

Australia's favourite travel news magazine

Traveltalk

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SPECIAL REPORT

AIRLINES FLY INTO STORM
OVER AGENT \$\$ CUTS

INDONESIA

Luxury dive
resort comes
back to life

MALAYSIA

Adventures
in the jungle

THAILAND

First look at
new eco-tour

Plus: The secret spots to take awesome travel snaps

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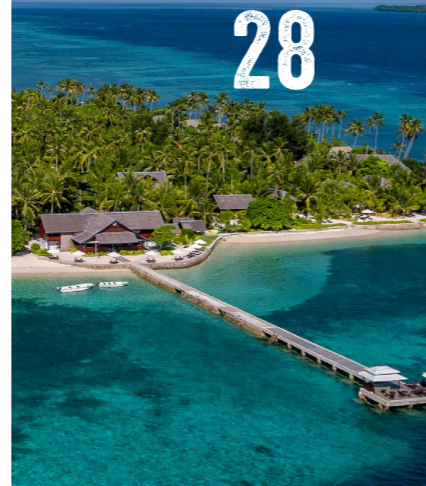
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COOK ISLANDS ON SALE

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Book By 31 August 2022



SAVE \$400 PER COUPLE



PACIFIC RESORT RAROTONGA
8 days from AUD \$1,694 pp twin share

- 7 nights at Pacific Resort Rarotonga - 4.5*
- Fresh "Flower Ei" meet and greet on arrival
- Private Transfers with Piccolo Bubbly on arrival in Rarotonga
- Daily tropical breakfast
- Complimentary Kayaks and stand-up paddleboards
- 2x Freedom of Choice Activities

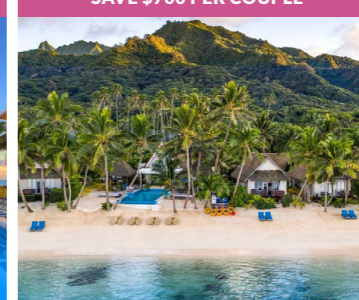
SAVE \$400 PER COUPLE



MOANA SANDS LAGOON RESORT
8 days from AUD \$1,787 pp twin share

- 7 nights at Moana Sands Lagoon Resort - 3.5*
- Fresh Flower Ei Meet and Greet on arrival
- Private Transfers with Piccolo Bubbly on arrival in Rarotonga
- Daily tropical breakfast
- Complimentary snorkelling gear and kayaks
- 2x Freedom of Choice Activities

SAVE \$700 PER COUPLE



LITTLE POLYNESIAN RESORT
8 days from AUD \$3,092 pp twin share

- 7 nights in Rarotonga at Little Polynesian Resort - 5*
- Fresh "Flower Ei" meet and greet on arrival
- Private Transfers with Piccolo Bubbly on arrival in Rarotonga
- Complimentary snorkelling gear
- Complimentary kayaks and stand-up paddleboards
- 2x Freedom of Choice Activities

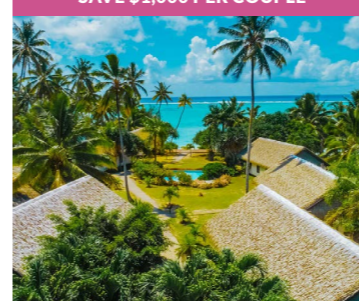
SAVE \$700 PER COUPLE



RAROTONGA, AITUTAKI & ATIU COMBO
12 days from AUD \$3,242 pp twin share

- 5 nights at Moana Sands Beachfront Hotel - 3.5*
- 3 nights at Aitutaki Village - 3*
- 3 nights at Aitiu Villas - 3*
- Anatakitaki Cave Tour - See the unique Kopeka Bird
- Island Tour of Aitiu with light lunch included
- Lagoon Cruise in Aitutaki with Tekings including transfers, lunch and refreshments

SAVE \$1,000 PER COUPLE



MOANA SANDS LAGOON RESORT & TAMANU BEACH RESORT
11 days from AUD \$4,392 pp twin share

- 5 nights at Moana Sands Lagoon Resort - 3.5*
- 5 nights at Tamanu Beach Resort - 4*
- Cruise to 3 fantastic, remote islets and stop for snorkelling and see giant clams during the Lagoon Cruise on The Vaka
- Internal Flights Rarotonga - Aitutaki - Rarotonga
- 1x Freedom of Choice Activity

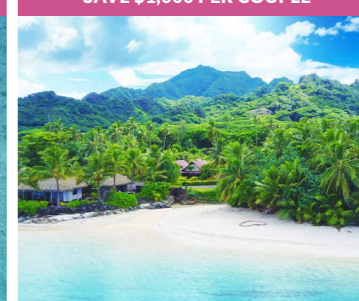
SAVE \$1,000 PER COUPLE



PACIFIC RESORTS RAROTONGA & AITUTAKI COMBO
9 days from AUD \$5,042 pp twin share

- 5 nights at Pacific Resort Rarotonga - 4*
- 3 nights at Pacific Resort Aitutaki - 5*
- Private Transfers with Piccolo Bubbly on arrival in Rarotonga
- 6x NZ\$60 Dining Vouchers included
- Internal Flights Rarotonga - Aitutaki - Rarotonga
- Freedom of Choice Days

SAVE \$1,000 PER COUPLE



SEA CHANGE VILLAS & AITUTAKI ESCAPE
11 days from AUD \$5,656 pp twin share

- 7 nights in Rarotonga at Sea Change Villas - 4.5*
- 3 nights in Aitutaki at Aitutaki Escape - 5*
- Internal Flights Rarotonga - Aitutaki - Rarotonga
- Private Lagoon Cruise including transfers, towels and BBQ lunch with drinks
- 2x Freedom of Choice Activities

SAVE \$1,000 PER COUPLE



LITTLE POLYNESIAN RESORT & PACIFIC RESORT AITUTAKI
11 days from AUD \$7,548 pp twin share

- 5 nights at Little Polynesian Resort Rarotonga - 5*
- 5 nights at Pacific Resort Aitutaki - 5*
- Special Romantic Dinner on a beach site with special menu
- Food & Beverage Resort Credit (valued at NZ\$250) at Little Polynesian Resort
- Food & Beverage Resort Credit (valued at NZ\$250) at Pacific Resort Aitutaki

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Vatnajökull ice cave, Iceland



Salar de Uyuni salt flats, Bolivia

Putting you in the frame

Everyone loves taking a great travel snap when they're on holiday. A new study has revealed some of the world's best hidden gems for would-be travel photographers.



The Lofoten Islands, Norway



Valensole Plateau, France



Stairway to Nothingness, Austria.
Picture courtesy Bernhard Wieland

RANKING

- 1 STAIRWAY TO NOTHINGNESS
Austria
- 2 BEENKERAGH
Ireland
- 3 SALAR DE UYUNI
SALT FLATS
Bolivia
- 4 VATNAJÖKULL ICE CAVE
Iceland
- 5 WAITOMO
GLOWWORM CAVE
New Zealand
- 6 THE LOFOTEN ISLANDS
Norway
- 7 STOCKHOLM
UNDERGROUND
Sweden
- 8 VALENSOLE PLATEAU
France
- 9 THE CANADIAN ROCKIES
Canada
- 10 NAMIB-NAUKLUFT
NATIONAL PARK
Namibia

The study was commissioned by [Passport-photo.online](https://passport-photo.online).

 passport-photo.online/en-gb

CHANGING THE PLAYING FIELD

Here, Explore Worldwide shares insights into the changing travel habits and preferences they are seeing from their customers since 2019.

1. GOING SOLO

Sixty per cent of Explore's bookings are now from solo travellers, with couples and small groups of friends making up the other 40 per cent.

Small group holidays are ideal for single travellers. With an average size of 12, groups are small enough to meet like-minded travellers while mingling with locals and enjoying authentic experiences.

The research, organisation and on-trip logistics are looked after and they'll be accompanied by a local guide who knows the destination inside out and can show them beyond the usual highlights.

Explore's solo travellers aren't just single people – often one person in a couple will enjoy walking or cycling more than a partner, or they just have different ideas of what their first post-COVID trip will be.

2. MAKING SLOW TRACKS

More people are travelling slowly and choosing rail. Travellers have shown greater interest in longer, more immersive holidays that avoid over tourism, explore at a gentler pace and really immerse in a destination.

New rail tours launched by Explore offer a more sustainable and authentic way to travel.

The 'London to Marrakesh by train' tour recreates the romance of rail

travel as you see Europe transform into Africa.

3. THESE FEET ARE MADE FOR WALKING

Walking holidays are up 55 per cent, allowing travellers to really get close to a destination on their own two feet.

Easy graded walking holidays and European walking holidays are the fastest growers but Explore have holidays for everyone – from gentle strolls in Italy to more strenuous hikes and even mountain summits.

In Europe, 'Walking the Azores' and 'Walking in Portugal' are both up, while longer-haul classic tours like 'Walking in New Zealand' and 'Walking Jordan's Spice Trails' continue to be very popular.

4. KEEPING IT CLOSE

Travellers are booking closer to departure. In the past four weeks, last minute bookings for this Northern Hemisphere summer are up 23 per cent on the same period in 2019.

There are still places available on selected tours from family adventures in Turkey and Sri Lanka to walking and cycling holidays in Europe, and classic tours in Botswana and Japan.

Explore have reacted to this trend with a live availability page on their website: exploreworldwide.com.au/offers/last-minute-trips

5. MAKE IT EPIC

Bucket list adventures are growing in popularity. Epic trips to the Maldives (+50 per cent), Kilimanjaro (+80 per cent) and the Inca Trail (+47 per cent), as well as safari holidays and polar voyages are on the rise.

After two years of not travelling, missing celebrations and get-togethers, there's a definite sense of *carpe diem* among travellers who are reluctant to wait any longer to tick off those dream holidays.

For a special occasion or once-in-a-lifetime trip, the 'Realm of the Polar Bear in Depth' voyage to the Arctic and Spitsbergen offers the best chance for seeing reindeer and polar bear.

"Adventure travel has come back with such gusto this year," said Ben Ittensohn, Global Sales Director at Explore.

"It's been interesting digging further into these new bookings and finding patterns emerging in terms of destinations and types of trips, but also new trends in booking behaviours.

