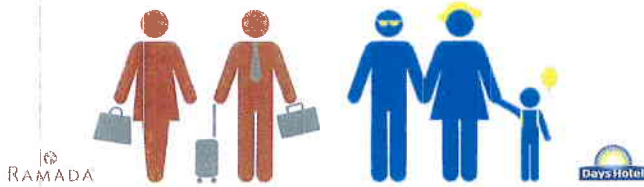


Business or Pleasure?



TTG

A S I A

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After three decades of climbing the industry rungs, Arthur Kiong, CEO, Far East Hospitality, has reached the top spot as CEO of a hotel management group. Watch him build a 'Singapore-inspired hospitality brand'. By Raini Hamdi -- see page 6

Vying for Muslims

More Japanese service providers are donning the halal badge

By S Puvanewary

KUALA LUMPUR Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO) is ramping up its focus on Muslim tourists from South-east Asia to boost tourism arrivals and assist the country's recovery from the March 2011 earthquake.

According to JNTO Singapore office manager, Susan Maria Ong, efforts to attract more Muslim travellers from Malaysia and Indonesia this year include conducting product briefings for travel consultants and organising media and trade fairs to showcase Japan's readiness.

Last month, JNTO published the *Japan Travel Guide for Muslim Visitors*, highlighting Muslim-friendly restaurants, mosques, attractions and Muslim organisations in the country.

The Kanagawa Prefecture has also embarked on a similar ini-

tiative with the launch of a travel guidebook for Muslim travellers.

Kasmah Hizir, secretary of the Kanagawa Prefecture representative office in Singapore, expects the booklet to help raise Muslim tourists' comfort levels during their travels. He explained: "Muslim travellers are not comfortable with *onsen* baths as they think they need to be nude. So we point them to the famed Yunesun Spa Resort in Kanagawa, which only allows those wearing swimsuits to enter."

Following a fair trip for 20 Indonesian consultants in April 2012, the prefecture will organise another one for the Malaysian travel trade this year.

Japan Travel Bureau (Malaysia) senior manager, outboard-division, Shen Nordin, observed that the company's new Muslim holiday packages to Osaka and

Tokyo were met with "surprising" response. He said: "We will maintain our Muslim packages for conservative Muslims. Liberal Muslims were attracted to regular packages, and we want to improvise our regular packages to cater to all races and make it more Muslim friendly."

A growing number of Japanese restaurants are seeking halal certification, observed Malaysia Halal Corporation (MHC) managing director, Akmal Abu Hassan. He said: "Last December, after we issued a halal certificate to Kamori Rusutsu Resort in Hokkaido, it received 260 Muslim tourists from Malaysia that month."

Since its establishment in 2010, MHC has issued halal certificates to nine restaurants in Japan so far; just last year alone, five Japanese restaurants were awarded the certification.

Several Japanese suppliers

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Rising baht spurs outbound travel for Thais

By Xinyi Liang-Pholsena

BANGKOK Bolstered by a strengthening Thai currency as the local economy surges ahead, 2013 is set to be a growth year for outbound travel.

The Thai baht has appreciated more than four per cent against the US dollar from early this year, reaching its highest level in more than five years in mid-March, while also rising strongly against regional currencies.

Several tour operators that TTG Asia spoke to have already observed an upswing in demand, with Asian destinations like Japan and China leading the pack.

"Since late February when the school holidays started, we noted a 20 per cent increase in advance bookings for overseas tours."

At Micko Travel, which recorded a 10-20 per cent hike in bookings in the first quarter, general manager, Sumalee Chomsri, added: "The strengthening baht gives Thais more purchasing power during their overseas trips as the yen and yuan have dipped quite a bit since Songkran last year, hence Japan and China have become popular outbound destinations. Interest in South-east Asia is also holding up."

Similar trends are also observed at AA Travel Service. Said president, Sanguan Phornprathi-

helps that the Japanese tourism authorities are rolling out a lot of promotions."

Outbound demand from Thailand to Europe, particularly Italy and France, is likely to gather pace as summer approaches, predicted Sanguan.

