests.

Over the past seven years, the 203-seat lounge has enjoyed a prime location with easy access from immigration. The makeover will see it emerge as a Plaza Premium Lounge and Plaza Premium First

(PPF) with different entrances, according to Plaza Premium Group's general manager James Yap. It will reopen in Q3 and Q4 respectively.

Yap said: "Today, technology plays a pivotal role for airport lounges so four self check-in kiosks will be installed which will enable guests to process registration simply by swiping their credit card."

PPF guests can enjoy



services such as a live cooking station with chefs preparing tailor-made dishes per guests' preferences. Yap also hopes to collaborate with branded companies, for example, with a premium

coffee brand whose baristas would showcase their talents on-site.

In addition, a relaxation zone will feature six rooms offering a 50-minute neck and shoulder massage

service. There will also be an exclusive bar featuring premium brand whiskey and champagne which are usually supplied to five-star hotels and Michelin-star outlets, Yap added.

DESIGN STICKS TO PRINCIPLES AS INDUSTRY SEES CHANGES



Founder and CEO of Design Hotels, Claus Sendlinger (above), expects a much slower pace of growth for the portfolio in Asia-Pacific compared to Europe this year. Yet he isn't too concerned as he'd rather stick to principles than grow indiscriminately, he said.

The consolidation in the industry has already impacted Design Hotels, which lost Alila as a result of the group going under Two Roads Hospitality together with two other brands, Destination Hotels and Commune Hotels & Resorts. That's no small loss to Design Hotels as Alila was its largest client in Asia with a total of eight properties.

That Marriott International, which acquired Starwood Hotels & Resorts, also now has a stake in Design Hotels factored into the breakaway with Alila. Sendlinger said: "They felt that they were competing with some of the brands operated by Starwood and Marriott, hence they decided to leave."

He remains cool. "It gives us a fresh look at the region. We're not looking for destination

replacements (for Alila). We're going for what really matches our design principles. It also gives us the chance to look at hotel operators who are pushing the bar and are ready to do things differently."

Currently, the company has 35 properties in 10 countries across Asia-Pacific.

When asked about the company's growth target for Asia-Pacific this year, Sendlinger said: "We want to grow this year, but with the right ones. The hotels I've seen which I would like (to add to Design Hotel's portfolio) would be around 10. If we grow by 10 hotels in Asia, I'd be more than happy, as there are not so many good products in the region."

Asia has "a very different hotel scene" compared to Europe, which is more dominated by non-branded hotels, he said.

"In Asia, real estate is expensive, especially in the cities, and it is owned by the big conglomerates. As such, these real estate owners tend to look for branded properties more than independent ones.

We're not looking for destination replacements (for Alila). We're going for what really matches our design principles.

"Another thing I see as a European is that a lot of development in Asia caters to the mass demand coming from India and China. I think it's a big mistake as the Indians and Chinese will eventually grow out of these commodity, entertainment properties."

Nevertheless, there are some properties from Asia that makes the cut, he said, pointing to The Warehouse Hotel in Singapore, Glad Live in Seoul, South Korea and Satoyama Jujo in Niigata, Japan as examples. He looks at the consistency of concept, design, architecture, branding, local integration and the hotel's approach to sustainability.

"The latest hotel in the region that became a member is The Warehouse Hotel. I love it and feel that the owners have hit it spot on. More Asian hotels should follow that model, where its owners come from true hospitality business," said Sendlinger.

He added the strongest and most sustainable businesses created were usually with owners coming from hospitality sectors such as F&B, not necessarily hotels.

Sendlinger also believed new hospitality models would emerge, particularly the combination of a co-working space with a private members' club and rooms.