"The pandemic has certainly influenced the way customers holiday – more European destinations and walking holidays, to a greater percentage of solo travellers and people booking closer to departure date."

exploreworldwide.com.au



WHAT TO ENSURE WHEN YOU INSURE

Many people are still confused about just what is covered by travel insurance policies. TODD NELSON, Managing Director, Australia for Cover-More Travel Insurance, supplies some answers.

Q: How has travel changed from the pre-COVID days?

A: Travel today is a lot more involved than ever before, so travellers need to do their research to understand the COVID-19 testing and vaccination requirements of not only their destinations but also airlines and other transport providers.

While we are seeing some relaxation of testing requirements by some countries, this is an ongoing and evolving situation, so travellers need to stay on top of the relevant details for their destinations.

Q: And you can help them do this?

A: Working with global intelligence provider, RiskLine, we introduced the COVID TravelCheck tool to our website last year.

It's an easy and accessible tool for travel agents and consumers about COVID-19 and destinations – a tool that can quickly answer the following questions for a particular country:

- * What is the level of COVID-19 infection and risk in the country?
- * What are the entry and quarantine requirements?
- * Are there any COVID 'hotspots' in the country to be aware of?
- * What are the mandatory rules for public spaces?
- * What are the COVID and other policies and requirements of the airline carrier?

Q: People might assume that all travel insurance policies cover COVID-related issues. Is this the case?

A: No. Policies are different and while all our policies provide cover for overseas medical expenses relating to COVID-19, there are differences when it comes to amendment, cancellation and additional expenses cover.

And there are some policies in the market that don't offer any cover for COVID-19.

Q: What problems could travellers run into without COVID cover?

A: Cover for overseas medical expenses is always critical as these costs can quickly escalate in countries such as the U.S. where healthcare is so expensive.

In addition, some countries are demanding to see proof of COVID-19 travel insurance cover before they will allow a visitor to enter, so it is critical that they understand the requirements of where they are travelling.

Q: So, what essentials should Aussies look for when booking insurance?

A: The three most important things are:

- 1 A travel insurance company with their own in-house emergency medical assistance team (nurses and doctors who will know how to look after you if you become sick or are injured overseas)
- 2 Clear explanations of what cover is offered (or not) for COVID-19
- 3 Travel insurance policies that give travellers the choice to design their own cover – for example, to upgrade on certain benefits, to add cover for adventure sports or motorcycle riding, to choose their own level of cancellation cover.

Q: You've just published a guide that helps explain COVID-insurance.

A: We developed the guide to help travel agents and consumers with information such as the following:

- * What international COVID-19 cover does Cover-More provide?
- * When is the best time to buy travel insurance with COVID-19 cover?
- * What do I need to know about travel insurance during the pandemic?

Travel insurance policy wording can sometimes be very hard to digest, often with complex wording, so another plus about our guide is that we have simplified policy wording to ensure everyone can grasp it quickly and with ease.

covermore.com.au/covid-international-travel-requirements



A VIEW FROM THE TOP

It's been a baptism of fire for DEAN LONG since he stepped into the role of CEO at the Australian Federation of Travel Agents.

In this exclusive interview with *Traveltalk*, Mr Long gives his thoughts on the industry post-pandemic and what the future holds.

Q: How would you describe the state of the Australian travel industry?

A: Really strong. I think people have got a better understanding of what their businesses are today than they probably ever thought they would.

They're also coming from the lowest possible cost base and we're now in an environment where air fares and other suppliers are significantly higher than what they were pre-pandemic.

So, there's good margins to be made by those businesses that have made strong investments through the last two years to survive and they should be really profitable this year.

But there's no doubt the workforce challenges, the lack of aviation supply and the lack of cruise ships in the

market at the moment are hindering what could be an even better recovery than what we're currently seeing.

Q: Many travel professionals left the industry during COVID. Can you get them back?

A: We've got to put it in comparison to what people are earning in other professions and what you need to do in other similar styles of roles.

For example, travel agents and frontline consultants would typically earn more than those on the front desk of a hotel, or those in a concierge service.

For the most part, we also offer fairly generous working conditions – I'd rather be working in a travel agency than pulling beer for up for 12 hours,



Dean Long, CEO at the Australian Federation of Travel Agents

working in a noisy pub.

It's also a really positive industry where you're helping people with the best part of their life.

I think we also need to recognise that our workforce challenges are not just about attracting frontline consultants. We need to make sure we've got great people in our businesses, be it accountants, IT and even business managers in general.

Q: Any ideas how will you do it?

A: We're going to look at working more closely with universities. How do we put together graduate programs that make it appealing for people to come into those professional services, not just the entry level roles, because the future is innovation and change.

Q: It seems COVID has reset what a travel agent will look like in the future?

A: Anybody who thinks their business or a consultant is going to be the same as pre-pandemic, that's just not true.

You're going to have to have great

customer service from when you first interact with them, while they're on their trip and when they return. You can't do all that as one person and still have a profitable business.

We'll end up with a scenario where a consultant, a travel business and its technology offerings will have to be one and the same. And if you've got a chink in any of those categories, your business is not going to be as successful as it needs to be, and I think that shift will happen.

It can't just be and won't just be a single shop on the high street. We need to have offerings for everybody within the travel intermediary mix.

We need to have high street consultants, corporates, online and tour operators that are Australian-based businesses that comply with Australian Consumer Law that can support Australians in destinations that may be more challenging.

We just need to do better across the entire remit of the travel sector, which is going to be really exciting. It's going to be people and technology that come together to drive that outcome.

Q: Will we ever see as many people working in the industry as we had pre-COVID?

A: I think we'll have more. We're going to end up with the large travel businesses that we've got today and then customised groups, maybe not

operating in a storefront, but a large workforce providing customised individual travel, charging higher fees and delivering customised support.

Q: You're almost predicting a golden age for the travel industry?

A: I am. AFTA has an important role to play in providing a place of knowledge and support for existing agents. It has that place because it's a highly trusted brand within the industry

When associations are at their best in a leadership position, they enable businesses to hear a message from a trusted source about what they need to do to be going forward.

Q: Is the role of a travel agent more important now than ever before?

A: I'm really excited about what the future brings. We've got businesses that are the leanest they've ever been and most have a very clear understanding of the type of customer that they want, which wasn't the case a few years ago.

We've got people who now know their business back to front and what they need to do to be profitable and that is a really good thing.

Q: Apart from successfully lobbying the government for industry support, what are you most proud of in your short time as CEO?

A: Getting that early win for those

businesses that needed that cash is something I'm really proud of. That cash injection gave owners the confidence to employ people to be able to get ready to reopen.

I'm also really proud of the pieces of work that we haven't talked publicly about, which is the new Constitution and the new Charter, which we're just putting the final touches on.

We're going to have two documents which are fit for purpose and recognise the scale, scope and innovation of the sector, and will imprint the DNA of AFTA for the next 50 years.

Q: Where do you think the travel industry will be this time next year?

A: That's a very good question. For the last 67 years we've gone through a period of uninterrupted economic growth and stability, particularly in Australia. That level of stability is unlikely, if not impossible.

From a travel perspective, I think we're going to have businesses back to 2019 levels by this time next year – in fact most would probably already be there now.

But it's not going to be stable and we're going to be operating in an environment which has more volatility than any of us have had in our lifetime.

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Traveltalk

GIFT AWAITS THE MASTERS

THERE'S STILL time for agents to earn a gift card of their choice through a promotion with MSC Cruises.

The company recently launched an interactive trade e-training program, MSC Masters, to help the trade refresh their skills and learn about MSC Cruises.

Modules include topics on the new ship *MSC World Europa*, pricing models, MSC Yacht Club, 360-degree virtual ship tours, pre-paid packages, MSC Voyager Club and webinar classes.

The first 200 travel partners to complete the e-training program by August 12 will receive a \$100 gift card. In addition, five \$50 gift cards will be on offer to win until December 31.

Benefits for completing the program include priority invitations to onboard events when ships are in Australia, priority to familiarisations, exclusive promotions and exclusive discounts for leisure travel.

"Our biggest aim is to support our trade partners with the information they need to sell an MSC cruise – there are so many partners who have changed businesses or not sold a cruise in over 18 months," said Lisa Teiotu, Commercial Director, MSC Cruises Australia.

"What a great opportunity to refresh their skills in the run up to what we hope will be a really successful wave season."

Each module is designed to take between 10 to 15 minutes to complete with a final exam taken by agents at the end of their training. Upon completion participants will receive an MSC Masters diploma.

[mscbook.com](https://www.mscbook.com)



EIGHT AUSSIE travel agents have joined their contemporaries from around the world to celebrate the return of Bali as a tourism destination.

Hosted by Club Med Bali, the event brought together more than 100 consultants from seven countries. Among them was Josephine Anne Francis, owner of Global Travel Solutions, Callum Whitehead, Managing Director of Barrow & Bear Travel, and Lisa Harrison, General Manager of Magellan.

Attendees participated in Balinese cooking classes, flying trapeze and archery at the resort while going off-site to explore Seminyak.

"For almost all the attendees, it was their first time overseas since the pandemic," said Michelle Davies, General Manager for the Pacific.

travelagents.clubmed.com.au

Experts get back on track

INTERNATIONAL RAIL has emerged from the pandemic with a new state-of-the-art booking platform and a full team of customer support experts.

The Melbourne-based company, who have been operating special rail services for 17 years, have launched the new platform connecting directly to Rail Europe's new ERA rail aggregation solution, opening live bookings to most European railways, including Eurostar, Trenitalia, DB Bahn and SNCF.

The company's wide range of rail passes, including Eurail and Swiss passes, are now offered as mobile passes that can be downloaded to a customer's device.

Bookings are self-managed, enabling agents to make changes or process refunds directly in the system. As an added benefit, all rail passes and train tickets are now electronic with agents receiving them directly to their email inbox.

internationalrail.com.au

ROADSHOW HEADS NORTH

A RANGE of events have been held for agents during a trade roadshow across Northern New South Wales.

Norwegian Cruise Line, Back-Roads Touring and Avalon Waterways staged the joint initiative from Tamworth to the Coffs Coast, including destinations like Port Macquarie, Singleton, Armidale, Kempsey, Taree and Forster.

The suppliers held eight events for agents and their clients, ranging from breakfasts to evening information events, each showcasing the brands' extensive options for cruising and touring in Europe in 2023 and beyond.

Vanessa Green, NCL, Alexa Papoulias, Globus family of brands, Aaron Dodkin, Back-Roads Touring



One year on...

