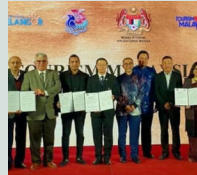




MEKONG

Myanmar adds to visa-on-arrival list.

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DESTINATION

MATTA boosts Indian ties to promote tours.

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HAPPY HOLIDAYS

We wish all our readers a Happy Chinese New Year.

MTF 2020 shifts dates

THE Mekong Tourism Office will unpack its conference goodies earlier this year as the dates for the annual Mekong Tourism Forum in Bagan, Myanmar, move to 28 to 29 April. Traditionally, the forum adopts

international aviation gateway, while Bagan famed for its 3,800 ancient temples and pagodas relies entirely on domestic services from Mandalay (a 30-minute flight) and Yangon (one-hour and 20 minutes).

dawn and drops you off at Bagan's river jetty on the doorstep of the four-star Aye Yar Riverside Hotel, the official MTF venue, during the late afternoon.

The more than 150 International delegates who annually head for the MTF to network and talk tourism strategies, will need to book direct flights to either Yangon or Mandalay to connect with domestic services to Bagan. It will bump up the cost of attending the MTF by just over USD100 to USD195 roundtrip.

From Mandalay airport, they can transfer to domestic flights on Air KBZ with the lowest roundtrip fare quoted at USD108. Unfortunately, the flight departs Mandalay for Bagan's Nyaung-U airport at 0700 which mean you have to overnight in Mandalay adding to the hotel bill. A more feasible alternative is to connect with the MAI flight to Nyaung-U that departs at 1800. The fare will set you back USD131 roundtrip.

Travelling via the Yangon gateway encounters the same challenge. The lack of seamless connections between international flights and domestic services to Bagan may force you to stay overnight in Yangon. The late afternoon domestic flight to Bagan could cost as much as USD195 about USD20 more than an early morning departure.

Aye Yar Riverside Hotel serves as the conference hotel, and according to MTCO executive director, Jens Thraenhart construction of the conference hall at the hotel is almost complete.



a mid-May time slot but this time around the host, the Ministry of Hotels and Tourism, shifted the event by more than a week to escape the threat of rain.

It wasn't the only revision for the Mekong region's top event the other being the decision to relocate the forum venue from Mandalay to Bagan after UNESCO added the ancient town to its World Heritage list.

Jens Thraenhart, executive director MTCO

Mandalay the country's second-largest city after Yangon is an

There is talk of upgrading Bagan's airport to international status to promote tourism. Still, the country's airlines fear it could inflict considerable losses on what is a prime revenue-earning route. Bangkok Airways has been associated with moves to gain access to Bagan from its base in Bangkok.

In its favour, Bagan has fascinating transport alternatives to air travel, having a fleet of riverboats that offer overnight cruises from Mandalay on the Irrawaddy River. There is even a daily ferry that departs to Bagan at

EDITOR'S POST

Showtime: Tick the carbon credit box

Mulling over where I should travel this year, particularly conferences and travel trade shows, I tumbled on a travel association telling its members they can now buy carbon credits from its "Neutral Together" programme.

The US-based Adventure Travel Trade Association (ATTA) programme rolled out 1 January claiming to be the first of its kind for the adventure travel industry. Just how many travel associations have carbon offsetting programmes in Asia, I wonder?

I have to admit in all the decades of travel, I have never paid a cent for a carbon offset. I suspected carbon offsetting was simply a speculative venture that sold trees planted on an imaginary plot of land in some obscure part of northeast Thailand.

I checked out the list of reliable carbon offsetting agencies. They are mostly registered in the US and promise your dollar donations will help to fund trusted projects to appease your carbon transgressions. One project close to home caught my attention. It provides eco-drinking water filters in Cambodia while another supported a wind farm in northeast Thailand.

Tourism's global carbon emissions stand at around 8% of which airlines generate 40%, while the damage caused by the tourism industry going about the business of selling travel is minuscule in comparison. Still, we can make a difference if travel and hospitality companies voluntarily pay a carbon offset when they assign staff to attend a travel show or conference.

We could start by attending only those travel shows that offer a carbon offset programme in the registration. It would need to be as easy as ticking a box on a registration page, and companies would need to authorise the additional travel expense on behalf of their staff.

