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# Malaysia bets future on domestic travel

*Malaysia's travel agents association rolls out a brand new domestic travel show to spur tourism recovery.*

MALAYSIA will host a brand new travel fair, 4 to 5 April, to promote domestic tourism as well as attract travellers from ASEAN neighbours, the Malaysia Association of Tour and Travel Agents announced at a press conference Tuesday.

MATTA president, Datuk Tan Kok, said the MATTA Fair Cuti Cuti Malaysia' would serve as the "best testament that Malaysia is safe and secure."

Partners Tourism Malaysia and Malaysia Airlines attended the launch press conference for the fair that will be hosted at the Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre.

Confirming massive booking cancellations from the Chinese markets over the last month the MATTA president said the show would contribute to recovery after the Chinese market collapsed. The show will promote domestic tour packages and encourage corporations to host incentives and events in the country.

Acknowledging that ASEAN neighbours supply 69% of all the tourist arrivals to Malaysia, the association president said the show would welcome travel agents from Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia and



Vietnam to boost package sales from these markets to Malaysia.

Around 200 exhibitors are expected to buy booth space at the show and are encouraged to showcase discounted domestic holiday packages to compensate for the drop in travel from China.

"We are offering heavy discounts for exhibitors to attend," he told the media, noting that the show would try to generate package sales to replace the shortfall from China.

Booth space will be discounted from MYR3,500 (charged for the twice-annual MATTA Fair) to around MYR2,000 for the new show representing a 40% discount.

"We will lose money on the MATTA Fair Cuti Cuti, but the

objective is to promote new packages and show Malaysia is a safe and secure destination."

He estimated package sales could reach MYR20 million during the two-day fair, about half of the revenue earned by the MATTA Fair that has been postponed until 1 May. The MATTA Fair focuses mainly on selling outbound travel to Malaysian travellers as well as domestic packages.

Hitting out at social media news, Tan said inaccurate information on social media "spread at a faster rate than the coronavirus".

China's outbound market that supplies around 20% of all visits to Malaysia closed down after China suspended outbound travel sales.

# EDITOR'S POST

## *Dire predictions cast a dark shadow*

Reality sinks in this week. The Covid-19 virus now in its 50th day is not going away any time soon. More than 70,500 people are infected, and the death count surpassed 1,770 at the weekend.

Travel and hospitality providers across Southeast Asia brace for impact.

To understand the depth of the disaster the virus inflicts on tourism, go no further than the dire forecast presented by Thailand's Minister of Tourism and Sports, Phiphat Ratchakitprakarn. He told an industry-wide meeting last Friday to brace for a 50% decline in tourist arrivals.

During a year the country is supposed to celebrate 60 years of tourism success, the minister warned tourist arrivals could dive from 38.9 million in 2019 to just 20 million by December 2020.

This is an entirely different kettle of fish than tourism leaders normally feed us. Lopping off 20 million tourists arrivals seems unthinkable and more so when we recognise there is nothing we can do other than to hunker down and hope the virus stops dead in its tracks before the half-year mark.

But we would be foolish not to take the Thai minister's doomsday prediction seriously. Every nation in Southeast Asia braces for an impact that will decimate tourism due to an almost suffocating dependence on the Chinese market. They just haven't been bold enough to put a figure on it. Last year, Thailand welcomed just short of 11 million

visitors from China and based on what is happening since 1 February, 86.55% of the China market has disappeared into thin air. Across all markets, the drop in tourist arrivals is around 43.47%.

Around the region, the same picture emerges for the first two weeks of February backed by data on advance booking data sourced by ForwardKeys. It noted that bookings for March and April to the Asia Pacific region are down 10.5% and to China alone by 55.9%.

We are not used to slumps of this magnitude and the prospect that there might not be an improvement or a tipping point to flag recovery this side of June is alarming.

Countries in Asia the rising stars in global tourism now find themselves on a watch or travel advisory lists. Travel from all markets, including Europe and North America to Southeast Asia is stalling. Airlines are shaving flights to countries impacted by the Covid-19 virus and the shutdown of services to mainland China will stretch at least to the end of March.

There's a temptation to immediately launch a marketing counter-attack, discounts and even throw visas to the wind in the hope it will restore bookings. A better option is to consider this an opportune time to take the foot off the accelerator and look at duty-of-care, put safety at the top of the agenda, change what we have the power to change while we wait for the virus to burn itself out.

I asked Dr Bert van Walbeek an acclaimed crisis management expert for his input. "What's the best course to take?" He had a simple solution.

"Team up, forget petty differences, put aside personal agendas, and brainstorm a national campaign that involves all stakeholders. Get it ready to roll and launch it the day the Covid-19 virus is beaten, not a day earlier or a day later than that." Spot on.