Travel Agent Finder is a free service connecting Aussie travellers with experienced travel agents. As the company approaches its first birthday, we talk to founder ANNA SHANNON.



Anna Shannon, founder of Travel Agent Finder

Q: How has Travel Agent Finder been received since you launched it?

A: The industry has been incredibly supportive, for which I am very grateful.

Within just a few months I had hundreds of agents registered and many industry veterans reached out in support of what I was creating, providing advice, feedback and contacts.

As a passion project-turned start-up, that is more than I could have hoped for.

Q: Why do consumers need a service like TAF?

A: Demand for a trusted and quality travel advisor is huge right now, for a few reasons:

Many lost touch with their trusted agent when so many of us (like me) lost our jobs

Those who were comfortable booking their own travel now realise it is more difficult these days and prefer an expert to manage

There is also an unfortunate side effect of the huge and sudden spike in travel bookings creating chaos for many agencies, especially the retailers with physical stores who are struggling to upstaff and can't keep up with the lines out the door. Some will wait, but others don't want to book an appointment for two- or three-weeks' time and will look elsewhere.

Travel Agent Finder is the only independent website dedicated to matching consumers with the right travel specialist, where you can do all these things in the one place.

We have more than 500 quality agents across Australia, offering more than 9,500 combined years of experience. You'll also find 480 recent client-submitted reviews. So, we make it easy to find, choose and connect with the best expert for your needs.

Q: Are there any new developments you can tell us about?

A: Travel Trade Connect, which is our travel industry directory of contacts inside the members area of the site. It lists BDM contact details and company updates for agents to have a one-stop shop for companies who support and value them as a distribution network.

Q: What is the feeling among agents about how the industry is recovering?

A: While it is exciting that everyone is travelling and agents are busy again, there are so many issues that are still making it difficult to get back to "normal".

Seat availability on flights, especially with the current trend of booking a lot closer to date of travel, is a huge issue, as well as flight changes and cancellations that take hours to sort out and usually with airlines who are less than cooperative, offer no compensation and are themselves overwhelmed.

Generally speaking there is positivity in the air and let's face it, agents who have made it this far have proven they are very resilient and can recognise that the light at the end of the tunnel looks brighter this time.

Q: What role will travel agents play in a post-COVID world?

A: This is a critical time for the industry. Those who demonstrate their value, provide exceptional service and tailored recommendations will quickly rebuild a repeat and loyal client base to set them up for future years.

While travelling might get easier again in the future, those consumers who receive a more personalised experience and enjoy a better trip, with the expertise of a trusted advisor who is always just a phone call away, are unlikely to go back to the headache of managing their own online bookings or secure boring package holidays.

travelagentfinder.com.au





INVESTMENT PUTS AUSSIE EXPANSION ON TRACK

A MAJOR cash injection is going to allow an innovative new travel business to expand its operations in Australasia and Europe.

Rail Online is set for rapid growth after securing a major new shareholder in form of global venture capital firm Dale Ventures, which has invested \$2.5 million to acquire a 20 per cent stake in the online travel agent.

The brainchild of former Rail Europe Australasia executives, James Dunne, Lachlan McCallum and Kew Muthalif, Rail Online launched in February with operations across Australia and the UK.

The company offers travellers international rail passes throughout Europe and point-to-point rail journeys across the UK. Additional point-to-point rail journeys will soon be added across Europe and North America.

“With the rapid advancement of digital ticketing in the rail sector, it’s time for a new player and we’re it,” said Dunne, Chief Executive of Rail Online.

He added that the backing of Dale Ventures would support the company in its goal to become the world’s most valued and frequently used travel app for rail and public transport.

“I am thrilled to be able to support their venture as they move toward making cheap, climate-conscious rail travel a reality for millions,” said Dale W. Wood, Founder and Chief Executive, Dale Ventures.

“The travel market has been waiting for a service like Rail Online since the advent of e-ticketing in the rail sector and this desire is only bolstered by pent up demand related to the pandemic.

“Digital ticketing is poised for major innovation and the Rail Online team are ahead of their time.”

Rail Online entered into a global agreement with rail technology leader SilverRail in 2021 to offer customers a seamless booking experience, with competitive prices and the ability to self-manage any changes or refunds.

Meanwhile, Rail Online has appointed one of Oceania’s most experienced rail experts, Kirsty Blows, as its general manager Australia and New Zealand.

Blows has more than 15 years’ experience working in the international rail sector. She has held senior management roles with specialist wholesaler Rail Plus and European rail distributor Rail Europe, where she was most recently Customer Care Manager Asia Pacific.

“Essentially we built the general manager role around Kirsty because no one else offers that combination of world-class knowledge and exceptional local connections,” said Dunne.

 rail.online



BUTTON UP FOR MAJOR GREEN CAMPAIGN

TOURISM IRELAND has announced the roll out of its new and extensive program of promotional activities under its global Green Button Campaign.

The initiative will hit digital channels, social media and video on demand across Australia in the coming weeks.

On a visit to Australia recently, acting CEO Siobhan McManamy said this is the largest integrated campaign Tourism Ireland has ever launched globally.

With the colour green being synonymous with Ireland and the universal colour for go, she said the recovery campaign aims to deliver a very clear ‘book now’ message by encouraging travellers to ‘press the green button’.

Prior to the pandemic, the island of Ireland enjoyed a record year in 2019 welcoming more than 11 million international visitors, including 252,000 from Australia and New Zealand.

As a top 10 source market for Irish tourism, reports show that Australian holidaymakers stay an average of 13 nights, longer than the average stay of visitors from almost all other markets.

 ireland.com

A road trip with no roads?

Amtrak bookings now available with Rail Online

Rest, relax and refresh
Hassle-free travel
Comfortable seats
Plug in power
Big windows

Register Now!

www.rail.online
Bookings available 24/7. No Booking fee



PAYING THE PERCENTAGE GAME



The hot topic in the travel industry right now is airline commission rates to agents. Along with several others, Australia's national carrier cut its rate from five per cent to one per cent, prompting a vitriolic response from some Aussie agents.

Here we present the argument from both sides of the fence and speak to one airline that is bucking the trend.

SEAN LUES, MANAGING DIRECTOR, JOURNEYS WORLDWIDE

THE MAJORITY of our turnover used to be in air ticket sales. At one stage we were the largest independent seller in Queensland of tickets for one particular airline.

Now – as the phones and emails are actively engaging again – we are actively advising all our loyal and much repeat clients that it is best that they book direct.

A lot of these clients we now know fairly well and it is sad to say goodbye. They, too, are expressing dismay and concern.

It is no longer worth our time or effort to try and source the best options for one-off tickets – the ongoing support and assistance with the constant changes and issues are just not worth the time or effort.

Some airlines have good BDMs, but their hands are tied and the support they are able to offer is completely limited. Support desks are just not

able to keep up and are inefficient at best.

We have removed any mention of just providing air tickets from our website and any other marketing.

Our database of more than 5,000 is whittling away as we start focusing on a more niche market, but I am happy with this – there is more satisfaction and enjoyment in the products we are developing. And there will certainly be more profits, financially and mentally!

» journeysworldwide.com.au

ROBYN SINFIELD, HOME TRAVEL COMPANY

WHEN YOU run a successful business, you value your worth and that means you have been charging a fee for professional time when assisting your clients.

The recent reduction in commission by the airlines that have chosen that path simply means that our potential clients who are unwilling to pay are most affected by the change.

This cohort of travellers book themselves and then encounter issues which 'once upon a time' would have had their travel advisor to sort it out.

So, we are seeing every part of

the airline that has taken away our commission get busier and busier with no customer service whatsoever and the daily media is focusing on this and sadly the travel advisors of APAC don't wish to support them.

Airlines who have chosen to pay commission must be laughing all the way to the bank, especially on high yielding international premium cabin tickets. These airlines, like Qatar, are continuing to take a shared approach with our industry and businesses supporting not only us but our valued travellers.

I've said it before and I'll say it again: the cost of distribution to the Australian travel industry was a small price to pay compared to these airlines trying to manage the mess themselves now.

It's not too late to say it's a mistake: five per cent was never going to make us rich, but it went a long way to a cohesive travel industry across all levels of participants.

» hometravelcompany.com.au

QANTAS SPOKESPERSON

THIS IS the first time Qantas has adjusted commission on international fares in more than 15 years and we gave travel agents more than 12 months' notice, so they had time to evolve their business models.

Even before the commission change, we saw many travel agents embrace the growing trend towards a fee for service model that has already taken place in many markets overseas.

Agents deserve to be rewarded for the time, knowledge, expertise and research that goes into booking and managing travel and a service fee is a logical way to do that.

We are continuing to invest in new technology through the Qantas Distribution Platform that modernises the way agencies can sell and service bookings with Qantas and provides access to new revenue opportunities.

» qantas.com

VIC NAUGHTON, GENERAL MANAGER AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND, AIR CANADA

Q: Why has Air Canada kept the commission rate for travel agents at five per cent?

A: We understand the value travel agents offer, especially in highly competitive markets such as Australia where Air Canada relies on agents to help promote our product and USPs, including our unique YVR transit experience.

Our agency partners do an outstanding job and so they deserve to be remunerated appropriately.

Q: Are there any plans to reduce this in the future?

A: I can honestly say that is not something we are considering, because frankly we don't believe it is currently the right thing to do.

But it would of course be naive of me to suggest commissions are guaranteed to stay at current levels forever – like every business, we are



DEAN LONG, CEO, AUSTRALIAN FEDERATION OF TRAVEL AGENTS

I THINK it's important to note that it's not just Qantas, there's several airlines that have made that decision. And there are several carriers, like Qatar, Delta and Air Canada, that maintain those commissions.

I think we're going to see competition in that marketplace and this is just the first of many decisions that suppliers are going to have to make about what commission rates are.

Seventy per cent of all international travel is still booked through an agent or an ATAS travel business.

So, if airlines and suppliers want to access the distribution network and capability of what agents can bring and what other travel businesses can bring, they will end up paying for it one way or the other.

» afta.com.au

subject to commercial pressures.

Ultimately it will come down to whether agents can shift market share to those airlines that support them. If Air Canada can see a clear commercial upside to maintaining current commission levels, it will help us withstand those pressures.

Q: How else does Air Canada provide support to Aussie agents?

A: Now is the time that agents need support more than ever and we know how much they appreciate receiving that support because they are constantly sending me messages praising our dedicated Sydney-based trade support team, which is contactable by email and prides itself on responding as fast as possible to every request.

