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NEWS FOR ASIA'S TRAVEL PLANNERS

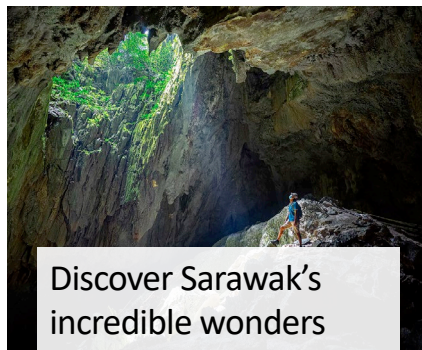
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**Visit Laos Year 2024  
celebrates culture**



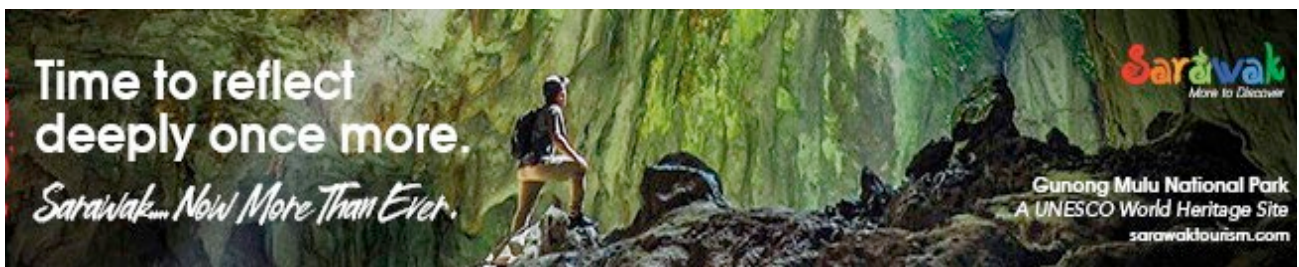
**Centara wraps up a  
successful 2023**



**Discover Sarawak's  
incredible wonders**



**Bhutan shares  
mystique and secrets**



**Time to reflect  
deeply once more.**

*Sarawak... Now More Than Ever.*

**Sarawak**  
More to Discover

**Gunong Mulu National Park**  
A UNESCO World Heritage Site  
[sarawaktourism.com](http://sarawaktourism.com)

## Philippines sets 2024 tourism target

The Philippines targets 7.7 million foreign visitors next year after exceeding its 2023 arrivals goal, the Department of Tourism (DOT) confirmed last week.

Philippines News Agency quoted the tourism chief Christina Frasco saying: "I understand that this is not yet our pre-pandemic numbers of 2019 at over 8.2 million international arrivals, but...

## BWH signs third Pattaya property

BWH Hotels continues its portfolio expansion in Thailand by signing the Best Western Jomtien Beach Pattaya.

The brand-new midscale hotel is under construction on a site just a few steps from Jomtien Beach and a short drive from main bay Pattaya..

## Airlines see brighter outlook in 2024

The International Air Transport Association's latest projections suggest airlines will declare strengthening profitability in 2023 and its forecast for 2024 signals the start of balance sheet stability.

However, net profitability at the global level is expected ...

## Lufthansa Group return to Tel Aviv in January

Lufthansa Group Airlines plans to resume flights to Tel Aviv starting 8 January 8, 2024, with 20 flights weekly.

Meanwhile, flights to Beirut (Lebanon) resumed on 15 December. Both the Tel Aviv and Beirut flights by the group airlines will use A320s...

## Elves wanted for Santa's Post Office

Santa's Official Post Office in Rovaniemi, Finland, is as busy as ever, sorting 30,000 letters daily from children and adults worldwide and recruiting elves for Santa Claus Cabin.

In a bid to attract novice elves, Santa Claus' Cabin has been listed on Airbnb for guests – free of charge – to roll up their sleeves, lend a hand with...

## Cunard sets maiden voyage date for Queen Anne

Cunard has announced the first event voyage on Queen Anne with a special British Isles Festival to coincide with her maiden voyage around the British Isles that sets sail on 24 May 2024.

Signalled a new chapter for Cunard, Queen Anne will depart Southampton on 24 May 2024...