"More and more people are living a nomadic lifestyle. For them, the classical hotel model will not work. This will be the next group of people to target when it comes to living spaces," he said. – Rachel AJ Lee

New luxury villa on Phuket's millionaire's mile

We didn't know Phuket has a millionaire's mile of its own. According to the PR of Aquila, that's Kamala, where the new seven-bedroom villa is located. With the trend of rich families or groups of friends or people with similar interests travelling together, Aquila taunts the limits of luxury with 1.01 hectares of landscape and million-dollar views from its cliff-top ocean frontage.

The 1,100m² Main Pavilion, its three-storey centrepiece, stretches out along the cliff-face, housing a movie theatre, a bar within a larger recreation room, a reception, a gymnasium and a living room and dining area for up to 16 guests.

From the living room, guests can step right out to a 30m-long infinity private pool, flanked by Twin Thai Salas offering shaded dining and lounging spaces. The Aquila also allows them to dip directly into the Andaman waters via a secluded cove on the property.

The seven bedrooms on the estate include a large suite with living area and an adjacent bunk bedroom, and in a separate pavilion, six self-contained guestrooms (two master, two double bedrooms and two twin-rooms).

At your clients' service are an English-speaking manager, a full-time chef, 24-hour security and free Wi-Fi. Special opening rates range from US\$2,750 to US\$7,500 per night.





PRESERVATION AT THE HEART OF GHM HOTEL IN SHARJAH

Al Bait Sharjah, the new luxury resort to be managed by General Hotel Management (GHM), aims to add vibrancy to the historic inner-city precinct in which it is situated when it opens at the end of this year.

Developed in partnership with Shurooq, the Sharjah Investment and Development Authority, Al Bait is part of the emirate's largest and most ambitious historical preservation and restoration project known as Heart of Sharjah. The heritage project, planned over a 15-year period and targeted for completion by 2025, seeks to revitalise the district and introduce travellers to its storied past.

Al Bait is a distinctly unique development as its new structures, following traditional Sharjah architecture, are built from the restored foundations of old houses that once belonged to important families. The name Al Bait means The House.

Covering a 10,000m² area in the centre of the Heart of Sharjah, its 53 luxury guestrooms

and suites, hotel facilities and amenities will coexist harmoniously with the several heritage buildings in the district.

Said GHM president Hans R. Jenni: "The introduction of Al Bait Sharjah in the UAE will do what sister resort, The Chedi Muscat, has achieved for the Sultanate of Oman – redefine luxury resort accommodation, increase travellers' aspiration to explore the destination, and ultimately raise the profile for the resort and destination."

The architecture and design of Al Bait Sharjah is undertaken by the UK architecture firm, GAJ.

Conservation highlights that guests can look forward to while staying at Al Bait include a direct connectivity and access to Souk Al Arsah, a traditional bazaar and marketplace – in fact, the oldest in the UAE – from the hotel, and even the incorporation of handcrafted thatched roofs and distinct motifs into the ceilings of the hotel's buildings.

Antipodean Luxury Travel launches in Singapore



A growing demand in Asia for more luxurious and interactive experiences in destinations further afield has spurred New Zealander Alexandra Stewart to launch Antipodean Luxury Travel in Singapore. The company aims to specialise solely on luxury travel experiences spanning both North and South Islands.

Among its exclusive experiences are exclusive helicopter rights and private access to UNESCO sites, wilderness fisheries and coastal coves. Clients can customise their own wine from a single vintage at Hawkes Bay winery under the direction of Steve Smith M.V, one of New Zealand's best winemakers.

"We cater to families, couples and solo travellers and our knowledge of the country, personal network and exclusive in-country partnerships enable us to deliver on that. With increased flight connectivity between Asia and New Zealand, and outbound tourism on the rise, now is an ideal time for us to connect with our target market," said Stewart.

Portier service at your fingertips



Going beyond its existing allocation of two staff members per guest (and a personal butler per suite), Bangkok's The Siam has launched the Portier Technology concierge tool.

Now, your clients can stay connected through Portier mobile phones with 4G and unlimited data roaming as well as free local minutes.

