



## Destination

# Beyond the shiny surface

Demand for experiential offerings is growing among travellers to Singapore, spurring inbound tour operators, hotels and resorts to serve up a new breed of tours and activities.

**Pamela Chow** unearths these alternative offerings

As the red-hot craze for immersive travel gains ground, tourism proponents in Singapore are getting creative by whipping up experiential and value-added activities for intrepid travellers.

Kicking off industry-wide efforts was the Tour Design Challenge launched last year by the Singapore Tourism Board (STB), which selected tour operators for a programme comprising industry workshops, site visits, pitching and grant support for selected applicants to pilot these new tours.

The challenge helped launch innovative tours such as Singapore 1920s: Trails of Ah Huat by Let's Go Singapore and the back-of-house Silicon Valley of Singapore Insider tour by UBE Singapore.

Furthermore, under this year's Marketing Innovation Programme, STB awarded seven businesses up to S\$1.3 million (US\$933,428) for marketing proposals that introduced a new dimension to storytelling about Singapore. One of the winning businesses, local e-commerce company Carousell, will launch a campaign – Embark on Your Great Singapore Treasure Trail – inviting Indonesian users to explore Singapore by planning their own 'treasure trail' itiner-

ary using the Carousell app.

The need for innovative visitor experiences is not lost on the local hospitality sector. The young Six Senses Maxwell has paired with Jane's Singapore Tours to bring guests through locales such as MacRitchie Reservoir Park, Botanic Gardens and the Civic District.

Capella Singapore, under the Capella Curates programme, has launched the Qi & The City experience that whizzes guests around the city in vintage sidecars, while providing commentary about the fengshui principles reflected in the local architecture along the way.

Murray Aitken, general manager, Six Senses Singapore, expressed: "We want to be an intrinsic part of the local fabric and culture, and if this calls for a deeper exploration of community partners who can bring about a layered approach to help our guests reconnect with themselves and experience the community, then we will continue to innovate, look for experiences that are always unique – often unexpected, sometimes unusual – and partner with leading experts."

The trend has spilled over even to Singapore's two integrated resorts, which are building on the traditional resort model to provide more experiential offerings. As part of a suite

**Above: Potato Head Folk resides within a heritage building on Keong Saik Road in Chinatown**

of massive expansion plans, Resorts World Sentosa (RWS) will increase its gross floor area by about 50 per cent to usher in new attractions, while Marina Bay Sands (MBS) will welcome a fourth tower and a 15,000-seat indoor entertainment arena.

Putting a greater focus on immersive products and services, RWS will first open a pirate-themed "adventure dining playhouse" in end-2020 to replace the Resorts World Theatre. Arriving in phases through to 2025 will be a public seafront attraction with free evening light shows and a new waterfront lifestyle complex helmed by two new hotels.

Additionally, Universal Studi-

os Singapore will unveil two new themed sections – Minion Park and Super Nintendo World – and S.E.A. Aquarium will more than triple in size and be rebranded as the proposed Singapore Oceanarium. The transformed resort, which will be backed by a S\$4.5 billion investment, is touted to "create a new wave of tourism growth for the next decade."

Tan Hee Teck, CEO of RWS, said: "RWS will form an integral part of the future Greater Southern Waterfront and become a centrepiece of the transformative journey to enliven the southern corridor."

Meanwhile, MBS has already begun flexing its creative muscle in the lead-up to its expansion. Where celebrity chef restaurants and Michelin-star dining were once all the rage, consumers are now hungry for an experience beyond the meal.

Mike Lee, vice president of sales, MBS, explained: "Guests now want to be entertained while they dine, and be simulated by visual and aural senses. Think DJs taking centre-stage in a restaurant, theatrical show kitchens and a playlist that sets the mood of a venue and the ensuing conversations of its guests."

That mentality is distilled in the resort's fresh F&B concepts recently opened with TAO Group that have "morphed entertainment and food" together, shared Lee, referring to rooftop restaurant Lavo, inventive nightclub Marquee, and Japanese restaurant and sushi bar Koma.

MBS has also taken the visitor experience to the next experiential level with the Wonderland trail, an adventure and food tour inspired by the ArtScience Museum's Wonderland exhibition. The trail brackets a visit to the exhibition with a specially concocted Wonderland Crazyshake at Black Tap and Wonderland-themed high tea at the signature Renku Bar & Lounge.

**“We want to be an intrinsic part of the local fabric and culture, and if this calls for a deeper exploration of community partners...”**

**MURRAY AITKEN**  
General manager, Six Senses Singapore





Hotels

# Filling the void

The list of midscale accommodation is growing in Singapore, as hotel chains leap at the opportunity to tap this under-served segment in the destination, writes **Pamela Chow**

Often associated with up-market stays, Singapore is poised to become a more accessible destination as an expanding crop of mid-tier hotels mushroom across the island to cater to a growing demographic of budget-conscious travellers.

Marcus Aw, managing director, Travelodge Hotels Asia, told TTG Asia: “The Singapore market is crowded with upscale and luxury international brands on one end, and local economy or budget options on the other. There is really only a handful of international, select service, midscale hotels in Singapore.”

This lack of quality and affordable accommodation in Singapore – where the operation of home-sharing services like Airbnb is still under government review – has possibly alienated a segment of budget-conscious travellers.

Amit Saberwal, founder & CEO, RedDoorz, observed: “Singapore presents an obvious challenge to travellers from the rest of the region and even on an international scale. We’re talking about business travellers who need to traverse the region, people who prefer to travel in large groups and even young, tech-savvy folks who are eager to explore the region, yet are often weighed down by budget concerns.”