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## **YOU HAVEN'T SEEN IT ALL UNTIL YOU SEE SARAWAK**

A UNESCO World Heritage Site. A World  
Craft City. PATA Gold awarded Sarawak  
Cultural Village. And so much more  
to see, to taste, to experience, to captivate.  
Discover the many ways you can do more in  
Sarawak, Borneo.

**Sarawak**  
*More to Discover*

# Centara wraps up a successful 2023

Centara Hotels & Resorts, a leading hotel operator headquartered in Thailand, reflects on a highly successful year celebrating several major milestones and achievements. 2023 marked 40 years since

a special centenary offer to help commemorate this iconic, century-old Thai heritage hotel.

Centara opened three new properties comprising 899 keys in 2023, taking its total portfolio to 95 hotels and resorts that

to the Central Ayutthaya mall and less than 15 minutes from this historic city's UNESCO World Heritage-listed temples.

To accelerate its future growth, the company has rebranded Centra by Centara as Centara Life, revealing a fresh and exciting new brand identity. Centara Lifewill retain its core "Elevating the Essentials" concept to help guests travel and stay seamlessly. The rebranding process will involve the complete and vibrant refresh of the brand's visual identity, which will permeate the brand's physical and digital presence, plus a series of new signature guest experiences such as extra sleeping comforts, complimentary local delicacies, flexible breakfast hours and more!

To help drive the growth of its six diverse brands, Centara recently announced the appointment of Michael Henssler as its new Chief Operating Officer.

A hotel industry expert with almost 30 years of experience, most recently as Kempinski's Chief Operating Officer for Asia, Henssler will help Centara move into dynamic destinations and exciting new international markets.

Centara also achieved a series of prestigious awards. Brand Finance's annual Thailand 50 report named Centara Grand, the flagship five-star brand, as the "Strongest Brand in Thailand," based on factors including its brand equity, trust and value, while the Investment Analysts Association (IAA) Awards for Listed Companies 2022-23



*Thirayuth Chirathivat, Centara's CEO, celebrates several major milestones and achievements in 2023.*

Centara first introduced its family-centric Thai hospitality to the world, and this year was also one of the most significant in the company's history. With three new hotels, including its inaugural property in Japan, a newly refreshed brand, a key executive appointment and multiple awards, Centara has advanced its five-year goal of becoming a top 100 global hotel operator by 2027.

To celebrate its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Centara created a series of mega marketing campaigns to thank guests for their support and stimulate demand. This was not the only milestone for Centara in 2023; Centara Grand Beach Resort & Villas Hua Hin turned 100 with

are open or in the pipeline. These included Centara Grand Hotel Osaka, a 33-story urban landmark that marked the group's debut in Japan. With its stylish and spacious rooms, modern MICE venues, five-star facilities, and eight world-class bars and restaurants, this hotel has already become popular among business and leisure travellers. Centara also reaffirmed its leading position in Thailand with the launch of two new properties: Centara Ubon, its first hotel in the northeastern gateway city of Ubon Ratchathani, just a few steps from the Central Ubon lifestyle mall, and Centara Ayutthaya, a new all-in-one leisure and lifestyle destination located next

# THE PLACE TO CELEBRATE

As the year comes to an end, it's time to celebrate with your loved ones and create unforgettable memories.

Whether your clients are planning a tropical family beach holiday in The Maldives, Samui and Phuket an immersive cultural experience in Sri Lanka and Japan or an urban getaway in Bangkok, Dubai & beyond, Centara Hotels & Resorts invites them to bask in the joy of life.

Let your clients surround themselves and their loved ones with Centara's signature hospitality, warm Thai family values and world-class service that will be at the heart of their stay anywhere in the world.

📍 Centara Grand Hotel Osaka

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HOSPITALITY COLLECTION

CENTARA  
GRAND

CENTARA

CENTARA LIFE

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# Visit Laos Year 2024 celebrates culture and nature



“You have such a beautiful country; please preserve it as much as possible,” a group of Spanish tourists observed as they chatted to a Laos tourism promotion team.