Thailand Tourism Council president, Piyaman Tejapaibul, is expecting outbound travel to grow even more this year, partly due to pent-up consumer demand in the wake of the 2011 flood. "This year, we're expecting a 10 per cent growth in outbound travel from Thailand, as well as a 10 per cent increase in overseas spending from 140 billion baht (US\$4.8 billion) last

number of Thai outbound tourists grew five per cent to 7.6 million last year from 7.2 million in 2011.

However, Thai Travel Agents Association (TTAA), president, Suthipong Pheumphiphop, has not observed a significant impact of the strong baht on outbound travel demand yet, if judging by the response during TTAA's recent Thai International Travel Fair in mid-February.

He said: "The Thai baht only started appreciating early this year but packages were sold several months ahead of the peak travel period from March to May."

"But if the Thai baht continues to go up, I expect the impact to be more pronounced after May when tour operators are likely to offer cheaper packages

Made in S'pore



Nature attractions soften Singapore's city vibe

Travel trade welcomes River Safari opening, but still don't see nature-focused packages as viable

By Lee Pei Qi

SINGAPORE The arrival of several nature-based attractions will complement Singapore's existing portfolio of attractions, but is unlikely to be enough to sell the country as a nature destination, said travel consultants.

Situated at Mandai between the Singapore Zoo and Night Safari, the River Safari – which just soft opened on April 3 – is part of the Singapore government's plan to develop the Mandai area as a nature tourism hub.

The river-themed park is the latest in a string of nature-based attractions to open in highly urbanised Singapore. Others like the Marine Life Park in Resorts World Sentosa and Gardens by the Bay also debuted last year.



Lee: greater diversity

Star Holiday Mart, managing director, Dennis Law, said: "These new nature-based spots will enhance Singapore's image as an eco-friendly place and not just a city destination."

"But it will not be feasible to use (nature) to solely attract tourists. These new places can only complement all our current attractions, (offering) a win-win situation for existing and new ones."

EcoAdventures Worldwide Singapore, managing director, Timothy Tan, added: "Such new nature-based spots will add diversity to our small place and can appeal to the nature fanatics."

However, it is unlikely that fully nature-based packages will take off because travellers still "want a bit of everything" in Singapore, he explained.

"New attractions always arouse the curiosity of travellers," said Jane Teo, general manager of Green Holidays, who noted that the bulk of her travellers often request

for family-friendly packages, which now comprise the Marine Life Park and Gardens by the Bay.

As for the creation of a purely nature-based package, she said: "It may be a good-to-have but it is not really a focus for us because our customers mostly still

want the best of all attractions."

Luxury Tours & Travel Singapore's director, Michael Lee, agreed that such attractions will not translate into new packages, but will allow for more diversity in tour offerings.

In addition, he also warned of the

growing competition between attractions, Lee said: "We see traffic from older existing attractions moving over to the new hotspots."

"It is important for the attractions, especially the older ones, to stay competitive if they want to retain their guests."

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Continued from page 1

Muslim-friendly stops

that *TTG Asia* spoke to during the recent MATTA Fair in Kuala Lumpur in mid-March also expressed their interest in rolling out Muslim-friendly products.

Don Quijote, which operates the 24-hour discount stores of the same name across Japan, now provides labels on non-halal food and is in the process of selecting food items for a soon-to-debut Muslim-friendly section in its stores, revealed Kazuhiko Tahara, business headquarters sub manager, inbound business team.

He explained: "We want to do our bit to grow the Muslim travel segment into Japan, which we see as having growth potential and is already on the rise."

Meanwhile, Universal Studios Japan is considering the installation of a Muslim prayer room within its property due to the rising number of Muslims from the Middle East and South-east Asia, said sales executive – international sales, Tommy Satō.

In 2012, Japan welcomed about 8.4 million international tourists, an increase of 34.6 per cent from the year before. Despite the surge in numbers, international tourist arrivals have yet to fully recover to the 2010 level of 8.6 million.



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