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**TTR Weekly** is a controlled circulation newspaper for the travel industry specialising in Thailand and the Mekong region. Published every Wednesday, alternatively in English, the publication is distributed free to travel agents. Available on subscription outside this qualifying category. Published by Ross Publishing Ltd.

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# Obstacle trail race launches in Phuket

**Laguna Phuket will host a brand new sports event in Phuket that should boost visitor arrivals from Asia.**

LAGUNA Phuket will host a new sports event, the Singha Obstacle Trail Run presented by Laguna Phuket, Saturday 2 May 2020.

Dubbed "Keng" (meaning "to excel"), the race will be Singha's very first beach obstacle trail event and mark the beginning of the brewery's Obstacle Trail Series 2020.

The good news announcement comes at a time when sports events face cancellations in the wake of the Covid-19 virus outbreak, but officials are confident that they can attract a good turnout for the inaugural event and boost travel to southern Thailand's famous holiday island.

The race will follow a course around Laguna Phuket's scenic tropical parkland close to Bangtao Beach and partially extend north to neighbouring villages. Passing the resort's lagoon, beach and following a route on sealed road and dirt trails, participants face challenging purpose-built obstacles.

"With Laguna Phuket recognised as the 'Best Sports Event Venue in Thailand (2018)', we are thrilled to add the Singha Obstacle Trail Run to



Phuket's sports calendar," said Laguna Phuket Group golf and destination sales & marketing, SAVP Paul Wilson. "This exciting new race complements the Laguna Phuket Marathon and Laguna Phuket Triathlon."

Hotel rates at properties in the resort estate start at THB1,400.

The nationwide Singha Obstacle Trail Series also includes a "Krang"

(tough) episode in Ratchaburi Province in September. The series' finale is "Kla" (brave), scheduled for December in Chiang Rai.

Online registration is now open for all three races. Each race comprises of an 8Km, 15Km and 2Km fun run in the solo category, and 24Km for the team race. Early bird discounts apply until 29 February 2020.

## MATTA moves fair to May

Malaysian Association of Tour and Travel Agents has postponed the first edition of its MATTA bi-annual travel fair from mid- March to early May.

The organisers announced the decision last Friday confirming the MATTA Fair hosted in Kuala Lumpur will now convene, 1 to 3 May, at the World Trade Centre. MATTA organises the travel first every six months in Kuala Lumpur and also lines up city fairs across the country.

The travel agents association noted that the coronavirus crisis is causing a "massive upheaval in economies in the region."

MATTA said forward booking are weak in the travel consumer market with customers "deferring their travel plans until the current global situation improves.

MATTA president Datuk Tan Kok Liang commented: "Although the shift in dates will not be convenient for everyone we are amazed at the level of support and encouragement that we have received from our exhibitors, sponsors and trade partners.

"History has shown that our travel industry has proven to be very resilient and that Malaysians are an adventurous and hardy lot who won't

stop travelling," added Tan.

More than 200 exhibitors including national and state tourism organisations, travel agencies, airlines, theme parks, cruise lines and hotels book exhibition space at the two MATTA fairs held bi-annually in March and October.

Last week the National Association of Travel Agents Singapore confirmed it had shifted its annual travel fair from this month to the first week of August.

Source: MATTA Fair extended – MATTA. <https://www.matta.org.my/news/82989-matta-fair-extended>



# Top sites for bookings

**Booking.com and Agoda top the SiteMinder list of sites delivering the most hotel bookings.**

BOOKING.COM and Agoda topped the SiteMinder list of Asia's top distribution channels that deliver the highest booking revenue for hotels worldwide.

SiteMinder revealed its annual list of the top 12 distribution channels noting the meteoric rise of Trip.com to fifth place in the chart in just a year.

Covering 20 of the world's top tourism destinations, the lists reveal the fast-growing successes of both direct booking strategies for hotels and the growth strategies of the travel industry's consolidation-hungry giants.

Within 14 of the 20 tourism destinations monitored, direct bookings – gained via a hotel's website – either climbed the list from the previous year or maintained their position among the top five spots.

## Major standouts

The debut of Airbnb in six markets within Europe, Africa and the Americas, less than two years after launching its first global hotel technology partnership with SiteMinder supports traditional hospitality providers.

The addition of Trip.com in another European market–Italy–alongside France, where the Chinese powerhouse made its western debut last year.

New players in the chart. WebBeds brands JacTravel, totalstay, Destinations of the World and Sunhotels join this year's top 12 list.

The re-entry of Australia-headquartered Flight Centre Travel Group in the country's top 12, after four years, was significant.