This week, close to 800 travel and hospitality executives flew to Brunei to attend the ASEAN Tourism Forum for no other good reason than they fear their trade buddies might forget them if they give it a miss. It's a weak argument as they have at least another 50 events lined up in the year to enjoy buddy reunions. We have Facebook and trade show friends with whom we exchange hail and hearty greetings, but at a trade show, back slaps, hugs and pecks on the cheek punctuate our greetings. It's called face-to-face networking. How many pecks on the cheek do you get in a year if you are on the travel show circuit?

A more pertinent question would be how many trade show delegates buy carbon credits? Probably very few. Like so many trade shows, the ATF is already a carbon emission disaster from end-to-end when you consider the mountains of paper, plastic, food and booth decoration waste. Sustainable tourism might be a show theme, but it certainly is not practised by the ATF organisers who are more comfortable with what critics call "green lies" and no one is in a hurry to conduct an audit on a show's impact on the environment any time soon.

Instead, trade show organisers concentrate on revenue streams and boosting profit. Paper is consumed to produce non-news show dailies when there are perfectly acceptable alternatives in the digital age. ITB Asia saw three dinosaur print dailies circulating at the show last October (one official, two clandestine) when delegates were happily glued to their mobile phones reading the same news online. Why do we accept this money grasping nonsense in the digital era?

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Managing editor: Don Ross: donr@rossttr.com

EDITORIAL: news@rossttr.com
Editor: Don Ross

MARKETING: sales@rossttr.com Tel: +66 82 829 6455
Content editor: Danai Stephen Ross
Publishing director: Lars Magnusson

PRODUCTION: info@rossttr.com
Creative director: Danai Stephen Ross
Graphics: Suradej Chatsomsiri,
Kamolapat Srivriwan

PATA summit still on track

PATA goes ahead with plans to host its annual summit this March in the UAE despite growing hostilities in the Middle East.

As the US and Iran continued to exchange threats in early January, the Pacific Asia Travel Association claimed the ongoing sensitive situation in the Middle East should not deter the association from hosting its annual summit in the region in March.

Less than three months away, it will be difficult for the association to switch to another destination if hostilities escalate. PATA will host the flagship event, that draws around 500 of its members worldwide, 31 March to 3 April, in Ras al Khaimah, the United Arab Emirates.

Commenting on the crisis in the Middle East, PATA CEO Mario Hardy told TTR Weekly: "I don't expect the current tension to impact on our events in 2020, but I do believe that should tensions escalate, it will impact on the price of oil which in turn will affect the aviation industry."

"This could lead to a reduction in the growth of tourism due to higher costs being passed to the traveller. Additionally, geopolitical tensions create uncertainty with investors and travellers, which results in a wait and see an attitude that isn't good for the global economy."

Meanwhile, Australia one of PATA's founding country members faces an unprecedented bushfire crisis that shows no sign of abating as summer heat and winds intensify putting at risk lives and the economy that relies heavily on tourism.

PATA's CEO said Australia's decision to stop all tourism marketing campaigns was the right approach while the nation deals with the natural disaster that has claimed 27 lives demolished thousands of homes and killed an estimated half a billion domestic animals and wildlife.

Since September, bushfires have destroyed more than 10.3 million hectares nationally.

"Australia has to concentrate on protecting its citizen, cultural assets,

wildlife and the environment at the moment. When things have settled, I am sure that Australia tourism will rise again, and PATA and its members will be here to assist recovery."

Travel industry organisations are joining other industries to donate millions of dollars for the relief effort, while Australians have set aside

political differences to present a united effort to tackle the crisis.

The New South Wales state government has announced it has approved emergency funding of AUD1 billion to help rebuild towns destroyed by bushfires. The funding is in addition to the AUD2 billion announced by the federal government.



PTAA promotes travel show

The Philippine Travel Agencies Association will host the 5th International Travel Trade, Expo 2 to 4 February, a B2B event held at the SMX Convention Center, Mall of Asia in Pasay City.

Friday, PTAA president Ritchie Tũaño announced details at a press conference last Friday according to a Philippines News Agency report.

The trade event will be followed by the 27th Travel Tour Expo, 7 to 9 February, also at the same venue but concentrating on retail sales to travel consumers.