Our team is up for nomination at this year's NTIA and I'm hopeful their work will be recognised.

Q: Are travel agents still relevant and important to Air Canada?

A: Travel agents played a crucial role in helping us successfully build our



pre-COVID Australian network. During COVID they did an extraordinary job of helping look after Air Canada customers.

Now they are playing an equally relevant and important role in rebuilding Air Canada's network. For all those reasons, we want to support them now.

From a personal perspective, I spent 10 years working as a travel agent, so I appreciate how hard consultant's work. I also know that they will, where possible, support those airlines that support them.

» aircanada.com

You really Orca do this

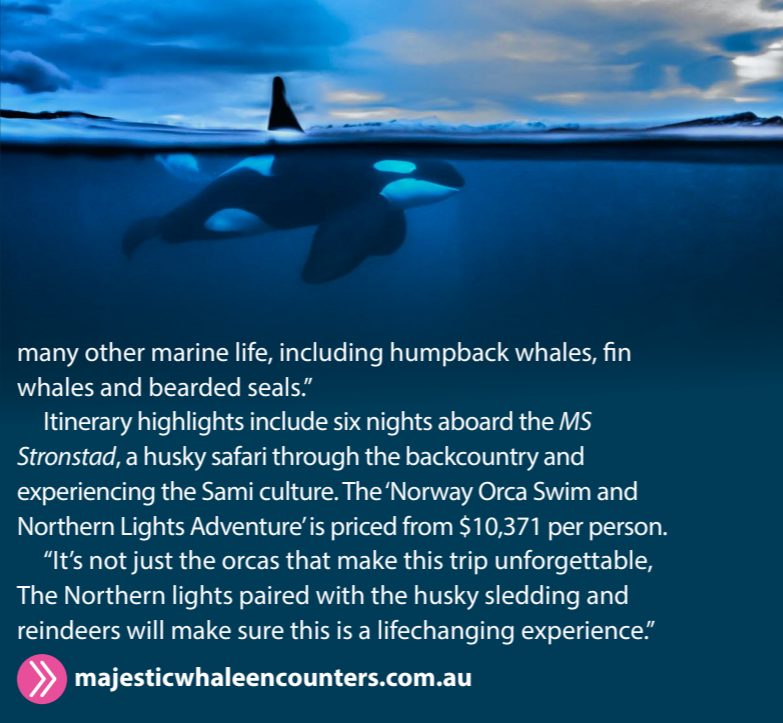
TICK TWO items off your bucket list by swimming with orcas in the fjords of Norway and then catching the Northern Lights.

Majestic Whale Encounters is running a nine-day/eight-night adventure departing from Tromso this November.

"Tromso is one of the only places in the world where you can swim with orcas," said Carmen Ellis, Founder of MWE.

"This particular group feed on herring, not mammals, which makes it the perfect opportunity to slide into the water and witness the panda of the sea.

"Not only will you see the orcas, but Tromso is home to



many other marine life, including humpback whales, fin whales and bearded seals."

Itinerary highlights include six nights aboard the *MS Stronstad*, a husky safari through the backcountry and experiencing the Sami culture. The 'Norway Orca Swim and Northern Lights Adventure' is priced from \$10,371 per person.

"It's not just the orcas that make this trip unforgettable, The Northern lights paired with the husky sledding and reindeers will make sure this is a lifechanging experience."

» majesticwhaleencounters.com.au

BACK ON THE THRONE

THE RELEASE of the long-awaited prequel to the hit TV show *Game of Thrones* has led Sail Croatia to launch a special tour.

The seven-day *Game of Thrones*-inspired cruise celebrates this month's release of *House of the Dragon*.

Much of *GoT* was filmed in Croatia, with some of its most famous scenes shot across the region's coastline.

The itinerary aboard a luxury small ship will call at several of the filming locations, including the city of Dubrovnik, home of Kings Landing. Here, guests can visit the Red Keep, Blackwater Bay and Walk of Shame, as well as sit on the Iron Throne.

Elsewhere, guests can explore Lokrum Island, which was the stand-in location for the city of Qarth, and Klis Fortress, the setting for the city of Meereen.

The cruise departs on August 20 from Split with prices starting from £939 (approx. \$AU1,650) per person. A dedicated tour manager will be on hand throughout to point out the highlights.

» sail-croatia.com



Kalambaka, Greece

ENJOY A FEET OF FAITH

GLOBUS AND Cosmos are encouraging travellers to delve into life-changing itineraries with a robust portfolio of faith-based holidays for 2023.

There include adding a new 'Camino de Santiago: The Scenic Portuguese Route' itinerary to its line-up.

"Our faith-based tours invite travellers on inspiring journeys to walk in the footsteps of Christ, his followers and the legendary figures of the Bible," said Scott Nisbet, President and Chief Executive Officer for the Globus family of brands.

"And in 2023, Globus and Cosmos guests can follow visionaries across the globe from France to Portugal, Greece to Turkey, Italy to Israel with dozens of faith-based holidays."

The new Camino itinerary will cover approximately 120

kilometres, allowing guests the opportunity to give the challenge the meaning it's meant to convey – whether spiritual, religious, physical or just an opportunity to meet like-minded people.

Other popular itineraries the company is bringing back to its 2023 portfolio include:

- * GLOBUS: 'Footsteps of Apostle Paul', 10 days, beginning and ending in Athens.
- * GLOBUS: 'Journey through the Holy Land', nine days, from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.
- * COSMOS: 'Spiritual Highlights of Italy', nine days, beginning and ending in Rome.

» globus.com.au

» cosmostours.com.au

BOOMING AUSSIE MARKET AIDS AIRLINE RECOVERY

"WE'RE VERY confident that travel is back and it's coming back much faster than we expected."

These were the encouraging words from Virgilio Russi, Air Canada's Vice President International Sales, during a wide-ranging interview between *Traveltalk* and airline officials.

Speaking in Sydney recently, Mr Russi said the airline is already operating at 80 per cent of its pre-COVID capacity.

"This is being driven by international travel, especially trans-Atlantic, and Australia is booming for us. In the last two weeks we have launched or are re-launching 34 new routes in the Pacific and Atlantic.

"Our booking numbers over the next eight to 10 months are looking quite strong. Whether this is just pent-up demand, or the demand is here to stay is hard to say but it's looking very good overall.

"We are hoping to see full recovery to pre-COVID levels by 2024 but it may be earlier. We'd rather under promise and over deliver."

Mr Russi said both Canada and Australia were identified as countries that would recover quickest from the pandemic.

"First, they were deemed as safe countries that managed the pandemic quite well. They also have a mix of urban activities with wide-open spaces, and we believe

there's a preference for those kinds of destinations."

Demand from Aussie travellers has seen Air Canada expand its services in the South Pacific region. The airline is currently operating Sydney to Vancouver 10 times a week while Brisbane to Vancouver flights commenced on July 3 with a four times a week schedule.

"Aussies are looking to get away and get to Canada, which is good," said Vic Naughton, Air Canada General Manager Australia. "We've increased capacity on the back of the demand we are seeing."

Looking at future trends in international air travel, Mr Russi revealed that customers appeared willing to pay a little more for their travel experience.

"There has been a growth in demand for more premium services, so our premium cabins are doing really well. This is not business travel: these are leisure travellers willing to pay more for premium economy or business class.

"This may be due to the fact that they didn't travel for two years so are now looking for an upgraded experience and this is a trend that seems to be continuing.

"The other trend is for slightly longer trips than before, but it is hard to say whether this is a pattern that will remain."



Virgilio Russi, Air Canada's Vice President International Sales

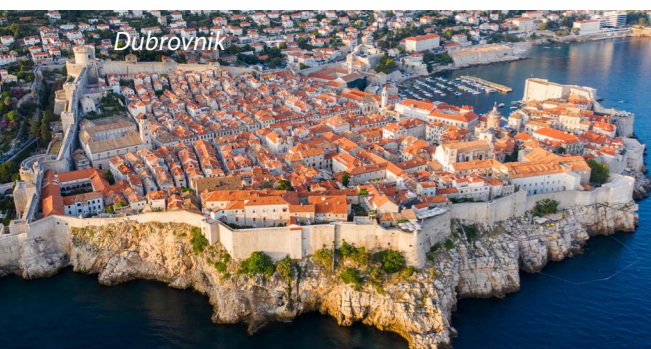
Mr Russi also confirmed that the Australian market would remain essential to the airline and that travel agents would be likewise.

"During the last two years I don't think we've ever seen more important evidence of how crucial travel agents can be in terms of helping our customers move through the difficulties of the pandemic and any future difficulties we'll have.

"We are very grateful to all our travel agent partners all over the world for how they helped us navigate this and get our customers from point a to point b.

"Travel had been extremely complex in the past two years – and it still is – and having someone help you through that is extremely important."

» aircanada.com



Dubrovnik



wellness and sleep when travelling, particularly on long haul sectors. That's where we've put our focus and attention with the new product. We heard loud and clear from 2,571 hours of customer research and a lot of live customer testing that space privacy and wellbeing were clear areas they wanted us to focus on. We feel the new product really delivers on these needs.

Q: How challenging was it for Air New Zealand during the pandemic?

A: It was very difficult closing down the airline, which is effectively what happened overnight. Obviously, making a lot of our employees redundant also made it a very difficult time.

But it's equally challenging, if not more so, reviving the airline. We could put more capacity on to meet demand if we had the resources to do so. And we need to employ more people – we've got 1,100 vacancies at the moment, which we're working through methodically.

Q: How do you see the future of airline travel?

A: Sustainability is one of the core challenges for the airline and we're really serious about our sustainability targets, agenda and aspirations. I think that will change the way people want to fly.

Another trend we are seeing is a higher demand for premium cabins as a consequence of the pandemic. So as our new aircraft come in, they will be much more premium dense at the front end of the cabin.

Q: Have you learned anything from the COVID experience?

A: We've learned a lot from the past two years, but I think one of the core issues is that the customer is key.

We are really focused on delivering to our customers' needs and actually putting some things back in place that we'd taken away over the years. The customer experience is really important to us.

** Air New Zealand will be launching a new flagship route from Auckland to New York on September 17.*

airnewzealand.com.au

NOW EVERYONE CAN LIE IN THE SKY

Air New Zealand created a huge buzz when it unveiled ground-breaking new product recently, particularly Skynest, the world's first sleep pods in economy.