The debut of Lastminute.com in two markets within EMEA, proving the continued rise of spontaneous decision-making among today's consumers.

SiteMinder's senior director of global demand partnerships, James Bishop commented: "The swift rise of Airbnb in many markets is evidence of the hotel industry's openness to adopting Airbnb as a partner and the



benefits they are seeing from selling an experience, not simply a room. It is also evidence that Airbnb users no longer just look for homestays and spare spaces.

He added: "Direct online reservations continue to contribute strongly to hotel revenue globally, with hotel websites remaining among the top four channels in the majority of markets and, in many instances, jumping up the ranks.

"It is clear that hoteliers are actively seeking to drive direct bookings, through greater knowledge and innovation, as well as investments in metasearch. We are also seeing technology providers supporting this appetite by adding professional services to their direct booking offerings, effectively acting as digital marketing agencies for hotels."

**In Asia, the top 12 hotel booking channels in 2019, based on total gross revenue made for SiteMinder's customers, were:**

1. Booking.com
2. Agoda
3. Expedia Group
4. Hotel websites (direct bookings)
5. Trip.com
6. Hotelbeds
7. Traveloka
8. Goibibo
9. Global distribution systems
10. Flight Centre Travel Group
11. HotelsCombined
12. Tiket.com.



"It is important hoteliers are aware of how the booking landscape is changing and how their guests are choosing their accommodation," said SiteMinder regional vice president – Asia Pacific, Brad Haines.

"Of note in our list of the 12 most popular booking channels is Trip.com, which has risen over the past year."

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# Heritage names new riverboat for Mekong

***A new riverboat, due to start its first cruise this September, slid into the Mekong River after a birth naming ceremony in Laos, last week***

HERITAGE Line launched its newest river cruise boat last week on the Mekong River in northern Laos.

The vessel was named Anouvong in a simple shipyard ceremony and glided on airbags down a slipway into the Mekong River.

Commercial river cruises on the new vessel are still eight months away once the boat is fitted out.

With just eight months before its maiden voyage, Heritage Line Anouvong has just reached another significant milestone in the ship construction process. On 12 January 2020, the captain and construction crew celebrated Anouvong's ship

christening prior to placing the vessel into the water for the very first time (known as the ship launch, and not to be confused with when the ship formally enters service with its inaugural voyage).

Witnessing mainly the shipyard crew and a few local spectators joined in the "ship-birthing process" took nearly the entire day before Heritage Line Anouvong floated freely on the Mekong.

The vessel is one of just a few river cruise vessels capable of sailing the northern section of the Mekong River passing Thailand, Laos and Myanmar and entering Thailand.

But even with a 0.775 meters waterline above its keel, the Anouvong will still be challenged by the erratic rise and fall of the river controlled by dams in China. Like many tourism operators, resorts and boat companies,

the future looks bleak for Mekong River communities that in recent years have turned to river tourism to supplement income.

Overcoming months, the shipyard team fit out the mechanical and electrical systems and then hand the vessel over to the company's interior designers to fit out the cabins and dining areas.

Heritage Line Anouvong is scheduled to embark on its four-day/three-night maiden voyage 29 September 2020 from Laos, Luang Prabang sailing upstream toward the Thai-Lao border town of Huay Xai. The same cruise will be offered downstream.

Early bird bookers save 10% off the inaugural promotion for the three-night upper Mekong journeys scheduled later in 2020 and through to the end of 2021.





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# Myanmar tourism growth rate soars

**Myanmar ranks the highest in tourist arrivals based on growth rates among the world's fastest-growing travel destinations.**

Myanmar scored the highest spike in tourist arrivals among the world's 10 fastest-growing travel destinations in 2019, according to the United Nations World Tourism Organisation.

Based on tourist arrival growth rates, Myanmar topped the ranking list with a year-on-year increase of 40.2% in 2019, followed by Puerto Rico (31.2%) and Iran (27.9%).

"This is good news for Myanmar,

and we need to keep this momentum going for many more years," said Myanmar Tourism Marketing chairperson, May Myat Mon Win.

The Myanmar government has introduced new regulations to facilitate easier access for tourists to visit the country. Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, Macau and some Southeast Asian countries were granted visa-free entry.

Indian, Chinese nationals from the mainland and other countries (Australia, Austria, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Luxembourg, New Zealand, Russia, Spain and

Switzerland) were granted a visa on arrival.

Citizens of over 100 countries are eligible for Myanmar e-visas (evisa.moip.gov.mm/) and can get an approval letter within three days.

Travel from China is on hold due to the suspension of tour package sales in China and the cancellation of airline services in a bid to counter the coronavirus outbreak across Asia.