The expo will feature 1,000 booths from more than 400 exhibitors from the travel agency and tourism enterprise industry. The B2C event

will offer discounts of up to 70% on cruises, hotels, theme parks, and airline fares.

The organisers said there would be strong contingency of destinations

keen to promote travel from the Philippines. They will include Australia, Bhutan, Cambodia, China, Czech Republic, Dubai, France, Iceland, India, Indonesia, Israel, Istanbul, Japan, South Korea, Myanmar,

North America, Sarajevo, Singapore, Spain, Tanzania, Turkey, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Vietnam.

The PTAA travel expo is the country's largest annual expo on travel and tours, expecting more than 100,000 visitors.



Thailand faces a reality check in 2020

The Tourism Council of Thailand concedes the 10% increases in annual tourist arrivals could be a shade too ambitious going forward.

THAILAND is scaling back its tourism forecasts to around 5% ditching earlier optimism that eight to 10% increases were still possible in a country that is now one of the top destinations worldwide based on sheer arrival volume.

According to a Reuters report, Thursday, the Tourism Council of Thailand president Chairat Triratanajaraspon conceded the days of the 10% annual increases could be over partly due to a strong baht that is making the destination more expensive when compared with its neighbours.

The baht has strengthened from THB31.64 to the USD in January 2019 to THB30.27 in January 2020.

Last year, the TCT president noted the country notched up 39.7 million visits a headcount that reflects all foreign arrivals including those on annual work or retirement visas as well as overland trips from Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar and Malaysia. At the start of 2019, the country's Ministry of Tourism and Sports set a target of 40 million.

But simple arithmetic rules suggest that expecting 10% annual growth rates even when annual volumes reach 40 million could be overly ambitious. Growth rates are bound to fall as the volumes hit mega levels.

It is quite likely that excluding a major boost in output trends in the China market, that supplies more than 10 million visits a year, a 5% annual growth is now the norm or even a slightly ambitious expectation going forward.

During the last three years, the annual growth rate in tourist arrivals averaged less than 10%.

2018 38,277,300 +7.54%

2017 35,381,210 +8.57%

2016 32,588,303 +8.91%

TCT says Chinese visitors could reach 11 million in 2020 while output from the higher yield markets of



Europe will probably record a very marginal growth or a flat no-gains, no-losses trend for the foreseeable future.

But the strong baht is not the only factor that could impact on tourism flow to Thailand. Competition is heating up with Vietnam exceeding 18 million visits in 2019 and is now positioned as a destination that will challenge Thailand in the long-run.

It is making headway with a better security and safety rating than Thailand. A recent SOS survey on travel risk showed Vietnam

outperforming as far as overall security goes. It is also seen as making the right moves to raise its poor road safety ranking to put some distance between its fatal accident score, and that of Thailand considered one the worst worldwide. In the meantime, Thailand should enjoy a strong turnout of Chinese visitors during the Chinese New Year this month. Overall, the Tourism Authority of Thailand estimates 1.1 million tourists will holiday in the country during the festival 24 to 30 January up 1.5%.

STR: China hotels head for growth

KEY Mainland China hotel markets should report performance growth in 2020 despite a challenging macroeconomic environment, according to the latest forecast from STR and Tourism Economics.

At the market level, Beijing should continue on its growth trajectory with a forecasted increase of 3.7% in revenue per available room (RevPAR). Average daily rate (ADR) is expected to continue to grow (+1.8%) after a strong 2019 in the metric.

After a challenging 2019, Chengdu is forecasted for ADR growth of 1.4%. The market is projected to report the country's second-largest supply growth rate (2.8%) with close to 18,000 rooms

in the development pipeline.

As the international trading centre and comprehensive transportation hub of China, Guangzhou is expected to show RevPAR growth of 3.4% with substantial increases in both occupancy and ADR.

Hangzhou is set to see its run of performance growth end in 2020 (RevPAR: -2.4%). Among key markets in Mainland China, Hangzhou should see the largest increases in supply (+4.1%) and demand (+4.7%).

Following three years of occupancy declines caused by the impact of new supply, 2020 is expected to be Shanghai's year of recovery. RevPAR growth is expected to reach 2.5%.

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Myanmar adds nations to visa-on-arrival list

Myanmar gears up tourism promotions and offers visa-on-arrival travel for five more nationalities.

