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Travel *talk*

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FEBRUARY 2022

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tips for
safer travel

COMPETITION

Win a luxe day
spa for two

THAILAND

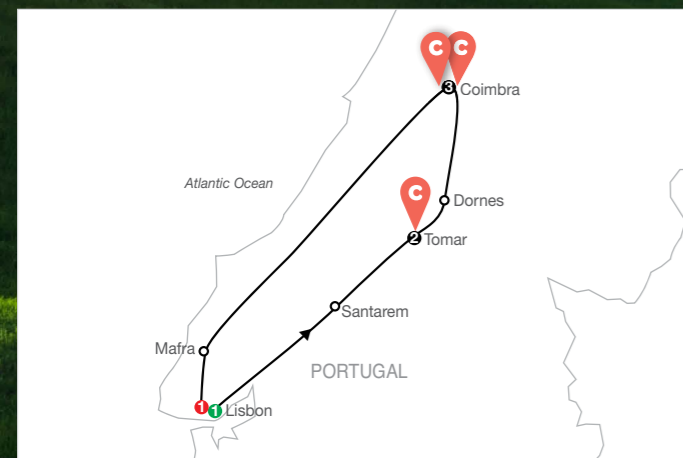
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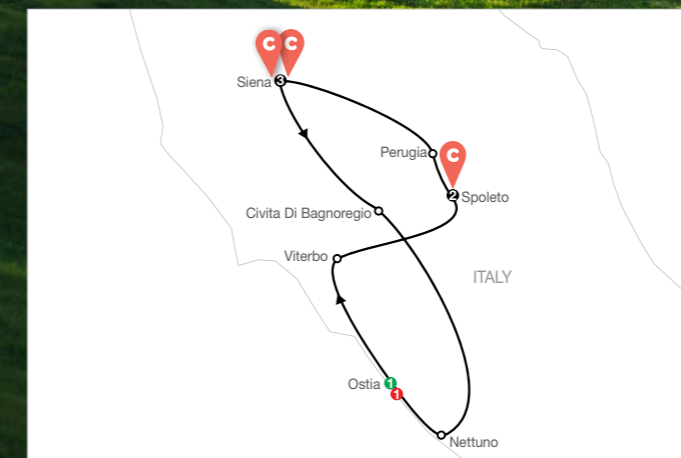
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COVER IMAGE:
Picture courtesy iStock

Welcome to the land of *confusion*

WE CAN all be forgiven for feeling a little befuddled right now.

While the majority of Australians have done the right thing and had a varying number of needles jabbed into their arms, there still seems to be no clear end in sight to the C-word saga that feels like its run longer than *The Mousetrap*.

To use a meteorological metaphor, the future seems cloudy with no sign of a clearing breeze.

Indeed, even the experts seem to disagree as to what the immediate future holds. On LinkedIn recently, the highly respected and erudite Chad Carey from Chimu Adventures declared the pandemic to be "over".

Writing about the company's first trip to Antarctica from Queensland, he enthused about the positivity shown towards the return of international travel by the 200-odd people onboard the flight.

"Once we were in the air people everywhere were discussing where they wanted to go next, Antarctica on a cruise, the Galapagos or just flop and drop in Fiji.

"RIP Covid. May you never need to bore us by having to talk about you again."

Amen to that, brother. Yet the very next day the equally well credentialed travel magazine editor Anthony Dennis posted a piece on the same social media network under the headline: 'Australia's reputation as a COVID-safe destination is in tatters'.

He bemoaned our "rushed and ill-advised UK-style "freedom day" approach to the virus as we opened up" and pointed to a U.S. directive that has seen Australia included on a list of high-risk COVID countries.

"Now we're apparently no better at managing the virus than Albania, Botswana, Haiti, Somalia and the Ukraine, to name a few," he wrote.

So where exactly is the Australian travel industry as we gently blow the froth off 2022?

Green shoots are definitely appearing. Travel companies (not all) are spending more on promotions and marketing, tours at home and abroad appear to be increasing in number and we've seen restrictions eased for international arrivals.

Yet the cruise industry remains becalmed by a government that seems reluctant to make a decision on when ships will again be allowed to sail to and from these shores.

Dean Long, CEO of Australian Federation of Travel Agents, says confidence levels among both consumer and corporate sectors remains low about booking travel.

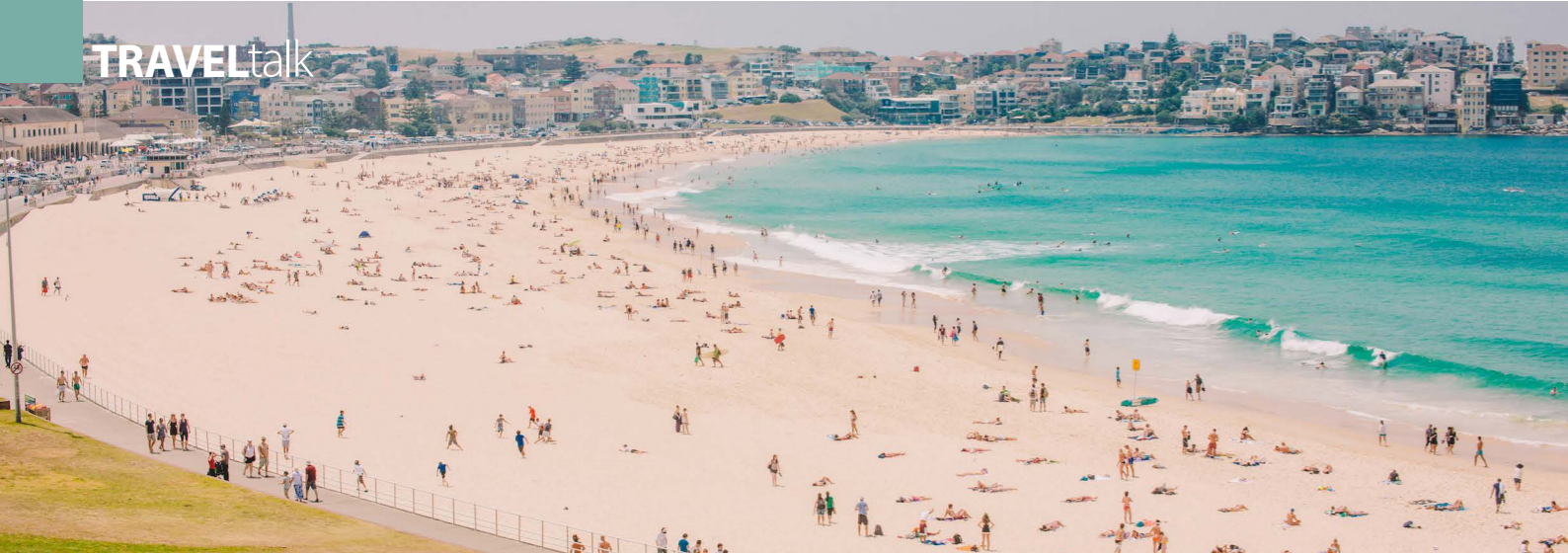
He describes it as "an exhaustingly long runway to recovery for Australia's travel retailers", claiming it will be mid-2022 before international travel returns to anything like normality and beyond that for travel agents to start earning proper wages again. AFTA reckons a third of its members have simply jacked it in and are now working elsewhere.

Little wonder then that Queensland travel agent Mike Dwyer has warned of a shortage of his colleagues once travel does kick back in.

"As the demand ramps up, we are going to hit a supply crunch, because there are not enough agents to help people make their plans," he commented.

It has to be hoped that AFTA and agent lobbying will force the government to give serious thought to further supporting an already decimated industry. With the complexities of travel in 2022 and beyond, consumers are going to need skilled travel agents more than ever and hopefully many will return back into the fold.

In the meantime let's hope the runway to recovery isn't as long as Mr Long believes. We're all ready for take-off...we just need someone to light the blue touch paper.



Our beaches rate great

AUSTRALIA HAS taken out two top 10 spots in a new survey of the most Instagrammed beaches around the world.

Bondi Beach in Sydney was the highest ranked, coming in at number four, while Airlie Beach in the Whitsunday region of Queensland ranked eighth.

The study by *LuxuryHotel.com* analysed Instagram hashtag data and the length of the world's most popular beaches to find the 10 with the highest 'posts per metre'.

Paradise Beach in Phuket in Thailand topped the list with 894,960 hashtags on Instagram. It is home to events such as the Full Moon Festival, where locals, tourists and famous DJs gather on the full moon of each month to party and dance.

Indonesia's Kelingking Beach and Miami's South Beach took second and third respectively.

Boasting more than 1.8 million tagged photos to its name, Bondi is one of the most popular beaches in the world, with more than 2.7 million

people visiting every year pre-COVID.

"Currently, many are on the lookout for their perfect summer holiday and plenty of those people will be looking forward to posting the perfect beach shot on social media," said a spokesperson for *LuxuryHotel.com*.

"This list highlights the best places in the world to do just that and it's fascinating to see which stretches of sand are the most Insta-worthy."

» www.luxuryhotel.com

Swede smell of success

THEY'VE given us ABBA, the Volvo, meatballs and affordable yet often difficult to assemble furniture.

Now Sweden has something else to offer, claiming top spot in a 'Quality of Life Index' compiled by Global Citizen Solutions, a data-driven immigration investment consultancy firm.

Conducted using a robust quantitative scoring system across several criteria and categories, the index accounts for the overall standard of living that a nation can offer, focusing on the aspects that make a country 'desirable' for expats, international retirees and digital nomads.