We spoke to LEANNE GERAGHTY, Chief Customer and Sales Officer at ANZ, to see just what Aussie customers can expect.

Q: How is the airline looking as we, hopefully, put COVID behind us?

A: We're definitely coming out of the pandemic and in the context of the whole environment, I think we're doing well.

We're back in 27 of our 29 international ports and come October we'll be back to about 70 per cent of our international flights pre-COVID. Domestically we're almost at the 100 per cent mark so we're tracking well in terms of the rebuild, revival phase.

We're saying first half of 2023 we should be back to pre-COVID figures.

Q: Your new products have caused quite a stir. A new business premier Luxe suite, a new business premier seat and Skynest coming in 2024.

A: We're absolutely delighted with the new products, particularly because they address choices for customers across the aircraft from nose to tail.

There's a huge amount of innovation, particularly in the economy cabin, and when those



Leanne Geraghty, Chief Customer and Sales Officer at ANZ

new aircraft come in and the product is onboard, it doesn't really matter where you are within the aircraft, you have the option to have a lie-flat sleep.

Q: Clearly a lot of research has gone into this.

A: 170,000 hours of design work over five years. These things don't just happen overnight.

There is a definite trend towards

TAKE A TASSIE HIKE

LIFE'S AN Adventure have announced a new addition to their 'Walk Three Capes' itinerary with the opportunity to heli-hike on Tasman Island.

Guests have the option to select from three experiences as part of their Tasman Peninsula pack-free adventure; a boat cruise with Pennicott Wilderness Journeys, a 20-minute scenic flight over Cape Pillar and Tasman Island, and now the chance to land and walk on Tasman Island.

"It's an extraordinary opportunity to walk on an island

few have ever had the opportunity to see up close," said Mark Norek, CEO of Life's An Adventure.

The helicopter landing is available to four guests on each trip and includes a guided tour. The island plays host to a bounty of sea birds and seals as well as offering views of dolphin pods and migrating whales.

This unique experience from Hobart (return) is valued at \$1,095 per person.

lifesanadventure.com.au



SNORKELLERS CAN now join conservationists assessing the Great Barrier Reef with a new tour launched by Passions of Paradise.

The citizen science tours in Cairns have previously only been available to experienced divers.

"We have expanded our Marine Biologist for a Day program to offer an option for snorkellers to participate in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority's Eye on the Reef Rapid Monitoring," said Russell Hosp, Passions of Paradise

Environmental Manager and Master Reef Guide.

"Participants get an unparalleled snorkelling experience in the company of a Master Reef Guide or marine biologist who helps them identify the various species of coral and fish they see."

Passions of Paradise is one of five operators in Cairns and Port Douglas participating in the Coral Nurture Program, run by the University of Technology Sydney.

"Through the program, dive masters employed by Great Barrier Reef tour

vessels collect, propagate, grow and plant coral to replenish reef sites and enhance the reef's resilience.

"Over the past two years Passions of Paradise has planted more than 5,500 pieces of coral on Hastings Reef."

The fully inclusive Passions of Paradise Great Barrier Reef tour and Marine Biologist for a Day program is \$350 for snorkellers and \$450 for divers including two dives.

passions.com.au



BRIDGE OVER ICY WATER

SILVERSEA IS enhancing its polar offering by adding three new Antarctica Bridge voyages for the 2023-2024 season.

The fly-cruise program provides the fastest, most direct route to Antarctica by enabling travellers to fly over the Drake Passage in business class comfort.

Adding to Silversea's existing Antarctica offering for 2022 and 2023, guests seeking the fast track to the White Continent can now select from two new five-day expedition voyages aboard *Silver Cloud*, departing February 2 and 7, 2024, as well as a six-day sailing departing February 12, 2024.

After landing at Chile's Eduardo Frei Montalva air base on King George Island, *Silver Cloud's* guests will spend the same amount of time exploring

Antarctica as on the cruise line's conventional itineraries.

They will journey deep into destinations such as Antarctic Sound, the Antarctic Peninsula and the South Shetland Islands before returning to King George Island.

The Expedition Team will guide Zodiac tours, kayaking adventures and explorations ashore, as well as provide lectures on the region's geology, wildlife and history. In addition to witnessing ice formations and otherworldly landscapes, guests will visit large penguin rookeries and may see several species of seals, whales and other birds.

For sailings that cross the Drake Passage, Silversea recently enhanced guests' journeys to Antarctica with the launch of round-trip voyages from Puerto Williams in Chile.

From the 2022-2023 season, guests sailing aboard the line's three ice-class expedition ships – *Silver Cloud*, *Silver Wind* and *Silver Explorer* – will enjoy more convenient flight times, personalised service during a private charter flight and quicker transfers to the ship.

» [silversea.com](https://www.silversea.com)

AVALON PICKS UP AWARDS

AVALON WATERWAYS has picked up two top awards from readers of a major American publication.

The readers of *USA Today* 10Best selected Avalon Waterways as the best river cruise line. In addition, the company's Suite Ship, the *Avalon Envision* – christened in 2019 by best-selling author Elizabeth Gilbert – was named the best cruise ship by voters in the river cruise category.

"Avalon is 100 per cent guest-focused and to receive this endorsement from our travellers, recognising all we've done to provide them an alternative to the traditional cruise experience, is not only rewarding, it's inspired us to continue to elevate cruising from start to finish," said Pam Hoffee, President of Avalon Waterways.

In the past five years, Avalon Waterways has added Active & Discovery cruises on every major waterway in Europe, increasing its offerings by 600 per cent.

In 2011 the company unveiled its award-winning Suite Ship design to guests (now available fleetwide) featuring two full decks of 200-square-foot Panorama Suites with beds facing the largest views – and widest-opening windows – in river cruising.

» [avalonwaterways.com.au](https://www.avalonwaterways.com.au)



The fees that please

THERE'S GOOD news for agents looking to benefit from the post-pandemic interest in boutique cruise voyages.

Cruise Traveller has halved fees to \$90 per month and introduced exclusive supplier training for its industry-first custom web solution – The Small Ship Collective (TSSC).

"Small ships definitely offer agents new and bigger revenue sources," said Craig Bowen, Managing Director, Cruise Traveller.

"More travellers are now seeking the space, freedom, accessibility, eco-sustainability and personal service that smaller ships offer and The Small Ship Collective offers immediate access to this lucrative market.

"It's lucrative, low volume, high-yield business that any agent can now tap into via The Small Ship Collective, which offers agents a complete suite of tools and extensive support from Cruise Traveller to quickly make them a professional in the small ship market."

The Small Ship Collective offers agents a personalised website branded with their own logo. The cruise content platform can be tailored by the agent to feature the company's and destinations they choose and can also include auto price feeds direct from the larger lines, creating a complete cruise solution for independent agents.

Along with small and expedition-style cruises, a Small Ship Collective personalised site also gives agents the ability to include large ships from mainstream and boutique cruise lines in their product range. This gives cruise specialist agents a truly comprehensive portfolio of itineraries to their guests.

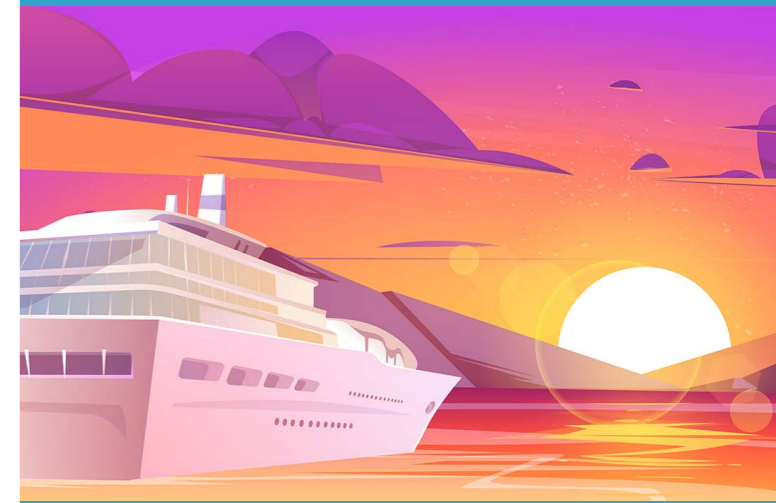
Agents in the SSC group will also enjoy preferred commissions on Cruise Traveller-provided products, specialist training, fam opportunities and onboard guest benefits from selected cruise lines.

They will also receive monthly marketing updates including customisable flyers, banners and social media tiles, a dedicated Key Partnership Manager, a priority toll-free reservations line and the ability to retain any existing affiliations.

"The products and packages put together by TSSC offer great benefits not only to us as a business but also as value-added benefits to our clients," said David Smith, Travel on Capri.

» [theshipcollective.com.au](https://www.theshipcollective.com.au)

Let's get back to business



THE REVIVAL of the cruise industry in Australia is gathering momentum with the announcement that Cruise Month will return in September.

Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA) Australasia made the decision ahead of the approaching summer cruise season. It's the first time the promotion has been held since 2019.

Under a new theme of #LoveCruise, the month-long initiative will bring together the Australasian cruise community in a succession of promotions and marketing campaigns, each designed to capitalise on the industry's global recovery and harness the renewed passion of travellers throughout the region.

"Cruise Month will herald the approach of our first summer cruise season in more than two years, allowing us to capitalise on interest around returning cruise ships and the new travel opportunities they offer," said Joel Katz, CLIA Managing Director Australasia.

"It will help mark our region's reunification with the global cruise industry and build more excitement around new cruising opportunities in Australia, New Zealand and around the world."

Cruise lines and retailers will mount #LoveCruise marketing campaigns throughout September, inviting travellers to explore new holiday ideas and book upcoming itineraries through CLIA specialist travel agents.

Travel agents will also be able to launch their own #LoveCruise promotions and social media initiatives, supported by CLIA's Cruise Month toolkit which will provide ideas and resources to help maximise engagement with cruise clients.

Further details will be announced ahead of an official launch at CLIA's Cruise360 Australasia conference on August 25.

» [cruising.org.au](https://www.cruising.org.au)

IN BRIEF///

Regent Seven Seas Cruises has unveiled a new offer for travellers. The company's 'European Indulgence' package provides guests with a \$US500 (approx. \$AU730) shipboard credit per suite, plus a one-night post-cruise hotel package on 60 voyages sailing to the Mediterranean and Northern Europe, from March 28, 2023, through November 13, 2023. To take advantage of this offer, guests must book before August 31 to secure their preferred suite and itinerary.