MYANMAR has eased visa regulations to draw more tourists to the country this year according to Union Minister for Hotels and Tourism U Ohn Maung.

In a statement at the weekend, distributed by the Myanmar Tourism Federation, he noted that effective

1 January the government had introduced visa-on-arrival (VoA) for an additional five countries.

The latest eligible countries are Austria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Luxembourg and New Zealand.

The VoA facility will be available to travellers from these countries for a three-year trial period.

Commenting on the news, Myanmar Tourism Marketing chairperson May Myat Mon Win

said: "We do hope that all these new regulations to ease access to Myanmar, will lead to more travellers from around the world to discover the unique Myanmar culture, nature and most of all the diversity and hospitality of the people."

Myanmar Tourism Marketing has invited travel journalists and Instagrammers to visit the country and is organising a raft of complementary media trips for publications that are prepared to write promotional stories in exchange for hosted travel.

A visa on arrival will be issued only to those arriving by airline through Yangon, Mandalay and Nay Pyi Taw International airports. It costs USD 50 and is valid for a stay of 30 days with no provision to extend the stay. Visitors are allowed to exit Myanmar at any international border checkpoint.

Last October the country included Italy, Spain, Switzerland, Germany, Russia and Australia to the visa on arrival list. Chinese tourists were granted a visa on arrival at Yangon International Airport, Mandalay International Airport and Nay Pyi Taw International Airport for one year, effective from 1 October 2018 to 30 September 2019. It has since been extended to 30 September 2020.



Vietjet expands Asia flights

Vietjet has unveiled seven new routes as it expands its international flight network.

Five new routes link Hanoi, Danang and Ho Chi Minh City to multiple destinations in Japan, and the commencement of two new routes connecting Can Tho with Seoul and Taipei.

The announcement identifying five new routes was made by the airline, 13 January 2020, during the Vietnam-Japan Bilateral Tourism Promotion Conference, which welcomed more than 1,000 delegates from Japan.

The five new routes, Hanoi – Nagoya, Ho Chi Minh City – Nagoya, Da Nang – Nagoya, Hanoi – Fukuoka

and Hanoi – Kagoshima, will be launched this year.

With 10 direct routes now connecting Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City and Danang to Tokyo, Osaka, Nagoya, Fukuoka and Kagoshima, the new flights will boost commercial and leisure travel and should help to increase Japanese tourist arrivals to more than 1 million in 2020.

Vietjet has also inaugurated its first two international services connecting Can Tho, the hub city of the Mekong Delta region, with Taipei in Taiwan and Seoul in South Korea effective 12 to 16 January.

The Can Tho – Taipei route operates four return flights per week

departing from Can Tho at 1240 and arriving in Taipei at 1710. The return flight departs from Taipei at 1810 and arrives in Can Tho at 2055. Flights started on 12 January.

The Can Tho – Seoul (Incheon) route will operate three return flights per week starting 16 January 2020. The flight will depart from Can Tho at 1650 and arrive in Seoul (Incheon) at 2355. The return flight will take off from Seoul (Incheon) at 0230 and land in Can Tho at 0620.

Vietjet currently operates seven domestic routes and two international routes from Can Tho International Airport. More international routes are planned for later this year.

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MATTA boosts Indian tour connections

MATTA teams up with travel associations in India to boost two-way travel as the government eases visa rules for Indian travellers.

The Malaysian Association of Tour and Travel Agents inked a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) last week with the national travel associations in India.

The agreement with the Travel Agents Association of India (TAAI), Travel Agents Federation of India (TAFI) and Outbound Tour Operators Association of India (OTOAI) will focus on boosting two-way travel between the two countries during Visit Malaysia Year 2020.

MATTA president Datuk Tan Kok Liang commented: "Malaysia is ready to welcome tourists from India for Visit Malaysia 2020 and this MoU is a winning collaboration for MATTA with the TAAI, TAFI and OTOAI, which augurs well for tourism in both countries."

MATTA president Datuk Tan Kok Liang, TAAI president Jyoti Mayal, TAFI acting president Pradip Lulla and OTOAI general secretary Shravan Bhalla.

MATTA will encourage member companies to introduce new itineraries and tour packages to boost visits from India. Visits from India increased from 600,311 in 2018 to an estimated 750,000 in 2019, an increase of 23.2%.