During the brief encounter, they commented on the country’s unspoilt beauty while visiting a spectacular viewpoint in Ban Hang Khon, far south of Don Khon Island, where the Mekong River delineates the Cambodian border.

Their message was simple, sincere, and clear, reflecting their experiences at tourist stops as they journeyed from northern Laos towards Cambodia, their next destination.

It underlined the importance of having a sustainability vision that is always top-of-mind when today’s travellers research their next travel experience. It reminds stakeholders in the tourism industry to embrace sustainability ahead of driving profit and boosting visitor arrivals.

In the upcoming year, Laos’s tourism treasures will take centre stage under Visit Laos Year 2024, themed “Laos: A Paradise of Culture, Nature, and History.” Gearing up to showcase the country’s tourism potential, the Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism organised a FAM trip for Thai media and influencers in early December.

The aim was to highlight the rich tourism resources of southern

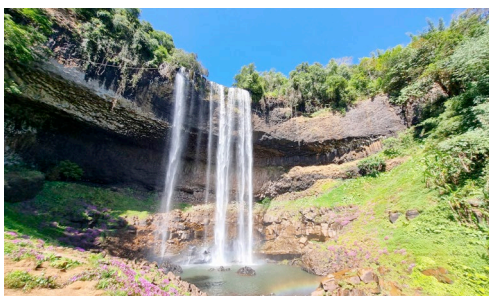
Laos, focusing on nature and authentic Laotian experiences.

There are no direct flights from Bangkok to Pakse, the gateway city to the southern provinces of Laos. You must first fly to Vientiane, then connect with domestic flights to Pakse. Or take the overland route crossing at the Chong Mek Border Checkpoint between Thailand and southern Laos. The distance between the border checkpoint and Pakse is approximately 43 km. You can fly or take the train from Bangkok to Ubon Ratchathani and then transfer by bus or taxi to the border, a



distance of 95 km (one hour and 20 minutes by car).

During the first nine months of this year, Champasak province in Laos welcomed 206,914 visitors. The southern region is best known for the charm and spectacular views of the Mekong and 4,000 river islands, but there are trekking options to waterfalls for those who love soft adventures. Among the top heritage attractions is Vat Phou, the pride of Laos, which has been recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The province features



244 tourist attractions, including 139 natural, 62 cultural, and 43 historical sites.

The FAM trip showcased the beauty of southern Laos' nature, particularly waterfalls and rivers, as part of Champasak's tourism development while highlighting four areas: Si Phandon; the Champasak World Heritage Cultural Zone; the Bolaven Plateau in Paksong, and the cultural and natural areas located in different districts.



The journey from Vientiane began late in the morning with a one-hour flight on Lao Airlines, landing in Pakse by lunchtime. The overland journey to Don Det followed, covering approximately 130 km.

At Nakasang, the last stop and the nearest village to Don Det, we board boats to transfer to Don Det. Upon arrival, it presented a glimpse of the scenery bathed in the sunset along the Mekong River. Here, riverside resorts and bungalows offer a perfect base to explore a riverine archipelago of islands, creating a natural awe-inspiring spectacle on the broad and fast-flowing Mekong River.

Don Det and Don Khon islands are perfect spots for those exploring Si Phan Don, including the famous Li Phi



Waterfall. Don Det is linked with Don Khon by a bridge. The road around these river islands has recently been improved and is in good condition year-round. Visitors can use local tourist vehicles or bicycles to explore island attractions.

After an overnight in Don Det and a half-day excursion, the group left the island and visited Khon Phapheng Waterfall before heading north of Champasak for Paksong, a city in Laos on the Bolaven Plateau.

The area enjoys a year-round cool climate and is renowned for its coffee and tea, which has a distinctive flavour due to the plateau's volcanic soil. It also boasts numerous waterfalls.