Criteria included sustainable development goals, cost of living, level of freedom, level of happiness, environmental performance and migrant acceptance.

Sweden came out on top because of its attractive landscapes, a corporate culture that has fully embraced a good work-life balance and being a country that leads in global development.

Fellow Scandinavian countries Finland and Denmark took out second and third place respectively with New Zealand ranking seventh. Australia didn't make the top 10.

"In Sweden, as with other Scandinavian countries, there is a great weight given to social equality and an emphasis on the importance placed on life outside the office and on a healthy work-life balance," said Patricia Casaburi, Managing Director at Global Citizen Solutions.

» www.globalcitizensolutions.com



The Quality of Life top 10:

- 1 SWEDEN
- 2 FINLAND
- 3 DENMARK
- 4 CANADA
- 5 GERMANY
- 6 NETHERLANDS
- 7 NEW ZEALAND
- 8 UK
- 9 SPAIN
- 10 AUSTRIA

STAR CHEFS SERVE UP A TASTY CAMPAIGN

TWO OF Australia's favourite culinary celebrities have teamed up to help promote travel to Japan.

Gary Mehigan and Manu Feildel star in Japan National Tourism Organization's (JNTO) latest campaign videos, launched on VOD, social and B2B platforms, sharing their favourite experiences while travelling in the country.

The initiative, which runs until February 28, is designed to encourage Australians to remember how travel made them feel and to start dreaming and planning their next trip to Japan when borders re-open.

"On my last trip I was able to experience the art of sumo and was lucky enough to have a training session with professionals," said Feildel.

"Skiing in Japan is some of the world's best, but of course the culinary experiences are a big draw card for me, and I was very fortunate to learn how to make soba noodles in Tokyo.

"I can't wait to return to Japan and

continue my journey to discover the endless types of ramen. That's my new obsession!"

The celebrity pair, who have travelled to Japan many times, are passionate about the cultural, culinary, nature, sporting and adventure experiences that Japan offers year-round.

"Manu and Gary were the perfect fit for this project, having experienced Japan on many occasions, being so passionate about the destination and delivering this with their engaging and fun personalities," said Yoko Tanaka, Executive Director of JNTO Sydney office.

Approximately 621,800 Australians visited Japan in 2019, which was a 12.5 per cent increase on the previous year.

"The campaign showcases us participating in a traditional tea ceremony, the beauty in the precision of Japanese gardens, Japanese



Left to right: Manu Feildel, video director Firass Dirani, Yoko Tanaka and Toni Fan from JNTO, Gary Mehigan

hospitality, sporting experiences and learning new cultural skills – it is a country offering so much diversity and I can't wait to get back there as soon as we are able to," said Mehigan.

» [VisitJapanAU YouTube Channel](#)



PICK UP A GIFT CARD

TRAVEL AGENTS have the chance to earn a \$150 Visa Gift Card through a new trade initiative with Oceania Cruises.

The cards are being offered as an upfront bonus commission for any new-to-brand guest booking made before February 28.

Oceania offers small, luxurious ships which can access boutique ports in more than 450 destinations worldwide and port intensive itineraries.

» www.oceaniacruises.com

IT'S OFFICIAL. LIFE DOWN UNDER IS STRESS-FREE

NEW RESEARCH has revealed the least stressed countries in the world, with Australia ranking in the top three.

Finland and Sweden took out the top two spots respectively in the survey carried out by UK-based insurance firm William Russell.

The research suggested that exposure to natural green spaces positively impacts both emotional mood and physical health.

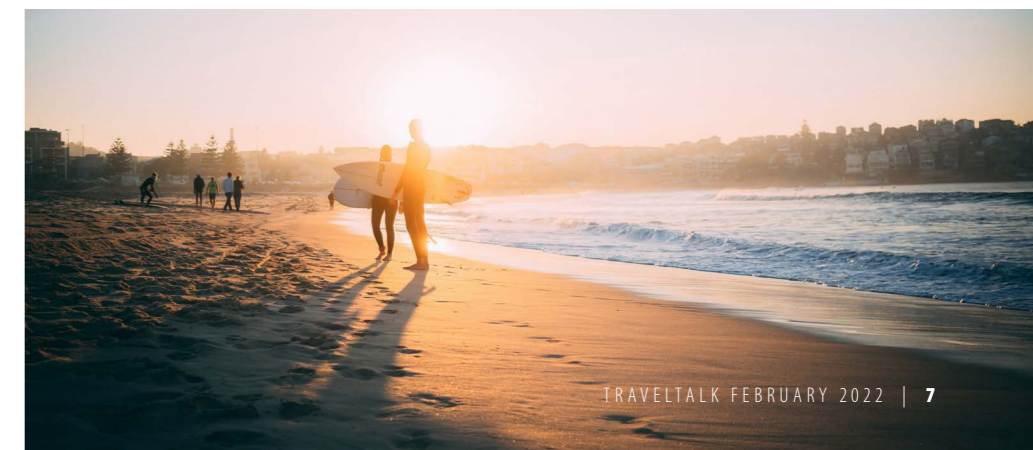
"Australia has the highest rating for quality of green spaces and parks out of all OECD countries. Australia also has one of the lowest noise and light

pollution levels of all OECD countries, which has been said to impact sleep disturbance and anxiety," it reported.

Australia also had three entrants in a top 10 list of the least stressed cities, with Brisbane ranking highest behind the winner, Helsinki. The most stressed countries were South Korea, Chile and America, while the most stressed cities were Cairo, Delhi and Karachi.

The study took into account factors such as city cleanliness, financial stress, LGBTQ+ safety and suicide rates.

» www.william-russell.com





FIVE TOP TIPS TO SAFE TRAVEL

The travel risk experts at World Travel Protection (WTP) have outlined five things you can do to minimise your risk of contracting Omicron when travelling.

1. BE FULLY VACCINATED

Emerging data suggests a third dose of an approved vaccine is required to provide maximal protection from COVID and although it provides less protection against the Omicron strain than the previous variants, it does a very good job preventing severe outcomes including the need for hospital and death.

Having only received two doses, especially if more than six months has passed from the second dose, will provide little protection against the Omicron variant, which is now the dominant strain of COVID in much of the world.

2. KNOW YOUR COVID TESTS

Two major types of tests are used to diagnose infection with COVID: PCR tests and Rapid Antigen Tests. PCR tests are the most accurate type of COVID test, but require a specialised lab to process the test and often are not available in a timely fashion.

Antigen tests can be done very rapidly, even at home by someone with no special training, but they are less accurate than a PCR test and may miss early cases of infection.

Generally speaking though, if an antigen test is positive you're highly likely to have COVID, whether you have symptoms or not.

3. BE UP TO DATE ON TRAVEL RESTRICTIONS

Guidelines and requirements for travel are changing constantly as the prevalence of the Omicron variant rises throughout the world.

Travellers must keep themselves informed and up to date. This includes understanding the requirements for vaccination and having appropriate documentation ready at hand, understanding testing and isolation requirements for all legs in their itinerary including the type of test and how recently it must be done, and also frequently checking to ensure requirements haven't changed prior to returning.

4. BE COVID SMART IN SOCIAL SITUATIONS

Despite the increases in transmissibility with the Omicron variant and the suggestion of waning immunity with only two vaccine doses, some truths still hold true.

COVID tends to be an infection that is mostly spread indoors, in crowded situations and is more transmissible among the unvaccinated and unmasked.

Travellers should consider the risk associated with social gatherings; how many people will be there? Is there a vaccine requirement for attendance and is a masking policy in place (and enforced)? Are crowd control measures in place and will there be adequate ventilation?

Remember that keeping your social bubble small is the best way to prevent COVID exposures which could seriously alter your travel plans, or worse make you or a loved one quite ill.

Install a local government COVID Safe smart phone app to check-in via QR code at locations, such as shops and restaurants, to make contact-tracing easier if you are unknowingly exposed to a COVID positive person.

5. CONTINUE TO DO THE LITTLE THINGS RIGHT

It is impossible to reduce the risk of COVID transmission to zero while travelling. Despite this, a layered approach of proven principles can be used to minimise risk.

Before deciding to travel, take stock of your own personal situation. How high is the proportion of COVID where you will be going and does this fit your personal risk profile?

When travelling, wear a high quality mask that can be worn comfortably for long periods of time, like in a plane. Socially distance and limit social contacts. Continue to practice appropriate hand hygiene, cleaning your hands regularly with alcohol-based hand sanitiser.

» www.worldtravelprotection.com



Cashed-up and ready to fly

AUSSIE TRAVELLERS are preparing for the longest and most extravagant holidays of their lives.

That's the encouraging news from Luxury Escapes' annual report, *Travel Trends*, which surveyed more than 1,200 people.

The report reveals that more than 84 per cent of Australians are optimistic about travel in 2022, with 76 per cent confident that when it opens up it will stay that way.

In a further sign of growing confidence, nine in 10 respondents

have booked, or plan to book, international travel this year.

"There's no doubt travel is absolutely back," said Adam Schwab, Co-Founder and CEO Luxury Escapes.

"The U.S. is open, South Pacific is opening, Asia is opening and Australians can't wait to experience travel again."

The report also reveals that 36 per cent of respondents plan to spend more on travel in 2022 than they did pre-pandemic. Some 62 per cent have still been saving for travel since

COVID began, while 55 per cent plan to treat themselves more on their first international trip than they usually would.