And with Concierge Connect, guests can contact their Siam Butler at any time of day, and arrangements made by the hotel will be uploaded to the My Stay itinerary planner.

The Portier City Guide provides content by renowned travel writers, while daily Radar bulletin introduces guests to cultural activities they can be a part of.

Content is available in four languages: English, Japanese, Simplified Chinese and Arabic.

Adventura Travel debuts in Vietnam

Luxury Travel Vietnam has lifted the covers off its newest brand, Adventura Travel, after seeing a rapid increase in demand for adventure holidays among clients, especially the young ones chasing unique experiences.

Adventura aims to provide fully-customised private tours, including soft adventure (biking, hiking, kayaking), family holidays, and special interest trips such as culinary and photography tours.

For universities, associations and philanthropic groups, Adventura can also arrange charity challenges and educational and volunteer travel programmes.

GET ACCESS TO PRIVATE RESIDENCES

Launched recently as Asia's members-only luxury destination club, Afini promises access to private residences located in top resorts. It kicked off with 25 properties at 12 "highly enjoyable" destinations.

CEO John Blanco said of the concept: "It's a collection of beautiful homes and properties sourced by our team. We lease them for three to five years for consistency from owners who use their premises little and want somebody to manage them. We even put money into upgrades at each property. Unlike timeshare, which has a much higher price point and restricted conditions, there is no limit of days to book, and nightly rates are 15 to 45 per cent below market rates."

Afini aims to tap 1,000 members from markets like Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, Hong Kong and Singapore.

Properties cover short and longhaul destinations like Niseko, Phuket, Bali, Bangkok, Singapore, London, Beverly Hills and New York. Additions to come will include Tuscany, Provence, Shanghai, Switzerland, Dubai, Greece and Rome.

It also works with Amanresorts for remote locations such as Bhutan, according to Blanco.



Villa Levi, Bali

Sashay on the clouds

If your clients are requesting an exceptional city accommodation in Seoul, a hotel in the world's fifth tallest building might do the trick.

Occupying the 76 to 101 floors in the Lotte World Tower, Signiel Seoul offers 235 keys across three broad room categories – Deluxe (44-53m²), Premier (57-61m²) and Suite (66-353m²).

Apart from its own facilities including a spa, gym and pool, guests can also be taken 550m off the ground to the world's tallest observation deck on the 117th storey. We hear that the Sky Walk and Sky Café on the outdoor deck give an experience of walking on clouds.

Your clients can soothe the exhilaration with some retail therapy in the same building. Let's hope they enjoy Chanel, Louis Vuitton, Hermes and the like.



Kenneth Barrett

Bangkok walks that involve little walking

Based on his best-selling travel book *22 Walks in Bangkok*, Kenneth Barrett will adapt a collection of walking tours that, believe it or not, involve "little actual walking".

Created exclusively for Abercrombie & Kent Thailand, the tours are designed with the luxury traveller in mind.

"As the guests are unlikely to be ardent walkers in the Bangkok heat, boats and a minivan are used to shuttle them around when necessary," Barrett explained.

Barrett's journeys around the city introduce hidden gems, historical treasures and forgotten neighbourhoods through a mix of historical expertise and geographical proficiency that – according to Abercrombie & Kent – even few locals appreciate.

And if Barrett happens to be in Bangkok, tour participants could even score a coffee session with the man himself at the end of their tour.



THE FACE SUITES

The Face Suites gets it – crummy and cramped rooms just don't cut it for luxury clients. That's why it is eager to pamper, with its lead-in category already featuring a generous 83m² of real estate.

Located in Kuala Lumpur's Jalan Sultan Ismail, the 200-suite serviced residences offers one- and two-bedroom suites across four categories.

Grand premier suites, the most luxurious category, also includes a small room with a single bed which can be used for your client's guest or helper (or even some of her newly-shopped handbags).