The Paksong Excursion Day began at Tad Koo Waterfall. This picturesque spot offers convenient access to the two-

[Read more...](#)

# Cambodia beyond Angkor



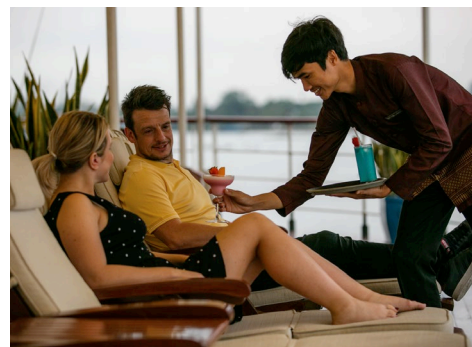
Siem Reap's travel experience shifts up a gear following the recent opening of the brand new Siem Reap Angkor International Airport (SAI).

Last October, travellers welcomed the opening of the new, larger airport for Siem Reap in Cambodia, home of the famous Temples of Angkor. It enables airlines to increase flights and operate larger aircraft, meaning more choices for travellers seeking to experience this ancient kingdom and beyond.

To celebrate the opening, Pandaw, a specialised river cruise operator in Southeast Asia and India, releases special offers for its Cambodia cruises between Phnom Penh and Siem Reap with a 10% discount and no single supplement available for sailings on select dates in early 2024.

While the temples of Angkor themselves top the must-visit list, there is much more to be discovered beyond the ruins. The Tonle Sap Lake is a marvel of nature with its alternating water flow, and the local villagers who still inhabit the floodplains are genuine and welcoming.

There are a host of craftspeople producing fine silks and traditional 'Krama' scarves, and authentic river villages are still practically untouched by the effects of tourism. This is in addition to the nature reserves located in the rich mountains and idyllic island escapes that rival Thailand's best.



Visit [pandaw.com](https://pandaw.com) for more details or email [information@pandaw.com](mailto:information@pandaw.com).

# Your Sabah Bucket List

[www.sabahtourism.com](http://www.sabahtourism.com)



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Malaysian Borneo



# Discover Sarawak's incredible wonders

If you are a travel enthusiast looking for a new adventure filled with nature escapades, food hunts and cultural exploration, Sarawak should be at the top of your travel bucket list.

Sarawak is a hidden Malaysian gem nestled in the island of Borneo and boasts a variety of unique attractions.

***Here are the top reasons to book your next trip to the Land of Hornbills.***

Sarawak is known as Malaysia's treasure trove of nature's wonders. Because of this, world-famous national parks are scattered all over the island, each with its own diverse wildlife. Enjoy a change of scenery, ranging from the fairytale-like caves of the Niah National Park to scenic nature trails of Sarawak's famous Bako National Park. If you are lucky, you could encounter some of Borneo's rarest species in the wild, such as the iconic hornbill in the Kubah National Park, or witness the world's largest flower, the Rafflesia, in full bloom at the Gunung Gading National Park.

Sarawak is the perfect place to fuel your adrenaline rush with kayaking in Kampung Bengoh or trekking up the mountain slopes on an adventurous hike at the Gunung Mulu National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage site. Further out to the island's coast, you will find the pristine sandy beaches of Sarawak. Among them is the Talang Satang National Park. It is the first dedicated marine turtle conservation area in Sarawak, where you can chance upon rare sightings of turtles.

A trip to Sarawak is never complete without a food crawl of Sarawak's finest delicacies. Sarawak is a street food haven that is bustling with both locals and tourists all day round, where the best and most authentic treats are those found at hawker stalls and



night markets. Popular food destinations you should visit when you're in Sarawak include Kuching's Siniawan Night Market, the Sibu Night Market and Miri's Saberkas Night Market. Here, you can experience local delights at its best, cooked to perfection, and shop for souvenirs and daily items.

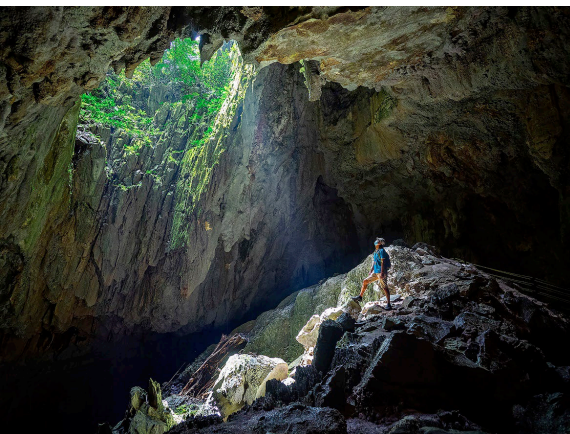
Some of Sarawak's most notable hawker stall must-try dishes include Sarawak laksa, kolo mee and nasi goreng dabai. For those with a sweet tooth, Sarawak's iconic layered cake 'kek lapis' and the legendary gula

tattoo piercings and pottery.