As for destinations, it's no surprise that Fiji tops the list of international locations that Aussies want to visit, followed by New Zealand, the UK, USA and Indonesia.

An overwhelming 90 per cent of Australians say travel positively impacts their mental health, at a time when influences on our state of mind have never been more significant.

Following two years of incredibly isolating times for much of the country, 72 per cent of respondents believe travel will be more important for general wellbeing than ever before.

"There haven't been many good things that came from the pandemic, but if there's one small silver lining, we now all appreciate travel in a completely different light. Not being able to see the world for two years has made us all appreciate just how important travel is."

"We can't wait to travel again to see old friends and make a real difference to people's lives."

» www.luxuryescapes.com

COMPETITION

WIN A LUXE DAY OUT FOR TWO!

The Bathhouse in Douglas Park, New South Wales, is a new destination retreat with a full range of treatments and magnesium pools for long, soothing soaks.

Inspired by Palm Springs, The Bathhouse takes its design cues from a retro, California retreat, complete with a pastel colour palette.

Check it out on Instagram [HERE](#) @the_bathhouse_

One lucky reader can win a bathing day pass and massages for two people to enjoy this luxe new escape.

» [CLICK HERE TO ENTER](#)



Trans Bhutan Trail

NEW MAIL ON AN ANCIENT TRAIL

FOLLOWING TWO years of extensive restoration, the historic and sacred Trans Bhutan Trail is due to reopen for the first time in 60 years.

The trail will be officially inaugurated next month by His Majesty the King of Bhutan, whose vision it was to restore the ancient route for tourism, adventure and connection.

From April, international tourists will be able to walk the trail for the first time, simultaneously providing much-needed economic benefits to rural communities along the way.

G Adventures has been selected by the Bhutan Canada Foundation, the non-profit organisation that led the restoration of the trail, as the first group adventure operator when the trail launches to the public.

The company is offering two active trekking itineraries: the 11-day 'Camp the Trans Bhutan Trail', which features camping and home stays, and a 12-day 'Highlights of the Trans Bhutan Trail' tour with accommodation in home stays, locally-owned guest houses and hotels.

The origins of the trail go back thousands of years to when it was part of the ancient Silk Road. Official records can be traced to the 16th century when it was the only route between the east and west of the country, connecting fortresses – or Dzongs – deep in the remote eastern Himalayas.

The tours focus on trekking specially selected parts of the 403km trail and connecting with local people to learn about Bhutanese life and culture, thus combining active travel and cultural immersion with the benefits of community tourism.

The 11-day trip from Paro return is priced from \$4,199 per person for departures from May 15. The 12-day itinerary also travelling from Paro return is priced from \$5,399 per person for departures from May 1.

» www.gadventures.com



Seven Pillars at Wadi Rum, Jordan. Photo courtesy Graham Meale

Bouncing back hard in 2022

BUNNIK TOURS have relaunched their international touring program with a 'reconnect' campaign designed to inspire Aussies to rediscover the joy of travel.

Dennis Bunnik, the company's Joint CEO, joined their first tour of the year to Sri Lanka last month. The company has close ties with Sri Lanka having opened an office there in July 2017.

"Our team in Sri Lanka can't wait to welcome the first Bunnik tour in more than 680 days and we have some extra special experiences planned as part of our first tour back," Dennis revealed before his departure.

February will see the relaunch of Bunnik's Middle East program, with both the 'Highlight of Egypt' and 'Highlights of Egypt & Jordan' small group tours running.

One of the company's senior leaders will be on the ground and will meet up with the first tours back in Egypt and Jordan.

Japan will return in March with eight departures scheduled for the magic of cherry blossom. The first of several departures will leave Australia on March 20.

April will mark the official resumption of their European touring program with the first departures, 'Spain, Portugal & Morocco', on April 23 and 'Jewels of Dalmatia' on April 24.

"One thing that has not changed is our passion for travel and connection. We can't wait to reconnect people, culture, food and sights of the incredible places we visit."

» www.bunniktours.com.au

YOUR CHANCE TO MAKE AN IMPACT



Carbon neutral whale watching, Iceland. Photo courtesy North Sailing

INTREPID TRAVEL have introduced 22 new 'impact initiatives' within its tours for 2022, continuing its focus on building a more equitable and sustainable future for travel.

The new experiences span 16 countries and include activities such as meals at local establishments supporting women, migrants and seniors, to immersive tours preserving Indigenous and ethnic minority legacies.

"The tourism industry is at a pivotal moment with the gradual resumption of travel," said Erica Kritikides, Senior Product Manager at Intrepid Travel.

"Businesses such as ours have an exciting opportunity, not to mention a responsibility, to find more ways to contribute in a positive way to the places and people we visit."

New itineraries include:

Authentic experience at a teahouse in Morocco supporting local women

Guests on the company's 13-day 'Morocco Uncovered', 10-day 'South Morocco Discovery', 15-day 'Premium Morocco In-Depth' and 12-day 'Premium Morocco Explorer' tours will visit Tawesna, a local teahouse on the river in Ait Ben Hadou.

This community-run establishment provides women with an income to support themselves and their children.

The women use natural ingredients sourced from local cooperatives to prepare tea and pastries, taking great pride in sharing their stories and giving

visitors an authentic experience.

Carbon neutral whale watching tour in Iceland

On Intrepid's 'Premium Iceland' tour, travellers will board an eco-friendly and carbon neutral electric boat to spot minke and humpbacks with an expert whale watching guide.

The silent boat keeps a respectful distance from the whales, allowing visitors to observe them in their natural environment without disturbing or distressing them.

Paper crafts class supporting a local deaf and mute community in Vietnam

Adults and children can visit a local non-government organisation that supports Hue's deaf and mute community by providing training, employment, support and a place to connect with others.

On the 'Vietnam Family Holiday' tour, travellers will meet members of the community and join them for a traditional paper flower making class – a fun and interesting way to get to connect with the hosts without exchanging any words.

Treats at a generation-bridging café in Vienna

The 15-day 'Best of Central Europe' trip visits Austria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia.

Guests can indulge in kaffe and kuchen (coffee and cake) at Vollpension – also known as "Granny's

public living room" – a generation-bridging café in Vienna.

The business aims to create meeting and learning areas for new types of cooperation and togetherness among old and young, providing support to seniors on their way out of financial poverty and loneliness.

Heritage tour in South Dakota empowering the Lakota community to preserve their legacy

The group will visit the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation to tour the Heritage Center with an expert local Lakota guide on the newly-launched 'South Dakota Lodge Stay' itinerary.

The Heritage Center is one of the first cultural centres and museums located on a reservation and empowers Lakota artists to preserve their heritage, improve their economic situation and share their traditional arts and crafts with the world.

Travellers will also enjoy lunch at a Lakota-owned restaurant that specialises in traditional foods.

"Intrepid's sustainable, experience-rich style of travel allows people of all nationalities and backgrounds to connect through immersive, hands-on experiences.

"Being more intentional with the experiences we offer our travellers allows us to collectively make a greater positive impact in our shared world."

» www.intrepidtravel.com/about/responsible-travel



Let's all dive in a yellow submarine

THE BEATLES may have sung about it but now one enterprising company has brought the yellow submarine to life.

Australia's first fully submersible hybrid tourist submarine has just launched on the Sunshine Coast in Queensland.

Down Under Submarines has opened for tours in Mooloolaba and is the only operating submarine of its kind in the world, able to dive up to 30 metres below the ocean's surface.

What makes the SUBCAT-30 so unique is it is a hybrid vessel, meaning it can both dive underwater and travel on top of the water's surface like a catamaran.

"As well as the marine life you can spot out the window, travelling in the nearly 20m long submarine is an experience in itself," said Andrey Alexeenko, Down Under Submarine Director.

"It's a one-of-a-kind submarine which has a special hull above the water so passengers can get that experience of both submersion and refloating.

"That's the difference and it really gives you that adrenalin rush when you see you're starting to submerge."

The SUBCAT-30 – painted a very apt shade of yellow – is also sustainable as it is powered by six battery operated electric thrusters that produce zero emissions while submerged.

"An experience of this kind has never been seen before in Australia," said Matt Stoeckel, CEO Visit Sunshine Coast.

"As our region opens up to the rest of Australia – and indeed the world – it is more important than ever that we have fresh new product that helps set us apart as a destination and Down Under Submarines is a really unique selling point for our region."

The 'Submarine Dive Experience' has a dive time of around 30 minutes plus 20 minutes surface travel, while the 'Yellow Submarine Cruise' goes for an hour. The dive costs \$253 for adults and the cruise \$55 for adults.

» www.downundersubmarines.com

AUSTRALIA'S MOST BEAUTIFUL TOWN NAMED

IT'S A survey that is likely to divide a nation with new research claiming to have identified Australia's most beautiful town.

Research experts at online shopping site *WeThrift* have compiled a detailed list of our top towns.

Rankings were based on six different factors, including Instagram hashtags, walking trails, UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, coastal location, sights and landmarks, and Pinterest pins. Each town was then given a 'beauty' score out of 60.

Topping the list was Noosa on Queensland's Sunshine Coast with a score of 53. The location ranked particularly well on walking trails, with an impressive 73 available, and also had the second highest score in Instagram hashtags with more than 1.5 million.

"It is a great privilege to achieve the top spot in this survey, not only for our organisation but also for the entire Noosa community," said Melanie Anderson, CEO of Tourism Noosa.