» [RSSC.com](https://www.rssc.com)

VIKING: A world of cruising in 25 years

THIS YEAR, we celebrate 25 years of Viking.

Having started with four river ships in 1997, today we have an award-winning fleet of more than 80 strong river, ocean and expedition ships. That's not bad in a mere quarter of a century.

At least compared to the Vikings who, driven by their insatiable spirit of discovery, sailed to the farthest shores for more than 300 years.

Like the ancient Vikings, we built our ships on the back of clean, streamlined design. We set the standard for modern river cruises offering discerning clients immersive and culturally enriching itineraries and experiences.

Next, we reinvented ocean cruises and launched our award-winning small ship voyages.

On our journey, we have accumulated more than 250 awards for our creatively designed Nordic-style spaces, cuisine and service and are now the first company ever to be simultaneously named the #1 Ocean Line and #1 River Line in *Travel + Leisure's* 2022 "World's Best" Awards.

We strive for meaningful experiences for The Thinking Person and make no apologies for our no kids, no casinos approach to cruising. This keeps our well-travelled guests coming back time and time again.

Today, we are onto our next project: perfecting expedition voyages, with our new, state-of-the-art expedition ships.

In January, we launched Viking Expeditions and the first of two purpose-built expedition vessels, *Viking Octantis*, which has completed her first Antarctica season and is currently sailing her inaugural season in the Great Lakes of North America.

We have also welcomed eight new Viking Longships and a new ocean ship, *Viking Mars*.

Soon to come this year are new purpose-built vessels for the Nile, Mekong, and Mississippi Rivers plus a second expedition ship, *Viking Polaris*, and another ocean ship, *Viking Neptune*.

After just 25 years, Viking now explores all seven continents of the

world via the Earth's waterways across our cutting-edge river, ocean and expedition categories of ship.

Given our legacy of the Viking spirit, we believe we'll outdo the ancient Norse seafarers' three centuries. And we've got you, curiosity-fuelled travellers, to thank for that.

In celebration of this special milestone, we are offering savings off 2023 and 2024 river cruises and a selection of our most popular ocean and expedition voyages for new bookings before October 31.

We invite you to join us on our onwards journey so we can expand our horizons together.

[viking.com](https://www.viking.com)

Readers of *Travel + Leisure* in America have voted Viking first in its categories in the 2022 *World's Best Awards*.

Viking was named the #1 Ocean Line for ships with 300 to 799 cabins and the #1 River Line, making it the first cruise line ever to top both categories in the same year.

Viking is also rated #1 for both rivers and oceans by *Condé Nast Traveler*; no other cruise line has simultaneously earned #1 in its categories from both publications.

Readers cast their vote in cruising with considerations in the following features: cabins/facilities, food, service itineraries/destinations, excursions/activities and value.

"To be the first line ever to receive both awards in the same year is a very special honour," said Torstein Hagen, Chairman of Viking.

"This achievement is the result of the hard work our Viking team members have put in over the last 25 years.

"In my view, it is now time to work even harder. They say that when you reach the top, there is only one way to go – at Viking, we say that way is onwards."



RE-FURB READY TO REVEAL

BOUTIQUE HOTEL Lancemore Milawa is set to unveil its multi-million-dollar transformation next month.

The property is set in the Victorian High Country's King Valley at the base of the Alpine National Park, framed by vistas of vineyards and mountains. It is in one of Australia's oldest gourmet regions and less than three hours from Melbourne.

Drawing inspiration from the local environment and with Moorish themes, the 40-room hotel is a carefully curated space, allowing guests to connect with nature and the surrounds.

Poolside hammocks and sunbeds lend Palm Springs vibes, while its position among some of Australia's most famed wineries evokes a sense of Northern Italy.

In winter, under the backdrop of snow-capped mountains, roaring fires both inside and out offer comfort and cosiness long into the night.

The hotel's restaurant Merlot is helmed by executive chef Aaron Jose who has more than 20 years' experience from award-winning restaurants including two hatted Momo.

[lancemore.com.au](https://www.lancemore.com.au)

New hotel is Pakenham in

MERCURE WILL add another property to their Australian catalogue next month with the opening of a new hotel in Victoria.

Located within the Pakenham Race Club Precinct, Mercure Pakenham is a 64-room property with a stylish lounge and cafe area. A new restaurant will be unveiled shortly, serving both hotel guests and the local population.

The hotel also features business services with conference, function and boardroom facilities. Guests will also enjoy high speed complimentary Wi-Fi and state of the art streaming services.

With easy access to the popular Cardinia Club and only 500m from

the Pakenham CBD, Cardinia Cultural Centre and train station, guests can enjoy all that the area has to offer.

"Pakenham has been in need of an accommodation facility and we are excited to deliver it," said Dale Bainbridge, Mercure Pakenham Managing Director.

"Pakenham and the Cardinia Shire is a rapidly growing area and this will be a valuable complex to help support this growth with much needed accommodation."

[mercure.com](https://www.mercure.com)



IN BRIEF///

InterContinental Hayman Island Resort will be opening a new luxury adults-only accommodation offering in September. Twelve standalone Beachfront Pavilions, each with its own private plunge pool, are positioned as an exclusive area of the resort and will help meet the increased demand the property has seen for elevated luxury experiences, also adding new appeal to couples and those guests wanting more privacy.

[haymanisland.intercontinental.com](https://www.haymanisland.intercontinental.com)

IT'S ONLY NATURAL

TAKE ADVANTAGE of a luxury winter package and sample the natural delights of one of Australia's most popular destinations.

Mount Lofty House in the Adelaide Hills is offering Sequoia Winter Escape packages until August 31.

"Winter escapes at Sequoia are one of Australasia's most wonderful travel and wellness experiences," said Jacqueline Kennedy, Estate General Manager.

"Our guests arrive to a quiet botanic landscape, meandering wallabies and sleepy koalas, crackling fires and steam rising from the artesian stone hot pools fed by the mountain's natural springs. It's all about nature inspired experiences."

Sequoia's range of bespoke tours include helicopter transfers to meet winemakers, private 4WD tours to pristine coastline and a behind the scenes tour of the iconic R.M. Williams workshop.

The two-night Sequoia Lodge Winter Warmer package is \$1,429 per person and the three-night Sequoia Winter Escape package is \$2,550 per person.

[sequoialodge.com.au](https://www.sequoialodge.com.au)





Paradise found for families

If you're planning a dream holiday to Bali, the Bali Dynasty Resort offers fun and activities for every member of the family.

FREE KIDS CLUB AND ACTIVITIES

The resort has reopened its FREE kids club and kids and adult activities around the pool and gardens. There are plenty of kids' activities to keep the family entertained in a safe, fun and supervised setting by a professionally trained team of staff.

The program in the kids club introduces some traditional Balinese games and crafts and gives children an appreciation of the Balinese culture. This means it is not only a fun experience, but they will also go away having learnt something.

Adjacent to the kids club is the Kids Water Fun Zone with its giant tipping bucket, two mini waterslides, pull ropes, water curtain, tipping cone, bubbler jets, hose jets, water cannons and tipping troughs.

The baby pool has a mushroom water fountain and beyond that is the new kids playground with swings, climbing frame, seesaw, slides and table tennis.

DAILY RESORT ACTIVITIES FOR ADULTS AND KIDS

Throughout the day, the team bring the kids around the resort to feed the fish and ducks, enabling the young

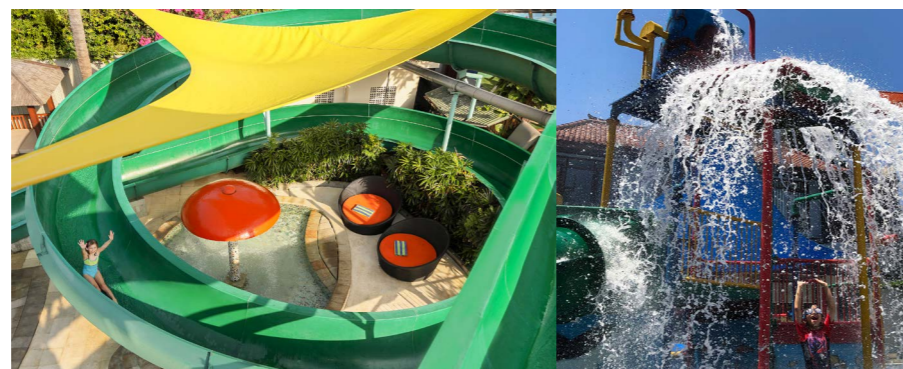
ones to interact with animals.

Another classic and popular activity is the watermelon eating contest. Or, if the kids are keen for some water fun, there's the highest splash contest and tug of war challenge.

Foodies will love the cooking courses for kids where they are taught how to make their own pizza and learn some delicious Balinese dishes as well.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Bali Dynasty Resort offers six restaurants, including the popular Chinese Restaurant Golden Lotus, the Irish Pub Gracie Kelly's, H2O Restaurant where you can enjoy dining by the pool, or Café Piazza, serving lunch with the tropical garden as your view. Kids menus are available at all the dining outlets within the resort.



MOVIE NIGHT AND THEMED BUFFET

Kids 12 years and under eat FREE on themed buffet nights every Monday (Italian pizza and pasta), Wednesday (Wild Wild West) and Friday (Malam Bali Indonesian Cuisine) when dining with the same number of full paying adults at H2O Restaurant.

On buffet nights the resort will be playing popular kids movies by the pool in a safe and supervised environment so the adults can relax and unwind.

KEEPING IT IN THE FAMILY

Many of the resort's family rooms come with bunk beds to keep the little ones happy along with room dividers to keep unwanted noises and privacy levels just right.

The newest addition to the accommodation offering is the Family Lagoon Pool Access rooms. Enjoy a secluded pool right at your doorstep along with a private terrace to chill out: for safety there is a kids proof gate.

These rooms come complete with bunk beds and a trundle to accommodate up to five people comfortably.

Alternatively, if you're looking for an even more spacious option, the Family Suite is also an expansive room category which guarantees ultimate privacy for parents.