Sarawak is also a hub for performing arts as the host of the annual Rainforest World Music Festival, a global celebration of music diversity. This event will normally be held and hosted in May – July. The 2023 edition of Rainforest World Music Festival commemorated the 25th year this event was held in Kuching, and it just keeps getting grander as the years pass.

Internationally renowned artists like Afriquoi from the United Kingdom performed during the 2023 edition. Artists from around the globe will gather to perform for this 3-night event and entertain thousands of guests who flock to Sarawak's

Cultural Village. During the day, various workshops will be held around the village to attract tourists and locals alike. Here, you can spectate beautiful multi-ethnic performances and explore the different cultural homes of Sarawakian people, where carving and weaving demonstrations take place for the public. Besides that, one could learn about the cultures and traditions of the 34 different ethnic groups in Sarawak. You'll be amazed by the hospitality.



among ice-cream is every local's favourite dessert.

Arts and culture are a big part of Sarawak's identity. Handicrafts made by locals showcase Sarawak's ties to its rich history and diverse culture in its intricate beadwork, weaving, carving, traditional tribal design and



# Dusit breaks new ground in Malaysia



Dusit Hotels and Resorts, the hotel arm of Dusit International, one of Thailand's leading hotel and property development companies, has signed a hotel management agreement with Gamuda Land to manage ASAI Gamuda Cove – Dusit's first hotel in Malaysia and the first hotel development by Gamuda Land.

Slated to open in Q1 2026, the hotel is situated next to the sprawling Paya Indah Discovery Wetlands within the thoughtfully planned Gamuda Cove. Spanning 1,530 acres, Gamuda Cove will also include residential and commercial areas to complement a range of eco-friendly tourism attractions, such as the already operational SplashMania Waterpark and Discovery Park, all designed with sustainability and

a low carbon footprint in mind.

Siradej Donavanik, Dusit International Vice President Development Global, Gilles Cretallaz, Dusit International Chief Operating Officer.

Kuala Lumpur airport is only a 20-minute drive by car and just 40 minutes to the city centre. This strategic location caters to both domestic and international travellers, enhancing the overall accessibility and appeal of the destination.

Operating under Dusit's distinctive locally focused lifestyle brand, ASAI Hotels, which promises to uniquely link curious travellers with authentic local experiences in the world's most vibrant neighbourhoods, the 280-key ASAI Gamuda Cove hotel enjoys the distinction of

being the first hotel signed under Dusit's expanded 'ASAI Tropical' model, specifically tailored for properties located in areas of outstanding natural beauty.

Like Dusit's operational inner-city ASAI Hotels in Bangkok, Thailand, and Kyoto, Japan, ASAI Tropical hotels will feature thoughtfully compact rooms delivering a distinctive blend of thoughtful essentials, such as plush beds and refreshing showers, complemented by an inviting communal space and locally inspired dining experience. What sets the model apart is providing a broader range of facilities. In this case, an infinity pool, more dining venues, expanded event spaces, and a wider variety of room categories, including spacious, family-



friendly options.

Strategically situated in the southern region of the Gamuda Cove development, ASAI Gamuda Cove will be designed to forge a sense of community by integrating local identity into its design language. Surrounded by lush greenscapes, the hotel will blend seamlessly with the adjacent wetlands and a sprawling 90-acre Wetlands Arboretum, accessible directly from the hotel.

Further highlighting Gamuda Cove's green credentials, an e-tram network – the first of its kind in Malaysia – will seamlessly link guests to hotspots within the development, such as Discovery Park, SplashMania Waterpark, and a pedestrian-only commercial hub, helping to limit the use of motorised vehicles and reduce carbon footprint. Regular community-based activities and events will give guests a unique taste of local culture and experiences while highlighting the importance of responsible tourism.