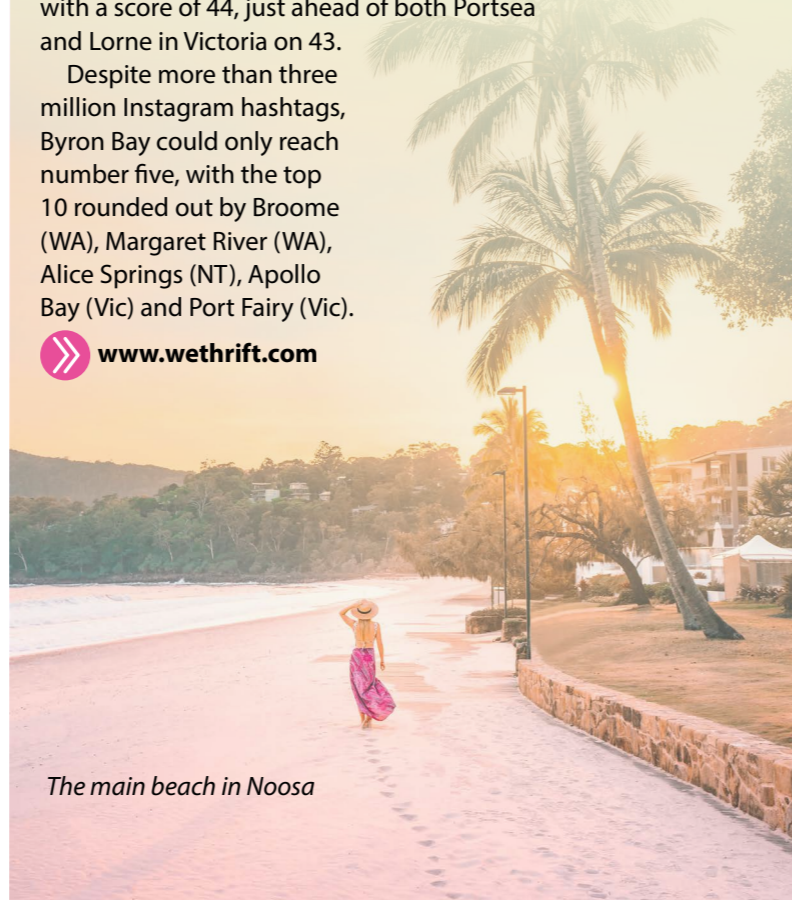
"This achievement is particularly rewarding after our local business owners and residents have faced numerous challenges in the presence of COVID-19.

"Noosa has an incredibly strong tourism industry that continues to showcase our beautiful and diverse region and this new data confirms that."

Second place went to Esperance in Western Australia with a score of 44, just ahead of both Portsea and Lorne in Victoria on 43.

Despite more than three million Instagram hashtags, Byron Bay could only reach number five, with the top 10 rounded out by Broome (WA), Margaret River (WA), Alice Springs (NT), Apollo Bay (Vic) and Port Fairy (Vic).

» www.wethrift.com



The main beach in Noosa

Festival looks to the skies

THE THEME for one of Australia's most important cultural festivals has been revealed.

Parrtjima – A Festival in Light 2022 will take place in Alice Springs from April 8 to 17.

The theme for the free festival will be 'Sky Country', focusing on our place in the universe and the relationship First Nations people have with the environment.

First Nations people have long looked to the skies to understand their place on Country and, in the heart of Australia, the behaviour of the seasons, the sky, the wind and the nature of flight all provide the knowledge needed for desert survival.

The Red Centre's desert night skies are famous for their blazing stars and the constellations have guided generations of Arrernte across their homeland, while the birds warn of predators and the winds determine what needs harvesting.

"Central Australia is unlike anywhere else in the country and Parrtjima is unlike any other event," said Tim Watsford, CEO NT Major Events Company.

"Every year, as the stars above illuminate the night sky, Parrtjima illuminates the desert landscape of Mparntwe. 'Sky Country' will make us all stop, look up and consider our place in the universe."

Parrtjima is the only Aboriginal light festival of its kind in the world, showcasing the oldest continuous cultures on Earth through the newest technology against the backdrop of the MacDonnell Ranges.

The Parrtjima program will tell the story of sky, air and wind through light shows, installations, art, music, talks, films, workshops and performance.

» www.parrtjima.com.au



HOP ON TO THIS KANGAROO TOUR

AN INTIMATE new tour offering guests the chance to savour the tastes and sights of Kangaroo Island has just been launched.

The small group experience is for a maximum of eight guests travelling in luxury touring vehicles. Each group is accompanied by a local KI tour guide who is passionate about the island and who has their own personal story to tell.

The itinerary begins from Adelaide on a scenic coach transfer to Cape Jervis, travelling through the picturesque Fleurieu Peninsula with its vineyards, coastal views and rolling hills. Then enjoy a 45-minute SeaLink ferry cruise to Australia's third largest island – Kangaroo Island.

Once on the island you'll experience a variety of highlights, including South Australia's first lighthouse, Cape Willoughby Lighthouse, and a trip to Seal Bay Conservation Park.

Throughout Flinders Chase National Park, take advantage of the opportunity to search for kangaroos, wallabies and a variety of birdlife. Koalas can even be observed peacefully perched in their eucalypt habitats.

Among the epicurean highlights is The Oyster Farm Shop, Kangaroo Island Spirits, South Australia's first boutique gin distiller, and lunch and wine tasting at the new False Cape Wines.

The two-day/one-night 'Kangaroo Island Sights & Gourmet Delights Tour' is priced from \$1,211 per person



and departs Adelaide every Monday to Saturday.

Price includes return SeaLink coach transfers from Adelaide to Cape Jervis, return SeaLink ferry transfers from Cape Jervis to Kangaroo Island, personalised 4x4 touring with expert commentary from your local driver/guide, all entrance fees and special permits, lunch both days and one night's accommodation and breakfast at the Aurora Ozone Hotel or Mercure KI Lodge.

» www.kangarooislandodysseys.com.au



EMERALD UNVEILS TWO SPARKLING GEMS

AN AUDIENCE of agents, media and industry VIPs were on hand recently as Emerald Cruises launched their brand in Australia.

A special event was held to reveal images and a new video of two superyachts that the company is bringing to the luxury market.

Emerald Azzurra completed her sea trials in Vietnam recently and the keel for *Emerald Sakara* was laid in early November.

Azzurra will welcome her first guests this year, cruising the Mediterranean, Adriatic and Red Seas. *Sakara* joins the fleet in 2023, adding the Black Sea and Indian Ocean itineraries to the collection.

"Emerald Cruises represents the ultimate in small ship cruising and the two innovative superyacht products will provide guests with intimate and unique experiences," said Anthony Laver, Group General, Manager Sales & Marketing, Australasia.

"Bottom line is, this is a new class and there's nothing this sophisticated in the market."

Catering for just 100 guests, the superyachts have a pool deck, sky bar, observation deck, spa with an infrared sauna, gym and a marina platform with kayaks, paddleboards, Sea Bobs and a water trampoline.

"This new video and images reveal just some of the superb features of this unique superyacht and what the experience will be like for the 100 guests on board. There is truly nothing like it," said Angus Crichton, Director of Sales, Marketing and Product for Emerald Cruises.

While no announcement has been made on a potential sailing Down Under, company executives wouldn't rule it out.

"The Australian market is an incredibly lucrative one," said Mr Laver. "I would be surprised if in the future we wouldn't consider looking at what opportunities there are here. There are so many beautiful parts of Australia which would fit perfectly for a small superyacht."

Responding to a question from *Traveltalk* about when cruising globally might make a full recovery, Mr Laver said it was dependant on several factors aligning.

"If we have a situation where most countries are vaccinated and most of the borders are open then cruising has a very strong propensity to rebound strongly in the second half of next year. 2023 is already very strong for us."

www.emeraldcruiises.com.au



DOING IT FOR THE KIDS

THROUGH THE generous donation of its guests, P&O Cruises Australia was able to make Christmas even more special for those in need in Vanuatu.

The cruise line gifted much-needed supplies to the maternity unit and children's ward at the Central Hospital in Port Vila.

Funds raised through P&O's Pacific Partnership helped the line donate to the Giving Hands Vanuatu fundraising campaign which has provided essential items including mosquito nets, reusable nappies and locally made soaps and creams to mums and their newborns.

In addition, doctors and nurses were treated to a smoothie delivery and fruit boxes, while children received a visit from Santa Claus, who delivered Christmas presents.

www.pocruises.com.au

IN BRIEF///

* Cunard will be taking Shakespeare to the high seas in 2022 as it joins forces in a first-of-its-kind partnership with the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) to bring world-class theatre to the transatlantic stage. Available exclusively onboard *Queen Mary 2*, guests will enjoy tailored performances by the RSC, which creates theatre by Shakespeare, his contemporaries and other literary legends past and present.

www.cunard.com

STAR COMES OUT FOR CHRISTENING

ACCLAIMED AMERICAN broadcast journalist and television host, Meredith Vieira, is set to christen the *Avalon View* later this year.

The 15-time Emmy Award-winning host, executive producer and anchor is Godmother to the ship, which will finally make her debut in April in Bratislava, Slovakia.

Vieira will christen the *Avalon View* in an international ceremony that will take place on the Danube River on April 12. After the special occasion the 166-passenger vessel will join Avalon's Suite Ship fleet sailing the Danube.

"Travellers wanting to see the world need only cruise down its legendary rivers," said Pam Hoffee, Managing Director of Avalon Waterways.