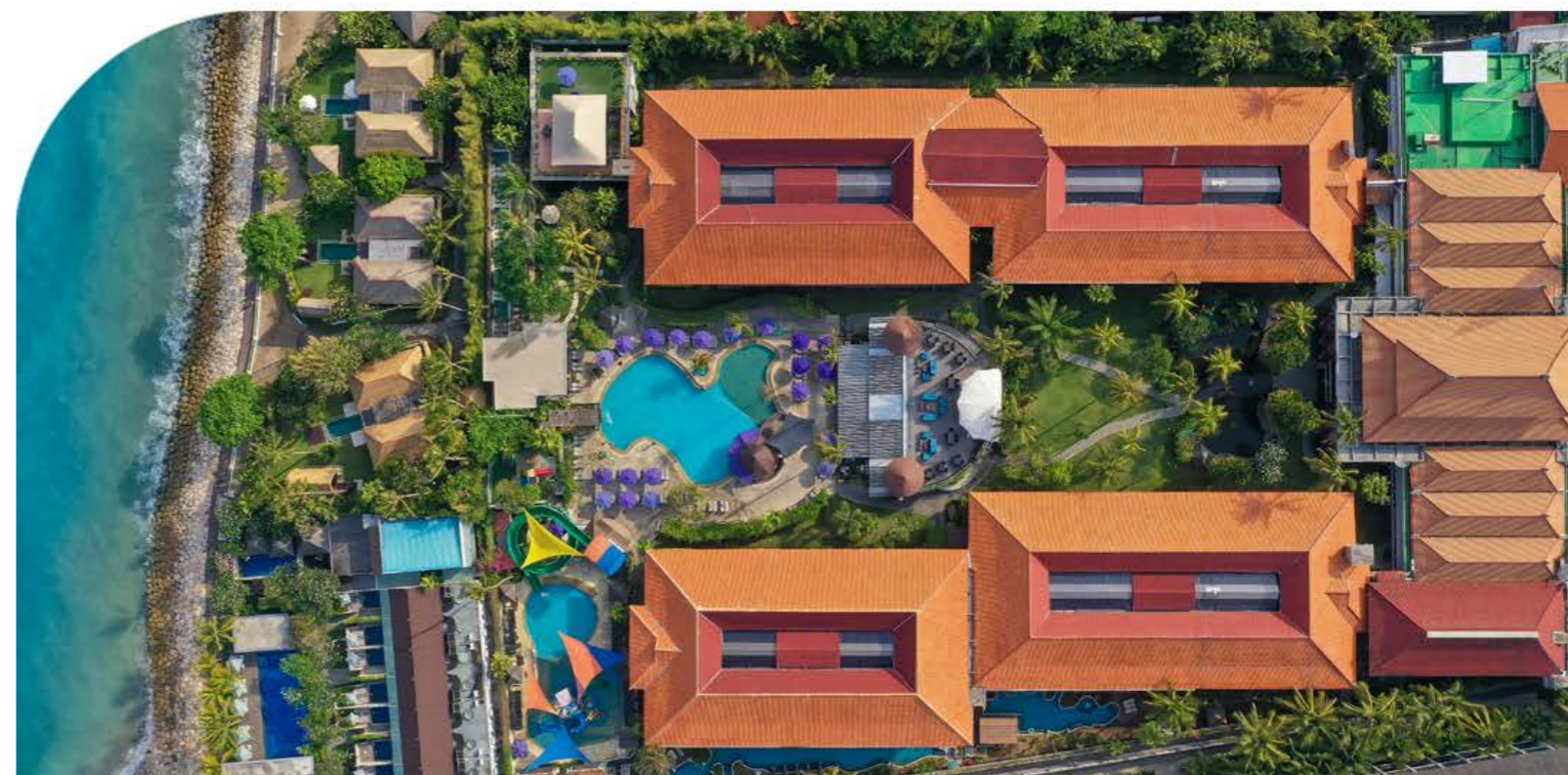
It features two pull-down beds and a sofa bed in the living area while parents can escape to the master bedroom.

The main motto at Bali Dynasty Resort is PRIME, People Responsible Individually for Managing Excellence, which means each team member is responsible for delivering excellent service to the guests...no matter what their age.

bdr.pphotels.com



BALI Dynasty RESORT
SOUTH KUTA - BALI



BACK TO BALI

Take advantage of this special offer and **save more \$\$\$** for stays up to **31st March 2023**. Stay a **minimum 6 nights** stay with **extra FREE benefits** thrown in to make this a deal too good to miss.

Enjoy **FREE 1X Themed Buffet Dinner**, **FREE spa samplers**, **FREE return airport transfer** and many more! You'll also enjoy **FREE access to the Kids Club & Teens Club**, **FREE resort activities**, **FREE access to Kids Water Fun Zone** and it's giant waterslide, and of course 2 times a day **Happy Hour** and much more!

Book now and use our promo code **"BALIHOLIDAYS"**!

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FUN IN THE FOREST

Canopy Walk - Taman Negara

From jungle expeditions to unique rainforest experiences, Malaysia has something to suit everyone's adventure style. Here we look at just some of the opportunities on offer.

KINABATANGAN

THE KINABATANGAN is a great wildlife and education destination offering escapism for all types of travellers.

Located in Sabah, the Lower-Kinabatangan River sustains one of the world's richest ecosystems and is Malaysia's largest RAMSAR site (a wetland site designated to be of international importance).

It is Malaysia's second-longest river, stretching 560km from its source in southwest Sabah to its outlet at the Sulu Sea on the east coast. A total of 26,000 hectares were designated as the Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary in 1997.

Other than being home to Borneo's indigenous orangutan and the proboscis monkey, the surrounding forest is one of only two known places in the world where 10 species of primates can be found.

A cruise along the river at dawn or dusk is the best opportunity to see the wildlife. You might spot the Bornean pygmy elephant feeding along the riverbanks, witness proboscis monkeys jumping from tree to tree

or even catching sight of a wild orangutan. Saltwater crocodiles can be seen lingering by the riverbanks or spot their eyes protruding from the water.

All eight species of hornbills found in Borneo make this area their home. The most spotted would be the rhinoceros hornbill and the oriental pied hornbill.

The diverse species of birds has seen the Lower-Kinabatangan listed as an Important Bird Area (IBA). Bird enthusiasts from near and far often book a carefully designed tour with travel agents specialising in this niche interest.

Although an overnight trip is do-able, a minimum of three days is recommended to stay at the Kinabatangan. A longer stay will yield a better chance to spot this wildlife.

Many major local tour companies run lodges in the Sukau, Bilit and Abai areas with packages that include accommodation (ranging from backpackers to luxurious river lodges), transportation, meals and guided tours.

Additional tours such as night walks

or night cruises to spot crocs, birds and nocturnal animals can also be arranged.

You may also want to experience a well-established homestay program; MESCOT KOPEL is available in surrounding villages and provides visitors with a good opportunity to truly experience the life of the Orang Sungai. Join in their cultural activities or even try your hand at the local way of farming.

While in the Kinabatangan area don't forget to visit the Gomantong Cave, the largest cave and most important source of edible bird's nest in Sabah, and the Agop Batu Tulug Cave.

» sabahtourism.com

TAMAN NEGARA

IF YOU love nature and rainforests, Taman Negara National Park is the ideal destination for you.

It is spread across the states of Kelantan, Terengganu and Pahang and is the oldest known primary rainforest in the world, believed to be more than 130 million years old. It is also the largest in Malaysia, covering some 4,343 square kilometres.

Here you'll find more than 15,000 plant species, 675 bird species and 250 freshwater species. It's home to some rare mammals including the Malayan

Lata Berkoh

Tiger, Asian elephant and Malayan Gaur, as well as birds such as hornbills, masked finfoots, red junglefowl and the rare Malayan peacock-pheasant.

Apart from the fauna and flora, visitors can enjoy trekking under the rainforest canopy, fishing and camping.

One of the main attractions for both local and international visitors is the Canopy Walk, which was initially built for research purposes. It was once the world's longest canopy walkway, being 530 metres long and 40 metres above ground level.

Not only can you walk between trees high up in the air, you can also zip through Sungai Tembeling's seven rapids on a boat, take photos at Lake Berkoh and cast your rod at Kuala Perka, Rincing, Rawa and Lata Said.

In terms of accommodation, there are many choices for visitors, ranging from resort to hostel. The most popular is the Mutiara Taman Negara Resort, which is the only resort in the National Park boundary.

» malaysia.travel

Malaysia
Truly Asia

Hornbill

WATCH THE BIRDY

Sarawak is Malaysia's largest state, occupying the north-western portion of the island of Borneo. Here, the rainforests are home to an impressive array of tropical wildlife.

With the highest number of national parks and nature reserves in the country (more than 600,000 ha of totally protected areas), Sarawak also offers superb birdwatching opportunities.

A great portion of Borneo's 650 bird species have been recorded in the state, including most of the island's endemics, such as the bizarre Bornean Bristlehead.

With an international airport and good roads, Kuching is a logical place to begin any birding adventure in Sarawak. There are numerous nature reserves within an hour of the city that offer a variety of bird watching opportunities.

One of the most popular is Kubah National Park, with its lowland rainforest and great diversity of birds. Several endemic species including Bornean Banded Kingfisher, Bornean Wren Babbler and Blue-banded Pitta can be found here.

Located near the coast is the Santubong National Park, with its rugged sandstone terrain and tall rainforest. This is the closest site to Kuching which offers a chance of seeing one of Sarawak's most emblematic birds, the Rhinoceros Hornbill.

Semenggoh Nature Reserve is also an excellent bird watching destination that hosts many lowland birds, including the rare Long-billed Partridge.

Further to the south, near the Indonesian border, Borneo Highlands comprises a range of forested hills culminating in Mount Penrissen.

Designated as an Important Bird Area in 2010, this region provides visitors the chance to see some of Borneo's endemic submontane birds, including Pygmy White-eye, Chestnut-crested Yuhina, Bornean Barbet, and Mountain Serpent-Eagle.

Other areas to consider are Northern Sarawak, where Gunung Mulu National Park has a remarkable array of fauna and flora. Mulu has a list of 262 bird species, which includes all eight species of Bornean hornbills and more than half of the island's endemics such as Fruithunter, Hose's Broadbill, and Whitehead's Spiderhunter.

Along its extensive coastline, Sarawak offers excellent wintering grounds for waders and other waterbirds. The globally vulnerable Chinese Egret often congregates in significant numbers in the Bako-Buntal Bay with possibly the largest concentration of the species in Borneo.

» birdwatching.sarawaktourism.com

Wakatobi returns to normal

After two years of closure due to pandemic travel restrictions, Wakatobi Resort has reopened. Here's what some of the first guests who sampled the luxury resort in Sulawesi had to say.