Face's generosity with space is carried throughout the property, from the tastefully done-up lobby to the Sky Deck on the 51st floor, which is where the fully equipped gym and heated infinity pool is located.

There are two dining options, Café IL VISO on the lobby is a coffee and juice bar for on-the-go guests, while Tangerine, a semi-fine dining restaurant on the rooftop offers western fusion with 360-degree views of the city. Deepblue Bar, also on the rooftop, is set to open this month.

Located in the heart of the commercial business district, The Face Suites is also within walking distance to the mono-rail station which links guests to main shopping districts in the city, such as Jalan Bukit Bintang, Jalan Imbi and Jalan Ampang. Attractions nearby include Petronas Twin Towers, Aquaria KLCC, KL Tower and Pavilion Kuala Lumpur.

Sawasdee, Capella

Capella Bangkok will open in summer 2018, as part of a luxury residential and hotel development known as The Chao Phraya Estate, developed by Bangkok-based Country Group Development.

The hotel, one of two international hospitality anchors within the project, will comprise 101 suites and river villas. F&B includes a bar, two restaurants and a riverfront ballroom and function rooms.

Occupying 5.7 hectares on the east bank of the River of Kings, The Chao Phraya Estate is Country Group Development's largest project to date, valued at 32 billion baht (US\$918 million).

Capella Bangkok will join Capella Shanghai and Capella Ubud (Bali) which are opening later this year.



ShellSea opens on the sea shore of Krabi

Picturesque Krabi, Thailand, has a new luxury addition, The ShellSea, which opened in April with a rate from 5,000 baht (US\$144) for a Garden Room.

The beachfront resort offers 72 spacious rooms 12 luxurious villas and a grand villa, with 180-degree views of the Andaman Sea. Facilities include a lap pool, family pool, spa, restaurants, beachside bar and a dream fitness centre with wall-to-ceiling glass windows overlooking the ocean.

The ShellSea is owned and managed by Aonang Ville, which also owns and operates Aonang Villa Resort, one of the longest established resorts at Krabi's Aonang Beach.

The resort is set directly on a 300m-long white-sand beach that links directly with the famous shell fossil plate, thereby offering guests classic beachfront resort relaxation along with the opportunity to explore one of Krabi's prime attractions.

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GOLDEN CELEBRATION 2017

LUXURY CRUISES

SEABOURN GETS CLOSE TO NATURE WONDERS

Your clients can see the vast icy wonder of the hidden Glacier Bay up close on select 11-day sailings aboard the ultra-luxurious *Seabourn Sojourn* which has started its 2017 Alaska season.

"Taking them to see the wonders of Glacier Bay is a fitting way to return to Alaska for the first time in a decade-and-a-half," said Richard Meadows, president of Seabourn.

A US National Park and Preserve that is part of a UNESCO World Heritage site, Glacier Bay is located along the Inside Passage on the south-eastern coast of Alaska. With no roads leading into the park, air and water are the only ways to explore Glacier Bay.

The park encompasses 5,130m² of wilderness, dotted with vast waterways, dynamic glaciers, emerald rainforests, striking coastlines, deep sheltered fjords, and snow-capped peaks.

A vibrant ecosystem made up of terrestrial and marine species, the abundant wildlife includes grizzly and black bears, mountain goats, numerous bird species, sea lions, harbour porpoises, orcas and humpback whales. Glaciers are geared for dramatic displays of ice and iceberg formation, including calving of icebergs into the bay – a wonder of sight, sound, and splash that is not to be missed.

Seabourn Sojourn's 2017 cruise schedule offering access to Glacier Bay includes June 26-July 7; July 21-August 1; and August 15-26.

Whatever the itinerary, Seabourn guests have new optional shore excursions and Ventures by Seabourn-guided kayak and Zodiac tours led by teams of scientists, scholars and naturalists that bring the awe-inspiring beauty of Alaska and British Columbia alive. The up-close explorations will be featured on *Seabourn Sojourn's* full series of 11-14 day itineraries sailing from Vancouver, British Columbia, and Anchorage (Seward), Alaska.