"Beyond Avalon's wall-to-wall, floor-to-ceiling windows is a world waiting to be explored.

"Whether travellers want to enjoy a guided walking tour of one of Europe's great cities, join a cooking class or paddle a canoe, our Avalon Choice selections of Classic, Discovery and Active excursions offer a wide range of possibilities, inviting our guests to customise their holiday each and every day."

www.avalonwaterways.com.au



The Danube River

Don't miss this mighty Miss offer

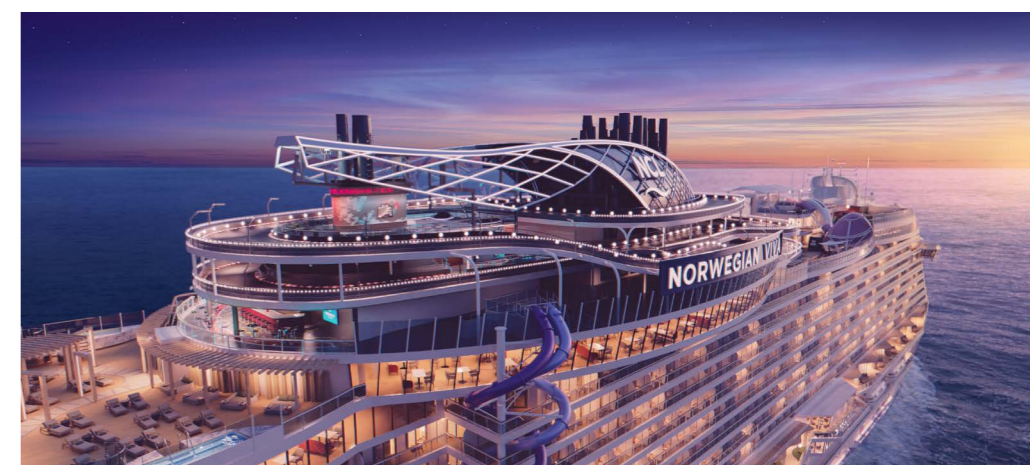
SAVINGS OF more than \$2,000 per couple are available on a Christmas river cruise through the heartland of America.

The offer is on earlybird bookings made by February 28 for a paddlewheeler journey down the Mississippi. International flights between Australia and the USA are additional.

American Queen Voyages has seven Christmas season cruises on the Mississippi in December aboard its biggest and smallest river ships – the boutique 166-guest *American Duchess* and grand 417-guest *American Queen*.

Cruise and stay packages from five- to eight-nights are available either round-trip from the jazz and blues capital of New Orleans or between New Orleans and Memphis – home of Elvis Presley.

www.aqsc.com.au/holidays



VIVA FOR VICTORY

NORWEGIAN CRUISE Line has unveiled the next ship in its new Prima Class and the second of six cutting-edge vessels for the brand.

Launching in June 2023, *Norwegian Viva* will homeport in four popular Mediterranean destinations: Lisbon, Venice, Rome and Athens.

She will then sail the Southern Caribbean for her 2023-2024 northern hemisphere winter season offering getaways from San Juan in Puerto Rico.

Mirroring the design and structure of her sister ship *Norwegian Prima*, *Viva* can accommodate 3,219 guests at double occupancy. Guests will enjoy NCL's largest inside, ocean view and balcony category staterooms.

Luxury-loving guests will enjoy a redefined The Haven by Norwegian, NCL's ultra-premium keycard only access ship-within-a-ship concept.

The Haven's public areas and 107 suites have been designed with features including an expansive

sundeck, infinity pool overlooking the ship's wake and an outdoor spa with a glass-walled sauna and cold room.

Experiences onboard include The Rush and The Drop, the fastest freetail drop dry slides at sea, and the Viva Speedway, the largest three-level racetrack at sea.

"*Norwegian Viva* sets the standard in the premium segment, illustrating our commitment to pushing boundaries in four main areas: wide open space, service that puts guests first, thoughtful design and experiences beyond expectation," said Harry Sommer, President and Chief Executive Officer of Norwegian Cruise Line.

Between June 15 and November 6, 2023, she will sail a series of eight-, nine- and 10-day voyages, offering guests the opportunity to explore the Mediterranean's Spanish, Italian and Greek regions.

www.ncl.com



Take your Royal pick

ROYAL CARIBBEAN has revealed its 2023 European summer line up of nine ships that will visit landmark destinations in more than 25 countries.

The cruise line will call at ports from the Amalfi Coast to the Holy Land, plus the Adriatic islands of Croatia, British Isles, Canary Islands and Greek Isles. Beginning in May 2023, the cruises range in length from five to 12 nights across 35 itineraries.

Following its 2021 debut, *Odyssey of the Seas* will again be cruising from Rome, offering family entertainment across a combination of signature

features and experiences.

Highlights include Playmakers Sports Bar & Arcade and bumper cars in SeaPlex, the largest indoor and outdoor activity complex at sea, North Star – the highest viewing deck on a cruise ship – and the gravity-defying skydiving simulator, RipCord by iFly.

Guests aboard *Odyssey* can choose from seven- to nine-night cruises from Rome to Naples, the Greek Isles and Turkey, as well as 12-night Holy Land sailings to the historic, bustling cities of Limassol in Cyprus, Ephesus (Kusadasi) in Turkey and Jerusalem.

Meanwhile *Symphony of the Seas*

offers experiences across seven distinct neighbourhoods, including the Ultimate Abyss, the tallest slide at sea. The ship also hosts famed Broadway shows and original productions across ice, water, stage and air, and features more than 20 different restaurants, bars and lounges.

Symphony heads to the Western Mediterranean on sailings from Barcelona or Rome. Travellers can enjoy seven-night cruises to bucket list destinations like Naples, Palma de Mallorca and Provence.

» www.royalcaribbean.com

during spring and summer.

A second, identical sister ship, *Viking Polaris*, joins the fleet in August for journeys to the Arctic and Antarctica.

Meanwhile the company has already released its full 2024 Egypt river cruise season, which includes the popular 12-day 'Pharaohs & Pyramids' itinerary from Cairo to Cairo.

Priced from \$7,995 per person in a deluxe stateroom, the itinerary includes savings of \$2,000 per couple. Highlights include a three-night stay in Cairo including meals and excursions, flight to Luxor to discover the Valley of the Kings as well as a visit to Aswan, Egypt's bustling market city.

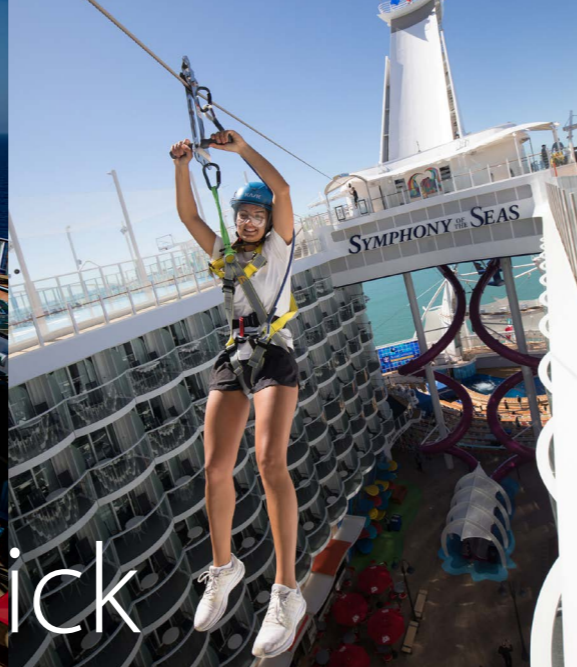
"Our Egypt river itinerary is a favourite among our Australian guests, so it's fantastic that we can offer the full 2024 season so far in advance," said Michelle Black, Viking ANZ Managing Director.

» www.vikingcruises.com.au

that is just what we have done," said Torstein Hagen, Chairman of Viking.

"With the arrival of *Viking Octantis*, Viking is now exploring all seven continents."

The new ship will be officially named in April in New York by her ceremonial godmother, Liv Arnesen, the famed explorer and educator. *Octantis* then makes her way to the Great Lakes for a series of voyages



WELCOME A NEW VIKING

VIKING HAVE celebrated the delivery of the first of two purpose-built expedition ships.

Viking Octantis was unveiled at a ceremony at Fincantieri's VARD shipyard in Søviknes, Norway. She hosts 378 guests and was part of Viking's first voyages to Antarctica last month.

"Our guests have asked us to build on our award-winning river and ocean voyages to take them further, and



NOW YOU SEBEL IT

ACCOR HAS opened its first The Sebel branded property in the heart of tropical north Queensland.

The Sebel Whitsundays Airlie Beach features 54 newly refurbished apartment-style guestrooms, including a selection of one- and two-bedroom apartments, three-bedroom penthouses and four-bedroom Presidential suites.

The property also features a 15m resort-style pool, heated outdoor spa, fitness centre and outdoor dining area with barbeque facilities.