Travel from India should boom now Malaysia has opened visa-free travel for 15 days after the government extended the Electronic Travel Registration and Information (eNTRI) system to both travellers from India and China.

Nationals from India and China can travel freely to Malaysia without applying for a visa as long as they pre-register with eNTRI system.

MATTA is also backing proposals to increase air connectivity, develop new tourism products and improve options for travellers from both India and China.

"MATTA will continue to support the government and Tourism Malaysia in developing India as a stronger



tourist source market, and work with airlines to add new routes and increase flight frequencies for scheduled flights

and explore the feasibility of charter flights to meet market demand," he concluded.

Ubud luxury resort rebrands

AFTER nearly two decades under GHM management, the once-private family estate of Indonesian architect, Hendra Hadiprana, returns to family management and has now been rebranded Tanah Gajah.



The 20-key property, located in the hill town of Ubud relaunched as an independent resort last week dropping the brand The Chedi Club for a new identity 'Tanah Gajah, a resort by Hadiprana'.

Tanah Gajah was built in the 1980s as a holiday home for the legendary Indonesian architect and transformed into a resort in 2004 under GHM management.

"Hendra Hadiprana defined Indonesian luxury hotel design as we know it today," said Tanah Gajah's GM Deasy Swandarini. "He was the man behind several upscale hotels and resorts across Indonesia. Although it

was at Tanah Gajah, his home, where he really groomed his passion for design, and where we plan to continue his story."

Tanah Gajah's local roots will be strengthened with the renaming of key facilities on the property to reflect its origin. The restaurant is now 'The Tempayan', named after the large traditional earthenware jars that

decorate the restaurant.

"Sometimes evolving means returning to the place where you first began," added Swandarini. "With the change, we're honouring where we came from and using that as an inspiration to fine-tune what's in place and expand on what works to create something truly extraordinary."

GHM announced the change in a statement on its website late last year.



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Chinese New Year bookings strong

AirAsia reports a booking jump for Chinese New Year flights despite virus scare in Wuhan and rising fuel costs due to the Middle East crisis.

AIRASIA says its average load factor on routes to China during the upcoming Chinese New Year has soared to 90% despite concerns over a virus epidemic in Wuhan.

The airline also emphasises its fuel hedging policy, securing at 60.2 USD per barrel for up to 73% of total fuel use to mitigate against fluctuations.

Asia Aviation and Thai AirAsia chief executive officer SantisukKlongchaiya said bookings for Chinese New Year, 24 to 31 January, have grown satisfactorily, especially on routes to China, which now have a load factor Average of 90% and are expected to reach a targeted 95 to 98% at the same time assuring news of an epidemic in Wuhan has yet to impact travel to and from Thailand.

"Following the news, the airline has been cooperating with Don



Mueang Airport and Phuket Airport to implement checkpoints and quarantines for international travellers, checking, screening and monitoring as per safety standards," Santisuk said.

On the fluctuating fuel price resulting from tensions in the Middle East, Santisuk indicated Thai AirAsia had in place measures to manage risks

and its capital and is exercising a policy to safeguard against swings in aviation fuel prices.

For 2020, the airline has insured Brent crude oil at an average of USD 60.2 per barrel for up to 73% of its total fuel supply, enabling it to be confident that any fluctuations in oil price will have minimal effect.

Chubb and Grab insure travel

CHUBB, a publicly traded property and casualty insurance company, and Grab has launched a new travel insurance product.

Travel Cover claims to be a simple and rewarding way for users to purchase travel insurance anytime, right up till the moment of departure.

Users who purchase Travel Cover are able to save their travel profiles on the Grab app, making future purchases easy and convenient. Additionally, Grab users will be rewarded with discounts for each repurchase of Travel Cover. The product is distributed by GrabInsure Insurance Agency, Grab Financial Group's insurance platform.

Starting Monda, a new insurance tile was added to the Grab app, allowing Singapore-based customers to purchase Travel Cover from just SGD2.50/day for travel to any

destination globally.

To celebrate the launch, the first 20,000 customers can purchase Travel Cover at a discounted price of just SGD1 per day until 29 February for trips within the Asia Pacific region. Travel Cover will be rolled out to other Grab markets in Southeast Asia in the coming months.