"LIKE IT never closed."

That's what first-arriving guests have said about their recent trips to Wakatobi Resort. After two years of closure due to pandemic travel restrictions, the resort hosted a select group of guests for a soft reopening recently.

"We spent a wonderful five weeks at Wakatobi beginning in May," said Robert Kreuzer.

"Even though it was a soft opening, it did not feel like it. Everything was well organised by the Bali team, including a smooth and easy transfer.

"All the service provided was exceptional, in particular the restaurant crew, housekeeping, our butler, the snorkel/dive team, the boat crew of WAKA VII, and for sure our guide Muji."

After two years away from Wakatobi, dive experience manager Demma Muji was thankful to be back and pleased to discover that many of the snorkel and dive sites were in a more pristine condition than before the pandemic.

"I missed the marine life, I missed

the ocean and I really missed the people," he said. "This place is like my family. I love being back and to once again serve our wonderful guests."

The soft reopening was followed by a full reopening in the first week of June. This "return to normal" was no accident, as the resort's management team had devoted considerable resources to retaining staff members

and to maintaining and improving the physical property during the closure.

Arriving guests were once more able to enjoy the convenience of the resort's private guest flights from Bali and disembarked at the upgraded and enlarged jetty.

Upon arrival, they were greeted by familiar faces as many of the resort's long-time team members were already back on the job.

Several guests said that they were delighted to discover that Wakatobi's highly praised culinary offerings were as delicious as ever.

"Chef Wayan and I spent time at the

resort at the end of last year creating new dishes and making some updates to the menu," said restaurant manager Tafik Ibram.

"It has been wonderful to see my co-workers work together again and a pleasure to serve our guests."

ACTIVITIES APLENTY

"The Wakatobi day boats have all been upgraded," reports guest relations representative Linda Cash.

"In addition to some general sprucing up, all the snorkel and dive boats now have freshwater showers - complete with the beautiful Wakatobi hair products onboard.

"The space and comfort on these boats for diving and snorkelling is unsurpassed and the minted towels are as beautiful and refreshing as ever after a dive."

Among the first arrivals were two couples who illustrate the diversity of guests that choose Wakatobi for their holiday.

In 2020, Umesh and Eishi De Silva planned a trip as a pre-wedding treat. The pandemic put those plans on hold, so they went ahead and got married, then moved their reservations to 2021 as a honeymoon trip.

Unfortunately, the trip was also put on hold as travel restrictions lingered, but a third reshuffling of travel plans finally brought the couple to Wakatobi in June.

While Eishi remembered the waiting and rescheduling as "emotionally exhausting," the trip itself was everything they hoped for.

Umesh is a diver but had not been active in the sport for several years, while Eishi had no prior dive experience but was eager to discover the underwater world.

"I had such a great time doing the Discover Scuba course," she said. "Judith (my instructor) was wonderful, I felt comfortable and supported through the whole process and the whole dive crew was attentive and helpful."

With Judith's help, Umesh soon refreshed his diving skills and was wowed by what he found.

"The reefs at Wakatobi are

mesmerising, with a rich array of flora and fauna to immerse yourself into. I could be under water all day marvelling at the different fishes as they go about their lives."

"Wakatobi is a truly relaxing holiday," the couple reports. "We were spoiled! Everything was arranged in a thoughtful manner, from the choice of pillows to the quality of food.

"And most impressively, the staff know you by name, understand your needs and are willing to go above and beyond to ensure the experience is exceptional. This was our best holiday ever and we are sure to return."

In contrast to the new diving newlyweds, Liz and Loren Yerks came to celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary.

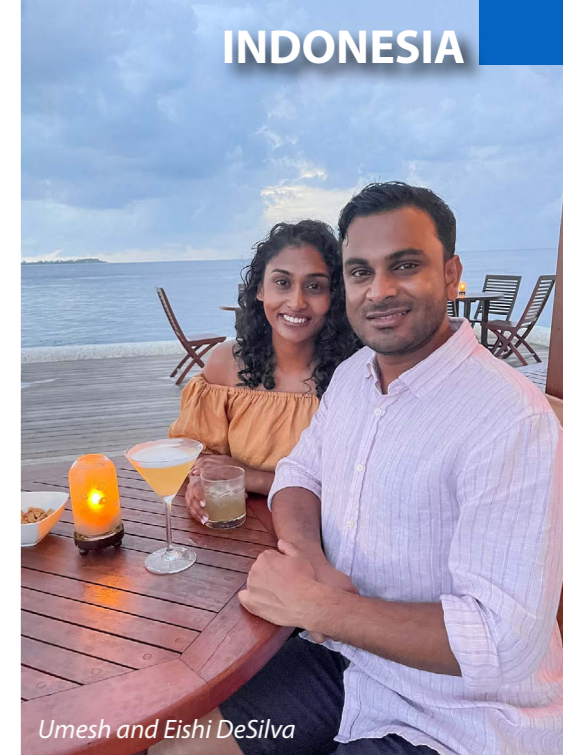
Loren has been diving for 52 years and Liz has been diving for 37 years. Each has logged more than 1,200 dives.

"We've dived all around the world" Loren said, "but we keep coming back to Wakatobi - it's our favourite destination.

"The diving is top notch and the staff is world-class, always smiling and happy at their jobs. This trip we got spoiled more than ever before.

"On day one, before I could grab my fins, there were two people helping me. There is nothing for you to do except be on holiday."

To learn more about a visit to Wakatobi, or to book a trip, email: linda@wakatobi.com



Umesh and Eishi DeSilva





Getting my eco on

Buffaloes, monks and being buried in sand. These were just some of the highlights when JON UNDERWOOD embarked on a new eco-tour in Phuket.



I'VE DONE some pretty strange things in my time as a travel writer.

Dangled over the Victoria Falls, had dinner with John Travolta, flew to Tokyo for a day.

But agreeing to be being buried up to the neck in sand was a definite first.

The day had started so well, with a blessing from a couple of Buddhist monks during a visit to a local temple, part of the Mai Khao Community Tour in Phuket, an eco-experience four years in the making and now available to visitors.

For many in our group the blessing was clearly a solemn and deeply moving experience. For me, I couldn't help but notice the big clock on the wall behind the monks, which was showing the wrong time. Clearly those seeking spiritual one-ness don't need to know what time it is...

We left the temple and climbed into some multi-coloured tuk-tuks for the next leg of our journey, a visit to what's described as the last rice field in Phuket.

Apparently, the area was once known for its rice fields and the water buffaloes that lived here, with both playing an important part in the local economy. Profits from the tour aim to preserve the rare breed of buffaloes that still exist and call this area home.

"Everyone knows that Phuket has grown up to be a big city popular with lots of tourists," said Arunsri Udomvej, owner of the Silver Hawk Group, the company behind the eco-tour.

"But the local community love this area and want to keep the local life and heritage alive. The buffaloes are part of that and we want to look after our natural habitat."

Admirable sentiments and totally in line with Thailand's ambition to make its tourism industry in general more eco-friendly, sustainable and "touchy-feely".

While our guides gave us an interesting and informative talk on the use of local flora in cooking, medicines and general wellbeing, the local fauna could be seen chewing on grass or wallowing in the mud.

Which brings me nicely to the



forementioned sand experience. The end of the tour takes place on Mai Khao Beach, where you can fish for mole crabs in genuine Thai style and plant local seaside vegetables.

You can also indulge in what's called "Earth Therapy", where you are buried in a trench on the beach and left to enjoy the therapeutic benefits of just listening to nature. The sand spa treatment is also designed to stimulate better circulation around the body.

Several thoughts raged through my mind as I lay there in what felt like a cocoon of wet porridge. What about the ants, what if I needed to go pee-pee, what if the tide came in...!?!

As I closed my eyes and tried to relax, I could definitely feel the blood pumping through my legs, but it was somewhat hard to totally drift off with planes screaming overhead from nearby Phuket Airport every few minutes.

The eco-tour is in its infancy and no doubt will develop and change as feedback comes in. The organisers are to be applauded for trying to connect visitors with a real side of Phuket, beyond the luxury hotels and bustling nightlife.

It must be hoped that more enthusiastic entrepreneurs like Arunsri are prepared to embrace modern tourism trends and give the visitors what they want: sustainable, ethical and genuine cultural experiences.

➤ silverhawkgroup@gmail.com

➤ tourismthailand.org



DOING IT FOR THE ANIMALS

IF THERE'S anyone left out there who still thinks that riding elephants is "cool" then a visit to the **Phuket Elephant Sanctuary** will hopefully convince you otherwise.

Here you'll find animals that were chained, abused and tortured – just so tourists could ride on their backs. The abuse suffered to elephants forced to work in the logging industry was equally horrific.

Their stories are heart breaking but I'll spare you the gory details. Suffice to say that, fortunately, these sick, injured and aging animals can now look forward to a peaceful and happy existence, grazing and roaming over 12 hectares of lush greenery.

The sanctuary opened in 2016 and is now home to 10 rescued Indian elephants but there are plans to expand this number as more funds become available. It can cost up to \$80,000 to free an elephant so its an expensive business.

Visitors can still interact with the elephants, helping feed and care for them, or observe them from a 600-metre-long canopy walkway – the longest in Thailand. All money raised goes to supporting a sustainable, ethical and compassionate approach to elephant tourism.

On a somewhat smaller but equally important scale, the **Soi Dog Foundation** takes injured, abandoned and malnourished dogs and cats off the streets of Phuket and tries to rehome them. They are also fighting to end the dog meat trade in Asia, which thankfully has been almost completely wiped out in Thailand.

It was set up in 2004 by John and Gill Dalley, a retired English couple who were shocked by the number of sick animals roaming the streets.

Their success has been phenomenal – more than 700,000 dogs and cats have been neutered since the Foundation's inception, including more than 80 per cent of the stray dog population on Phuket.

The organisation receives no government funding, relying solely on donations and the efforts of volunteers to feed and treat the more than 1,400 animals that are now housed at the facility.

Being the owner of a much-loved German Shepherd, I found our tour around the impressive set up deeply emotional for many reasons.

While it was great to see the animals well fed, cared for and out of danger, it was upsetting to see so many in cages, hoping that someone would take them home.

Hopefully it won't be long before each and every one of them find a family to love them and give them a better life.

➤ phuketelephantsanctuary.org

➤ soidog.org

*Pink Beach, Komodo Island,
Indonesia*