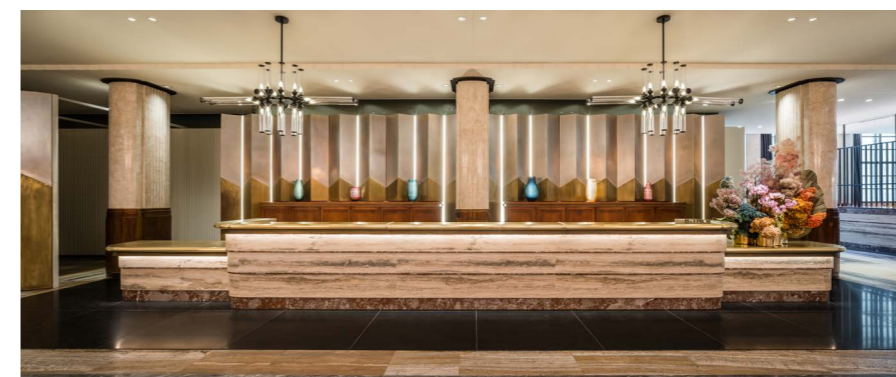
"The Sebel has a long-standing

reputation for delivering exceptional accommodation and an outstanding service experience," said Simon McGrath, Accor Pacific Chief Executive Officer.

"It brings quality and credibility to the serviced apartments sector, which is rapidly growing in popularity."

The Sebel Whitsundays Airlie Beach is ideally located just a few minutes' walk from downtown Airlie Beach and opposite the Port of Airlie marina, where daily cruises and island connections depart.

» www.thesebel.com



Aussie debut for Kimpton

BILLED AS the city's most exciting hotel development of the decade, the Kimpton Margot Sydney has just opened its doors for business.

Marking the brand's debut in Australia, the hotel combines heritage-listed Art Deco architecture with modern Australian style. It has a Scagliola pillared lobby evoking the spirit of the 1930s and bold patterns, plush furnishings and botanical displays.

Situated over nine levels on Pitt Street, the Kimpton has 172 deco-inspired rooms and suites, most with bathtubs and all with Mr Smith amenities. Rooms feature wall art from global artists while close to 600 pieces of art adorn the property.

Social Hour, where guests come together for daily complimentary drinks, will vary daily: from boutique Australian wines to a Four Pillars gin and tonic, or Kimpton's signature Margot cocktail.

There's a rooftop pool surrounded by a huge terrace, conference and event spaces, and restaurants that include Luke's Kitchen, helmed by renowned chef Luke Mangan. Rates start from \$350.

» www.kimptonmargotsydney.com

HOTEL ON A MISSION

AUSTRALIA'S FIRST Dorsett Hotel has opened with a mission to become a leading force in sustainable travel.

The upscale hotel boasts 313 rooms set within The Star Gold Coast's world-class entertainment and leisure precinct.

"As a brand new build, Dorsett Gold Coast provides a fresh and fun way for people to enjoy the very best of our city," said Michael Foster, General Manager, Dorsett Gold Coast.

"Everyone who checks in will receive a special Dorsett Discoveries booklet, which will provide insider knowledge to our guests so they can live like a local while visiting the Gold Coast."

The property offers eco-friendly features such as paperless and contactless check-in and automatic lighting within the rooms.

» www.dorsethotels.com

IN BRIEF///

* Oakwood has crossed the milestone of 10,000 keys across more than 62 properties worldwide with the opening of Oakwood Premier Melbourne. A debut for the brand in Australasia, the new landmark is one of the tallest, single-purpose developments in Australia, soaring 40 storeys over the new central business district with views of the Yarra River, South Melbourne, Albert Park and Port Phillip Bay.

» www.Oakwood.com



Jared Lee, Vice President for Southeast Asia, Southwest Pacific & Indian Subcontinent, Qatar Airways

Come fly with me

The global pandemic has been particularly hard on the airline industry. In the first part of an exclusive in-depth interview, we talk to JARED LEE, Vice President for Southeast Asia, Southwest Pacific & Indian Subcontinent, Qatar Airways, about the past, the present and his hopes for the future.

Q: What effect did the global pandemic have on the airline industry?

A: The COVID-19 pandemic brought with it some of the darkest days ever seen by the aviation industry in the history of flight itself.

We saw the demand for business and leisure travel essentially evaporate overnight as a result of strict and constantly changing entry restrictions imposed around the world.

It has been a constant game of adapting to the latest and ever-changing pandemic situation, and a real test of our nimbleness in adapting our strategic business plan. The aviation industry will look quite different after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Q: So how did your airline adapt to this unprecedented situation?

A: For Qatar Airways, it was a clear strategy to never stop flying and we were one of the very few airlines that operated throughout the pandemic period.

Although many destinations in our network were suspended due to global border closures, our

network has never fallen below 33 international destinations even at the height of the pandemic in 2020.

That included our Australian services to Sydney, Melbourne and Perth. Adelaide services were reinstated in August 2020 after a brief pause. In addition, Qatar Airways also started operation to Brisbane in March 2020 to meet repatriation demand and that was actually a new route for us.

Q: How will international air travel change in a post-COVID world?

A: In the short term, we expect many of the safety measures that have been implemented due to COVID-19 to remain in place, as the situation is still rapidly evolving.

Travel situation largely depends on three key factors: vaccination rollout, border restriction and caseloads, as these influence a country's entry and quarantine restrictions.

In the longer term, it does seem like vaccination will be key for the future of travel. We have already seen a gradual restart of global travel and they are mostly limited by entry restrictions rather than customer confidence.

After an extended global lockdown, travel demand is definitely recovering and we are looking forward to continuing to grow and restore our network as travel picks up.

Prior to the pandemic we flew to more than 160 destinations and currently we're operating to more than 140, so I'd say we're making good progress.

Q: You're also making progress with your aircraft, too?

A: Qatar Airways has always invested in the latest fuel-efficient aircraft and has one of the largest fleets of the Airbus A350 and Boeing 787 Dreamliner aircraft.

We believe that investing in fuel-efficient technology is one of the paramount ingredients for sustainability in aviation.

Our fleet diversity has enabled us to plan an honest schedule of flights as we rebuild our network, ensuring that we operate the right size aircraft to offer sensible capacity on each route that passengers can rely on to take them where they want to go.

Q: How important are travel agents to you?

A: Working collaboratively with trade partners is pivotal to our business success, so we have stood in partnership with our agents, rather than introduce artificial barriers, restrict content, add surcharges or apply complex administrative changes to the booking process.

* Next month: Why the Australian market is so important to Qatar Airways.

» www.qatarairways.com



An unforgettable stopover in Qatar

Your clients can turn one holiday into two, making the most of their journey with the 'World's Best Value Stopover' packages by Discover Qatar starting from AUD19* per person per night, including hotel stay and more.

*Terms and conditions apply.

Learn more



THAI-ING THE KNOT

JETSTAR HAS become the first Australian airline to take off to Thailand since borders opened.

Flights from Sydney and Melbourne commenced to Phuket last month, the first time the airline has flown to the Kingdom since 2020.

"Thailand has consistently been one of our most popular overseas holiday destinations since we started flying there in 2007 and our research tells us that Phuket still remains high on the list of places Aussies want to go," said Gareth Evans, Jetstar CEO.

"A recent survey of Jetstar customers showed that Thailand currently ranks in the top three international destinations that travellers have on their bucket lists for 2022."

During January, flights from Sydney operated three times per week on Mondays, Wednesdays and Saturdays, and twice weekly from Melbourne on Thursdays and Sundays.

During February, services between Sydney and Phuket will operate via Melbourne or Singapore before resuming the direct link in March. Flights are operated by Boeing 787-8 aircraft.

International flights to other destinations in Jetstar's network – Bali, Japan and Vietnam – are scheduled to resume as quarantine requirements in these destinations ease.

» www.jetstar.com



IT WAS party time at the airport when Virgin Australia celebrated their first international flight since being relaunched 12 months ago.

The inaugural flight from Sydney to Fiji was sent off in style, with airline CEO Jayne Hrdlicka on hand to mark the occasion.

Passengers were treated to branded coconuts, free beach tote bags and a performance by Paulini Curuenavuli, who sang a rendition of Madonna's 'Like A Virgin' before a traditional Fijian song.

In an added bonus, all passengers received a free economy return flight anywhere on the airline's domestic network as a thank you for their support and loyalty.

"Australians love Fiji and Virgin Australia is getting travellers there at great value," said Ms Hrdlicka.

"As a business we're going from strength to strength and today's flight is another big step forward in our transformation journey and demonstrates our commitment to our team and our guests."

Virgin Australia is scheduled to expand its international network, with the resumption of services between Melbourne and Brisbane and Fiji, before returning to Bali and Queenstown in New Zealand.

» www.virginaustralia.com

Flying roo pouches safety tick

QANTAS HAS come in seventh place in a survey of the world's safest airlines for 2022.

The survey was compiled by *AirlineRatings.com*, the world's only safety, product and COVID-19 rating website.

Air New Zealand was crowned the world's safest airline, just ahead of Etihad and Qatar. The top ten was rounded out by Singapore Airlines, TAP Portugal, SAS, Qantas, Alaska Airlines, EVA Air and Virgin Australia/Atlantic.

Those compiling the research took into account factors including an airline's crash and serious incident record, fleet age, audits from aviation's governing bodies and lead associations, operational innovation, COVID protocols and balance sheet strength.

Meanwhile Qantas has announced it will commence direct flights to Italy from June 22 to meet demand over the holiday peak season in Europe.

The new Sydney-Perth-Rome flight will cut more than three hours off the current fastest travel time to the Eternal City using the Boeing 787 Dreamliner, with cabins designed specifically for long haul travel.

» www.airlineratings.com » qantas.com



Why Belinda is fulla Bula

BELINDA HACKETT was aboard the inaugural Sydney to Nadi flight with Fiji Airways recently. Here the TravelManagers' representative for The Oaks in New South Wales reports on what kind of experience visitors can expect as travel between the countries resumes in a post-COVID era.