Meanwhile, Seabourn continues its exclusive partnership with UNESCO, which began in 2014, with new UNESCO Partner Tours at World Heritage sites across Europe starting this summer.

An example of how exclusive this is, in one of the tours, Stonehenge, your clients enjoy the rare privilege of slipping past ropes that keep tourists at bay and walking among the towering stones of Stonehenge on the Salisbury Plain of England. They will have a full hour to explore, snap photos and take in the majesty of the standing stones. Available on the port call at Portland for *Seabourn Quest* on August 20.



It's edgy, like a celebrity

Designed completely in 3-D, and featuring the work of A-list global architects and designers, the 2,918-guest *Celebrity Edge* aims to "establish a new baseline for ships from here on out", said Richard D. Fain, chairman and CEO, Royal Caribbean Cruises.

Celebrity Cruises' first new ship class in 10 years, a key highlight is the Magic Carpet – although it is not for riding. Cantilevered from the side of the ship, it makes *Celebrity Edge's* distinctive profile recognisable from miles away. The size of a tennis court, this engineering feat scales the 16-deck ship through the day and evening, positioning at four of the ship's decks, transforming into a new experience at each.

At the summit of the ship on Deck 16, the Magic Carpet becomes a speciality restaurant offering a special Dinner on the Edge for 90 guests. Alongside Deck 14, Magic Carpet becomes an open-air expansion of the main pool area. On Deck 5, Magic Carpet extends one of the ship's speciality restaurants into al fresco seating, and at its lowest position on Deck 2, Magic Carpet is an embarkation station where guests will be whisked away aboard Edge Launches.

The new Edge stateroom turns guest quarters into a seamless space, from the room's door all the way to the water's edge. The simple touch of a button gives guests open-air access to the sea, bringing the outside in and the inside out. With the touch of another button, guests can take complete control of their stateroom and personalise everything from lighting, shades, temperature and service – even choosing a setting to tuck them in or gently wake them.

Celebrity Edge will homeport in Fort Lauderdale, making her first sailing December 16, 2018. Bookings are now open.



LUXURY CRUISES



Rainer Witzgall



How to spend US\$50,000 at sea

Spend 10 nights on the world's largest and most opulent suite at sea for just over HK\$388,000 (US\$50,000) per person.

The 412sqm Regent Suite aboard the new US\$450 million *Regent Seven Seas Explorer* includes unlimited fine dining, wines and champagnes and unlimited treatments in the suite's private spa. The ship started a new season of European voyages in April.

Here's a peek at how opulent The Regent Suite is:

- It features a spacious master bedroom with separate living area, guest bedroom and a custom-made Steinway grand piano.
- The in-suite spa is in the master bathroom and includes a full sauna, ceramic heated loungers and a multi-jet shower.
- US\$150,000 was spent on the opulent Savoir No. 1 bed in the master bedroom.
- The suite also has a private solarium and 2.5 bathrooms with lavish marble and stone detailing.

PARISIAN JOY OF LIVING GOES ON

Uniworld's S.S. *Joie de Vivre*, the first of its kind to cruise the Seine River, was launched with added support from actress Joan Collins, whose known love affair with Paris continued as she christened the ship as godmother on March 27.

The Travel Corporation (Uniworld's parent company) had contemplated whether to proceed with plans following the events that hit Paris in November 2015, but in a gesture of support for the city, went ahead and birthed the ship this year.

Now docked in Paris for its Paris-Normandy sail, the ship celebrates French flair throughout – from its fabrics, antiques, art and gilded and wrought-iron accents, to its farm-to-table cuisine and local wine selection.

The 128-passenger vessel features two Royal Suites, eight Junior Suites and 54 staterooms. All rooms will have made-to-order Savoir of England beds and marble-lined bathrooms.

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