Chubb Singapore country president Scott Simpson said: "Outbound travel from Singapore is thriving, reaching 10.4 million departures by air and sea in 2018[1]. At the same time, smartphone users are projected to hit 4.65 million this year. Our partnership with Grab allows us to develop more customer-centric insurance solutions that align with the varied lifestyles of consumers."

Grab's head of Insurance Tom Duncan said: "Our mission with GrabInsure is to provide access to

affordable insurance products that better meet the everyday needs of Southeast Asians as we enter the consumer insurance market.

"Our customer research shows that many individuals were uninsured when they travel, and we are uniquely placed to address this gap. Travel Cover is an example of how we are leveraging GrabInsure's platform to deliver innovative 'on-demand' insurance products. We will continue to work closely together to expand the product offering and address the different consumer needs across the region."

[1] Department of Statistics <https://www.tablebuilder.singstat.gov.sg/publicfacing/createDataTable.action?refId=15301>

[2] Smartphone users <https://www.statista.com/statistics/494598/smartphone-users-in-singapore/>



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The “Huat” of Travel during Lunar New Year

Falling on 25 January this year, Chinese New Year or the Spring Festival is one of the most important events in the Chinese calendar and is celebrated by many across the world.

THE auspicious period is a time for colourful processions, seasonal markets and lively lion dances, as friends and family members meet up, exchange Mandarin oranges and feast on festive dishes. While celebrations are centred on gatherings and food, the holiday is also steeped in age-old tradition and ceremony, with rituals to honour familial ancestors and invoke good luck and fortune for the year ahead.

To help celebrants maximise their chances for a prosperous year ahead, Emirates partnered with Way Fengshui Group, Singapore's first private limited fengshui firm to curate a series of fun travel predictions based on the 12 Chinese Zodiacs for the Year of the Rat.

Grand Master Tan Khoon Yong's predictions range from lucky places to visit, the best period to travel, to best activity on flight and travel partners to help travellers boost their travel luck in the coming year. According to the predictions, the months of April, September and November are the most auspicious months for travel for all Chinese zodiacs. However, those born in the year of the Rat and Horse are advised to take extra precaution to ensure a risk-free and smooth journey.

While each Chinese zodiac has its own set of characteristics, Asian countries, especially China, Indonesia and Japan, are popular and lucky destinations for most travellers.

For travel-lovers born in the year of the Rat, Ox, Rabbit, Snake, Horse and Rooster, heading northwest to different destinations in the United States is recommended this year – including to destinations such as New York and Florida. Various destinations in the European continent will also bring luck to all Chinese zodiacs, except those born in the year of the Tiger.

Travellers can also count on certain lucky numbers to get the best out of their travel experience. Grand Master Tan has shared at least one lucky number ranging from 2 to 10 for each Chinese zodiac. Using this, travellers can select their lucky seats on the plane by pre-booking their seats on row numbers that end with their respective auspicious numbers.

Furthermore, certain activities en

thusiasts born in the year of the Dragon are encouraged to regularly update their loved ones on their location and status throughout the trip, while those born in the year of the Goat are reminded that kindness begets kindness and being kind would help attract benefactors even when overseas.

To ensure that the trip is stress-free and smooth, those born in a Snake

year have been warned to control their food intake, and to not over-indulge when travelling while those born in a Monkey year have been advised to stay alert to ensure they aren't duped by any overseas sellers.*

Bringing good fortune when travelling

As a global airline, Emirates celebrates events from all over the world. Travellers looking to plan their next adventure based on the travel predictions by Grand



route to destinations can attract more good luck as well! When travelling via air, jet-setters born in the year of the Horse and Dog are advised to occupy themselves by watching a movie or two, while those born in the year of the Ox are encouraged to start a conversation with the people around them as they might benefit from these interactions in the future.

For travellers born in the year of the Tiger and Pig, taking a nap should be at the top of their agenda so they can muster all the energy they need for the trip.

Additionally, Grand Master Tan also provided some useful travel tips and warnings to heed for each Chinese zodiac to maximise their luck during their adventures. For instance, travel

Master Tan Khoon Yong need not look any further! With Emirates' expansive network and connectivity, travellers can cover all corners of the world with the vibrant and dynamic city of Dubai as its hub.

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