"I WAS delighted to accept the invitation to join the inaugural flight," writes Belinda.

"It's been a long time between cocktails and I couldn't wait to return to this beautiful destination which has been so special to me and my customers over many years as a travel agent.

"Everywhere we went, we were greeted by the same familiar, beautiful 'Bula' spirit that makes Fiji a truly special destination.

"After such a long absence, it was wonderful to greet so many familiar faces and see for myself that even though much has changed in the way of international travel, some things remain the same."

According to Belinda, the Fijian Government has taken great care to ensure that resorts, transport and tourism operators attained their accreditation with the Care Fiji Commitment (CFC), which applies strict health and safety guidelines to ensure the safety of both guests and staff.

"Protecting visitors against COVID-19 is taken very seriously in Fiji.

There are temperature check stations, hand sanitising stations and resort COVID staff that are there to answer any questions and provide all possible assistance.

"The resorts even have their own doctors and COVID Safe officers available on site to administer rapid COVID tests and PCR testing prior to leaving."

According to Belinda there is a range of COVID-related protections in place, including a negative PCR test by an approved provider for all travellers aged 12 years and over within 72 hours of departing Australia.

Visitors must also have an Australian Government International Vaccine certificate and proof of an accommodation booking in a CFC approved resort for a minimum of three days, plus a further PCR test within 48 hours of leaving Fiji to return to Australia.

"It may seem like a lot but in my experience the PCR testing process was quick, simple and highly efficient: I had my results in hand within 15 hours of taking the test."



Visitors to Fiji are free to travel around the nation as long as they are using a CFC provider or are transferring to another CFC accredited resort.

With an estimated 120,000 Fiji-based hospitality workers having lost their jobs over the course of the pandemic, Belinda confirms that the Fijian people are ready to start the process of recovery.

"Having this experience and first-hand knowledge of what my clients can expect has been invaluable. The Fijian people are so happy to once again be welcoming international visitors to their beautiful country."

Belinda believes customers will benefit from the supplier relationships which she and her fellow PTMs have with accredited operators and that her expertise in navigating the various international travel and documentation requirements will ensure that their holidays are stress-free and seamless.

"Regardless of what happens with Delta, Omicron or any other variants that may arise, customers who book with an experienced travel professional like me can travel with absolute confidence, secure in the knowledge that they have someone there to provide assistance at every stage in their holiday."

» www.travelmanagers.com.au

» www.fiji.travel

Can do in Canada

Entire Travel Group has a range of holiday packages to help you get the most out of any visit to this remarkable country. Here are just some of the experiences available in Canada.

GET ON TRACK

TRAVELLING BY train from Toronto to Vancouver on board VIA Rail's "The Canadian" is a spectacular journey, one which winds through some of Canada's greatest towns, cities and vistas.

Between central Ontario and the west coast, the Canadian landscape transforms from lakes to prairies to the picturesque Rocky Mountains. Each province offers something new and intriguing.

So, whether you're most looking forward to seeing and experiencing the east, the west, or the in-between, this cross-country route is sure to surprise you.

Saskatoon

As you enter central Saskatchewan, you'll find that Saskatoon is smack dab in the middle of this prairie paradise. Straddling the South Saskatchewan River, Saskatoon is filled with historic neighbourhoods, indigenous culture and native wildlife.

Edmonton

Next on the list is Edmonton, a city on the rise, highlighted by an abundance of innovative artists, makers, farmers and chefs.

But unless you choose to stop off in Edmonton, you'll simply have to

appreciate the striking architecture, beautiful wilderness and eclectic, colourful neighbourhoods that Alberta's capital is known for.

MANITOBA

Explore the heart of Canada in Manitoba – from polar bears, extraordinary natural phenomena and world-class parks to outstanding museums.

Give in to your sense of adventure and see for yourself why Manitoba is a special destination that shouldn't be skipped. Here are just three reasons to visit.

1. "Polar bear capital of the world"

Up north of Manitoba and located on the shores of Hudson Bay is the town of Churchill, "Polar Bear Capital of the World."

More than 60 per cent of the recorded polar bear population roam its lands and you can see them up close while touring on a tundra vehicle or visiting a wilderness lodge, or on a walking tour with an expert guide.

2. Northern Lights

Known for its ideal position within the Aurora Oval, Manitoba is a great spot for witnessing one of nature's most mysterious and stunning

phenomena – the aurora borealis.

Although it's most visible between January and March, the Northern Lights can be seen up to 300 nights a year.

3. Riding mountain national park

Open throughout the year, the Riding Mountain National Park is a destination for all seasons.

With a landscape of grasslands, towering forests, charming meadows and the prized Clear Lake, the park is a wonderful experience for all outdoor activities.

YUKON

Located in the northwest of Canada, Yukon is a territory rich in wild landscapes, charming towns, alpine lakes and many more wondrous sites to see.

For all seasons

From summer nights to magical winter days, Yukon is a great destination no matter the temperature, weather and season.

During the summer, the sun sets just before midnight, giving you plenty of time to indulge in outdoor activities.

Autumn marks the beginning of the aurora borealis season. The longest season, however, is winter which spans for five months – lakes become glass arenas, the aurora borealis are more vibrant and the towns become magical with a blanket of snow.

Once the snow melts, spring becomes the perfect season for scenic road trips.

Nature and wildlife

Perhaps one of the best things about Yukon is that about 80 per cent of it is untouched and untamed.

You'll be constantly surrounded by a panorama of nature's wonders in the form of rugged mountains, clear lakes and luscious forests.

In addition to the vast unspoiled nature, Yukon's wildlife species outnumber its human population. For any wildlife enthusiasts, Yukon is a haven worth exploring.

www.entiretravel.com.au



THE BEST OF CANADA

In partnership with



The Rockies by VIA Rail

The Rockies by VIA Rail shows you the best of British Columbia and Alberta, allowing you to step back in time to the days of classic rail travel, riding in the original steel 'streamliner' railcars.

Board VIA Rail's The Canadian and make your way through the interior of British Columbia, from the seaside modern metropolis of Vancouver to the vistas of cascading waterfalls, turquoise-coloured lakes and snow-covered peaks of the Rockies.

Pass through the rich fields of the Fraser Valley and the towering peaks of the Coastal Mountains before entering the Fraser Canyon and onto famous Banff and Jasper National Parks.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Travel aboard VIA Rail's 'Canadian' train for the famous rail journey to the majestic Canadian Rockies
- Explore the spectacular Icefields Parkway
- Enjoy the Canadian Rocky Mountain resorts of Banff, Lake Louise & Jasper
- 2 Freedom of Choice Activities



Discover the Yukon by Self-Drive

Discover the Yukon on this 15 day Self Drive adventure. There's over 350,000 square kilometres of mountain vistas, boreal forests, wild rivers and crystal blue lakes.

Your discovery of the Yukon starts in Whitehorse. The Yukon has 10 times more moose, bears, wolves, caribou, goats and sheep than people. Enjoy the unique wildlife experience on your visit to Yukon Wildlife Preserve. A two hour drive along the historical Alaska Highway takes you to Haines Junction, a picture-postcard village and the gateway to exploring the pristine Klane National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

HIGHLIGHTS

- See the grizzly bears in Klane National Park and the Dall sheep grazing on Sheep Mountain
- Explore the historical sights of Dawson City at your leisure
- Cross the Arctic Circle on the iconic Dempster Highway
- Visit the Yukon Wildlife Preserve



Classic Churchill Polar Bear Adventure

Every autumn, savvy wildlife photographers from around the world go to Manitoba's north to observe one of nature's greatest moments. Witness the polar bear migration in the small town of Churchill, a once-in-a-lifetime encounter!

The Classic Churchill Polar Bear Adventure includes two full-day Tundra Buggy safaris in the Churchill Wildlife Management Area, where polar bears await the freezing of the Hudson Bay. You will have plenty of opportunity to explore the area for these majestic mammals and other subarctic wildlife in their natural environment.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Roundtrip flights between Winnipeg and Churchill
- Learn about the local heritage of this remote community
- Explore polar bear habitat on board of the Tundra Buggy
- Churchill and area tour, Churchill Itsanitaq Museum and evening cultural presentation





A walk down the Ruak River with the Golden Triangle Asian Elephant Foundation

WALKING THE WALK

What do you do when ‘the elephant in the room’ is an actual elephant? JOHN BORTHWICK investigates Thailand’s latest successes in ethical, community and sustainable tourism.

SUSTAINABLE AND community-based tourism is long past being the elephant in the room — an inconvenient upstart that just won’t go away. It is here to stay.

In Thailand, where the ‘chang’ is the national animal, the ethical treatment of this great creature is emblematic of wider changes in tourism.

The country’s growing “regenerative” travel sector now offers visitors a range of sustainable and community-focused activities. Here are a few options.

ELEPHANT CHANGES

“Due to attitudes among inbound tourists from Australia, Europe and other places, many of the activities we once offered have changed,” says John Roberts, who has overseen the elephant camp at the Anantara Golden Triangle resort for almost two decades.

Elephant polo and the like are gone, notes UK-born Roberts. They’ve been replaced by activities like this morning’s ‘Walk With Giants’ that I had just done in the company of Laddanan

Yonthantham, conservation biologist for the Golden Triangle Asian Elephant Foundation.

Along with four “rescue elephants” and their mahout handlers we had ambled along riverside trails while she described the care now given to these elderly animals that previously had laboured for years in logging camps or carried heavy tourist loads.