To keep up the momentum of tourist arrivals rise and win back business interrupted by the virus crisis, Myanmar Tourism Marketing will launch its "Green Season" campaign (May to the end of September) with the support of hotels, airlines and tour operators.



## UNWTO's top-10 fastest-growing travel destinations

1. Myanmar 40.2%
2. Puerto Rico 31.2%
3. Iran 27.9%
4. Uzbekistan 27.3%
5. Montenegro 21.4%
6. Egypt 21.1%
7. Vietnam 16.2%
8. Philippines 15.1%
9. Maldives 14.9%
10. Bahamas 14.6%

## Rosewood reflects Yangon heritage

ROSEWOOD Yangon opened its doors earlier this week, introducing the luxury brand to Myanmar's gateway city.

Housed in what was formerly the New Law Courts that date back to 1927, the hotel is located in downtown Yangon surrounded by heritage buildings at the junction of the famous Strand and Sule Pagoda Roads.

"Rosewood Yangon exemplifies a perfect balance between heritage and chic modernity in this vibrant city," said Rosewood Hotel Group chief executive officer Sonia Cheng. "We are thrilled to be a launching point for 'affluent explorers.'"

A conservation management

plan assured that the conversion of the New Law Courts to Rosewood Yangon maintained the architectural integrity of the building as part of the neighbourhood's historic streetscapes.

The two internal courtyards are entirely preserved and restored, as is the original portico on Bank Street, the pyramidal pavilion rooftops, the majestic promenade along Strand Road and the entrance halls on the building's north and south sides.

For its efforts to restore the building, the 205-room Rosewood Yangon's owning company received the 31st Yangon Heritage Trust Blue Plaque to commemorate the building's historical and cultural significance and

legacy.

A Chinese restaurant, due to open late 2020, will showcase Cantonese and regional Chinese specialties. A wine cellar and tasting room at the restaurant's entrance will cater to wine lovers. At the same time, a tea library inside the heritage cage lift will offer a comprehensive, bespoke selection for guests who appreciate the Chinese art of tea as well as tea-infused cocktails.

Rosewood Limited Edition" package, available to April 2020 consist of art and history experiences. Guests have the opportunity to discuss Yangon's preservation efforts with Dr Thant Myint-U, a leading historian and writer and founder of a heritage trust.





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# Hua Hin embarks on trust-building

*Hua Hin's travel and hospitality leaders join hands to present beachside festivals to raise traveller confidence.*

HUA Hin's municipality and private sector partners are campaigning to strengthen visitor confidence in the Gulf of Thailand beach resort.

Hua Hin Mayor Nopporn Wuttikul (centre in photo) leads the initiative that is backed by the Tourism Authority of Thailand, the Prachuap Khiri Khan office, the Hua Hin/Cha-am Tourism Association, and Hua Hin hotel operators.

It involves organising events at the popular beach resort during the remainder of February and throughout March.

The aim is to boost confidence and



encourage tourism-related businesses to draw more international tourists to the resort.

**February highlights**  
**The month included Latin music and dancing, Saturday, 15 February 2020.**

Zumba Dance on the Beach, a collaboration with Centara Grand Beach Resort & Villas Hua Hin, made this festive popular and a dynamic

alternative for getting fit and having some fun at the same time.

This free-of-charge event featured some of the finest Zumba instructors from Bangkok and Hua Hin, who passionately guided participants through easy-to-master moves and brought out the inner Shakira or Ricky Martin. Live bands, mini-concerts, and many fun and inspiring activities were open to the whole family providing a whole new perspective on world-



famous Hua Hin Beach.

**Yoga Festival 2020, 21 to 23 February**

This festival presents a zen-like opportunity for the young and the young at heart, experienced yoga fans and beginners alike, to get into the flow of yoga and improve their moves. In partnership with Shakti Yoga, the festival gets underway on a beachfront strip of land at Soi Hua Hin 75/1.





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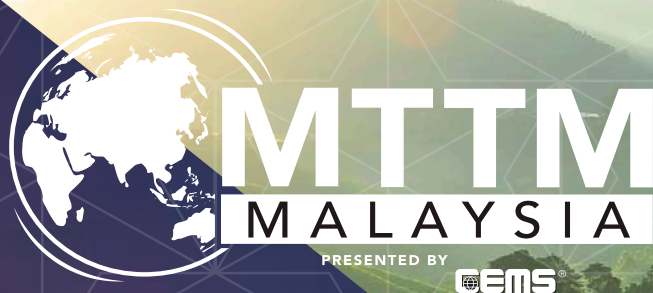
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