ASAI Gamuda Cove is set to cater to both domestic and international tourists who will visit Gamuda Cove's host of eco-tourism activities, such as SplashMania Waterpark, Discovery Park, and Paya Indah Discovery Wetlands – attracting a targeted 1 million visitors annually.

"To be entrusted with the



*Photo caption: (from left) Eusoffe Chua, Gamuda Land Chief Commercial Officer, Chu Wai Lune, Gamuda Land Chief Executive Officer, Zuaida Abdullah, MIDA Executive Director, Services Development, HE Lada Phumas, Ambassador of Thailand to Malaysia, Mohd Shahrir Mohd Ali, Tourism Malaysia Senior Director, International Promotion (ASEAN) Siradej Donavanik, Dusit International Vice President Development Global, Gilles Cretallaz, Dusit International Chief Operating Officer.*

management of the first hotel within the dynamic Gamuda Cove development truly is an honour, and we are delighted to partner with Gamuda Land to help bring their vision for their first-ever hotel project to life," said Dusit International chief operating officer Gilles Cretallaz.

"With its stunning location and sustainable credentials, Gamuda Cove perfectly encapsulates the spirit of the ASAI brand, and we look forward to delivering a unique and unforgettable hotel experience that immerses guests in the diverse cultural tapestry of

Malaysia and the natural beauty of the wetlands, all while contributing enduring value to our esteemed partners and the community we serve."

Dusit's property portfolio spans 19 countries and comprises 56 hotels operating under Dusit Hotels and Resorts and approximately 240 luxury villas under Elite Havens. More than 60 Dusit Hotels and Resorts are in the pipeline worldwide.

# Bhutan shares mystique and secrets

With a new year just around the corner and the desire to travel ever-present, thoughts turned to planning my next adventure — Bhutan is top of mind.

I signed up for the sage advice of Bhutan's Yangphel Adventure Travel and embarked on my latest journey to explore Bhutan's

transformation for the entire nation. So, are you ready to embark on a journey beyond the ordinary?

***Here are 10 mind-boggling facts that make the Land of the Thunder Dragon a must-visit destination for savvy travellers.***

with modernity. The majestic dzongs and monasteries stand proudly, adorned with intricate artwork, while modern buildings incorporate traditional Bhutanese designs.

### ***3. The only carbon-negative country***

Bhutan shines as the world's only carbon-negative country in an era dominated by environmental concerns. Lush forests cover over 70% of its land.

### ***4. A unique dress code***

Bhutanese men proudly don their traditional attire, known as the "gho," a knee-length robe wrapped around their bodies and tied securely with a belt. It forms a pouch pocket. Men wear it daily at work and during formal occasions and gatherings. The women in Bhutan dress elegantly in an ankle-length dress known as Kira.

### ***5. Tigers Roaming Free***

Bhutan is home to diverse wildlife, including the elusive Bengal tiger. Conservation efforts have allowed these majestic creatures to roam freely in protected areas.

### ***6. Archery, the national sport***

Archery isn't merely a sport in Bhutan; it's a cultural celebration. With traditional bows and arrows in hand, locals engage in spirited archery competitions.

[Read more...](#)



mystique firsthand.

Bhutan stands apart in a world bustling with tourist hotspots, demanding a bit more than the usual travel toll. The Sustainable Development Fund of USD100 per day is reinvested to ensure longevity that protects and preserves what makes Bhutan unique. Authorities say the Sustainable Development Fee (SDF) is designed to attract wealthy tourists by discouraging budget travellers who spoil the environment. The funds maintain the pristine landscape and offset the carbon footprints left by visitors.

Bhutan's new brand tagline is BHUTAN: BELIEVE. More than just a destination, it's a

### ***1. Gross National Happiness topples GDP***

Unlike most nations fixated on economic growth, Bhutan prioritises the well-being of its citizens through the unique concept of Gross National Happiness. This holistic approach considers psychological, cultural, and environmental factors, fostering a society that values contentment over material wealth.

### ***2. Architectural marvels with a cultural twist***

Bhutanese architecture seamlessly blends tradition

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