Recent years have seen a radical reappraisal in Thailand of elephant rides, ‘trunk painting’ and other stunts performed for visitors.

Revelations about the harsh training

and hidden abuse experienced by some animals have led to a new standard of “Look, don’t touch” at many locations. Informed visitors are just saying no to exploitative shows and rides.

Travellers keen to contribute to Thai elephant welfare have numerous choices. The Golden Triangle Foundation for instance, which cares for 20 elephants, runs a ‘no fee’ program for volunteers who make a minimum two-week work commitment.

Other operations include Phuket’s Elephant Sanctuary where half- and full-day programs start from around \$125 a head, as well as shorter tours of its excellent 12hectare home for the animals.

At around \$400 a week, feeding and maintaining an elephant is not cheap. The most effective form of support is to donate to a dedicated foundation. (See details below.)

MARITIME MATTERS

“I’m a coral gardener,” says Thai marine ecologist Khun Aorn as she surfaces, grinning, from the Gulf of Thailand.

Aorn, 28, is typical of an upcoming breed of educated, engaged young Thais making an impact and career in conserving their country.

We’re at little Koh Talu island where, along with dive-master Khun Oh, she is leading local schoolkids in a coral regeneration project.

We head to a pontoon where the students secure fingers of staghorn coral to a tubular frame which is then lowered to the seabed where it will form a new coral garden.

Several commercial operators organise programs at Koh Phangan and Koh Tao for paying volunteers interested in coral or sea turtle



Kayaking through the Phuket mangroves



Coral gardening on Koh Talu



Traditional samlor drivers in Chiang Mai

projects. Participants typically work a five-day week within a supervised team and are fully certified divers.

Elsewhere, upmarket resorts often support nearby sea turtle sanctuaries, encouraging tourists to actively get involved.

At Khao Lumpee-Haad Thaymuang National Park in Phang Nga, guests from the nearby Aleenta Phuket Resort sponsor and release turtle hatchlings, and at Phuket’s JW Marriott resort visitors observe the Mai Khao Marine Turtle Foundation at work.

NATIONAL PARKS

A significant but sometimes overlooked contributor to sustainable tourism is Thailand’s network of national parks.

Many offer ranger-led excursions as well as budget cabins and camping sites. Just make sure you book well ahead for accommodation and avoid Thai national holidays.

Khao Sok National Park, one of the country’s unsung wonders, is a 740-square-kilometre domain of rainforest, lakes and karst limestone peaks. Located inland and a four-hour drive north of Phuket, it forms part of

Thailand’s largest wilderness area.

Visitors can stay in small pontoon cabins which become their base for jungle excursions to spot macaques and gibbons. Hours spent kayaking on the park’s magical Cheow Lan Lake may be among your most personally sustaining ones ever.

Further south on the Andaman coast in Satun province sits magnificent Koh Tarutao Island. The park headquarters here rent basic bungalows from where you can range out by foot or bicycle to encounter truly untrammelled beaches, jungle birdlife and giant monitor lizards. Meanwhile, the waterways of Phuket Marine National Park in the far north of the island shelter a series of species-rich mangrove trails. Exploring them in a rental kayak is the island’s best, least-known thrill.

DIRECT ACTION

Samlor drivers Khun Phrayad, 52, and Khun Sa-At, 64, are among the last of their tribe.

Piloting their three-wheeled pedicabs around the streets of Chiang Mai they still feel like spring chickens when compared to their oldest colleague who retired at age 98 after pedalling a samlor since the Second World War.

Dutch-born Frans Betgem, expat and passionate tour guide, introduces me to the pair as we head out to tour the city’s ‘Teak Raj’ mansions of a century ago.

Samlors have been dying out, figuratively, for decades, so next time you see one, hail the driver and go for

a relaxing ride around town. You’re sustaining a piece of Thai communal history and a family livelihood too.

In the same “non-institutional” spirit, look for opportunities such as using a local blind massage facility rather than a perfumed day spa, or seek out home stay accommodation rather than a hotel or hostel.

TIPPING THE ICEBERG

We fortunate travellers engage daily with a huge, unacknowledged Thai “community”.

It consists of the waiters, drivers, guides, hawkers and dozens of others who enable our journeys and entertainment.

Often members of Thailand’s large informal economy, most of them have suffered greatly during COVID-19’s decimation of their livelihoods.

The most effective, direct-action way we can sustain this very real community is to engage their services — and tip generously.

Pictures by John Borthwick

Find out more

WILDLIFE

- maikhaomarineturtlefoundation.org
- gibbonproject.org
- saveelephant.org
- phuketelephantsanctuary.org
- helpingelephants.org

VOLUNTEERING

- bangkokcommunityhelp.com
- volunteerthailand.org
- volunteerhq.org
- wildlifevolunteer.org
- responsibletravel.com

COMMUNITY TOURING

- siamrisetravel.com
- hivesters.com
- handsacrossthewater.org.au
- chiangmai-alacarte.com

ACCOMMODATION

- thainationalparks.com
- aleenta.com
- elephanthills.com
- minorhotels.com
- homestay.com



Phang Nga National Park

KINGDOM COMES BACK TO LIFE

As international travel slowly resumes, we look at some of the most popular regions in Thailand.

MORE THAN 750 kilometres south of Bangkok, **Phang-Nga** has mountains, forests and a variety of natural attractions, such as Phang-Nga Bay, which contains more than 40 small islands and islets.

These include Ko Tapu (AKA James Bond Island), Mu Ko Surin and Mu Ko Similan, the sandy coast of Khao Lak as well as Ko Yao Noi and Ko Yao Yai.

The region's landmark is Khao Chang, which is a mountain in the shape of a crouching elephant – the symbol of Phangnga province.

The national parks here feature inspiring scenery with very different attractions. Most famous is Phang Nga Bay National Park, a geological wonder filled with islets, sunken caverns and startling rock formations rising vertically out of the sea.

The bay is extremely sheltered, making it ideal for expeditions on sea kayaks that explore the many fascinating caverns and islands throughout the bay.

Visitors can also enter caves such as Ruesi Sawan, Luk Suea and Pung Chang, all of which have impressive stalagmites and stalactites.

The easiest way to get there is to fly to Phuket Airport and then drive about 90 minutes to Khao Lak Beach, where most of the resorts are located.

KRABI

Visitors could easily spend weeks in Krabi and still leave yearning for more of its scenic views, beaches and islands.

The region has attractions including hot springs, a wildlife sanctuary, sea caves, coral reefs, exotic marine life, limestone cliffs that draw rock climbing enthusiasts from around the world and national parks that include the island paradises of Koh Phi Phi and Koh Lanta.

In particular, the coral reefs here are among the world's best, which makes the city a great spot for coral diving. If that wasn't enough, Krabi also features some of the most photogenic sunsets in Thailand, often accompanied by spectacular displays of cloud to cloud lightning.

Most visitors stay in Ao Nang, a seaside strip of guesthouses, hotels, bars, restaurants and souvenir shops that continues to grow as tourist arrivals increase.

It is also the major launching point for boat trips to nearby islands and the isolated beaches of Phra Nang Cape, where the famous former hippie enclave of Railey Beach is located.

Further north is Noppharat Thara, whose quiet, shady beach is part of the National Park that includes the Phi Phi Islands.

PHUKET

The biggest island in Thailand, Phuket is located in the south and sits on the Andaman Sea.

Phuket has a large Chinese influence, so you will see many Chinese shrines and restaurants around the city, while a Chinese Vegetarian Festival is held there every year.

Being a big island, Phuket is surrounded by many impressive beaches, such as Rawai, Patong, Karon, Kamala, Kata Yai, Kata Noi and Mai Khao. Laem Phromthep viewpoint is said to feature the most memorable sunsets in Thailand.

SAMUI

This is the third largest island in Thailand and the largest in an archipelago of more than 80 islands that includes the Ang Thong National Marine Park, a kayaking paradise and a day trip from Ko Samui.

Small enough to be circumnavigated in just a couple of hours by motorbike or car, Samui features top beaches like Chaweng, Lamai, Taling Ngam and Natien.

Activities around Ko Samui include cooking courses, yoga instruction, Muay Thai training, scuba diving and even golf. Besides plentiful nature, the island is also full of history and culture.

» www.amazingthailand.com.au

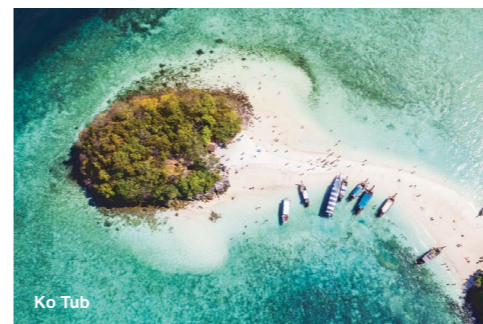
* From February 1, Thailand is reopening Krabi, Phang-Nga, Phuket and Surant Thani (Ko Samui/Ko Phangan/Ko Tao) as part of its Sandbox program.

This means fully vaccinated travellers from overseas can travel within these destinations during the first seven days and can change accommodation three times (can book three different hotels).

For more information, visit www.tatnews.org/thailand-reopening/



Samui



Ko Tub



Bamboo Island



Ao Nui, PhiPhi Island

Do you remember the last time you took a time-out to laze in a pristine, white paradise?

Relax on Thailand's stunning, hidden beaches once again.

Even more amazing experiences await on your return as you can enjoy your favourite destinations in Thailand.