Seeking to plug this gap, a slew of hospitality players have swooped in on the midscale market this year. In August, Accor franchised 15 hotels operated by Global Premium Hotels (GPHL) – one of Singapore’s largest hotel chains – of which 13 were trading under the economy Fragrance Hotel brand and two under the four-star Parc Sovereign Hotel brand.

The 15 hotels will be rebranded to become one Mercure, one Ibis

Styles and 13 Ibis Budget hotels, and will undergo asset enhancement initiatives to align with Accor global standards. With this deal, Accor has established a total of 1,840 midscale rooms and 2,428 economy rooms in Singapore.

GPHL owner James Koh expressed that the partnership with Accor is “indeed timely”, as it comes in the midst of the increasing popularity and strong growth of Singapore’s mid-tier hotel segment.

“The Singapore market is crowded with upscale and luxury international brands on one end, and local economy or budget options on the other. There is really only a handful of international, select service, midscale hotels...”

**MARCUS AW**  
Managing director, Travelodge Hotels Asia



Fragrance Hotel, Selegie

Across the shore from resort island Sentosa, Travelodge has taken over Bay Hotel Singapore and will transform the property into the mid-scale Travelodge Harbourfront Singapore after a S\$15 million (US\$10.8 million) refurbishment project.

And earlier this year, InterContinental Hotels Group opened its fourth Holiday Inn Express hotel in the country. The 119-room Holiday Inn Express Singapore Serangoon is located within walking distance of Little India heritage area, with a design that pays homage to Singapore’s past landmarks such as the New World Amusement Park.

For the period of January to July 2019, the mid-tier segment enjoyed an average occupancy rate of 88.5 per cent and a RevPAR of S\$148.20, up by one per cent and 1.1 per cent YOY respectively. Meanwhile, the economy segment registered 81.9 per cent occupancy – down by 2.4 per cent – and S\$89.10 RevPAR, up by 1.1 per cent.

The figures for both segments are expected to grow as Singapore welcomes this wave of new openings, with even more affordable options to come in the following months.

Saberwal revealed: “Singapore is very important for RedDoorz. We are taking a strategic approach to expanding our footprint across the region, including Singapore, and aim to have a combination of over 2,000 hotels and hostels by end 2019.”

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Fresh Eyes

# Guiding principles

With a team comprising some of Singapore's youngest tour guides, Monster Day Tours is on a mission to pump passion and innovation back into the business of tours, discovers **Pamela Chow**

The demand for local tours in Singapore may be flourishing, but sourcing for new talent to drive the industry is no mean feat. One tour operator has taken up the mantle of grooming a team of young management and guiding talent to lead innovation in the local tourism scene.

Monster Day Tours, run by founder & CEO TY Suen under Woopa Group, is now Singapore's largest walking and private tour operator.

Monster Day Tours' prominence grew in 2017 when it launched free daily walking tours in Chinatown and Little India, taking participants through the districts' heritage sites, hipster hotspots and architectural wonders. The company has since expanded its menu of free tours to cover Kampong Glam, Marina Bay Sands, Gardens by the Bay, the Civic District, Bugis and Bras Basah.

Suen explained: "We aim to combine adventure and professional storytelling to create quality visitor ex-



**(Most of Singapore's younger generation) are not aware that there are new ideas and innovation happening in this industry, and I hope to be able to change that.**

**TY SUEN**  
Founder & CEO,  
Monster Day  
Tours



periences in Singapore, and to make travel accessible for everyone. Most tour and activities companies will address a specific audience or conduct a specific genre of tour, but we do our best to spread it out."

But while Singapore's touring landscape is thriving more than ever before, it is not immune to the challenge of recruiting bright and passionate talent.

Suen professed: "My idea is to be able to attract young talent into the tour operator and guiding industry. Most of Singapore's younger generation still think that tours are big group bus tours, and a tourist guide is some-

one waving

a flag and bringing the group from point to point. They are not aware that there are new ideas and innovation happening in this industry, and I hope to be able to change that."

Now, Monster Day Tours' management team and tour guides are among the youngest in the local industry, with an average staff age of 30 years. Suen said he involves the guides in the brainstorming of ideas for tours to keep them on their toes.

He said: "We continuously update and refresh our tour offerings. In the past two years, we have seen existing players start to innovate and develop more unique tour experiences. It has also begun to attract even players outside of the industry. I think the challenge for tour operators is how to keep our tours and tourist guides relevant for travellers."

The company's synergistic energy has empowered it to launch a number of paid themed tours, including A Taste of Michelin 1-Star Chicken Rice & Local Hawker Food Tour, Sin-



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gapore After Dark Local Street Food & Nightlife Tour, as well as Crazy Rich Asians: Singapore Icons & Filming Locations Car Tour.

This year, Monster Day Tours has branched out to "other focus areas" and developed two new brands: UBE and 8xplore.

Touted as the "pioneer of start-up and business innovation tours in Singapore", UBE organises localised tours in conjunction with creative start-ups and businesses from various industries in Singapore. Its debut product is Singapore's first Silicon Valley of Singapore Insider Tour at one-north and JTC Launchpad.

Set to be launched next year is 8xplore, which will specialise in themed Singapore holidays curated for the China market, with offerings ranging from food and culture to heritage and shopping.

## What's hot

# A bounty of attractions

### 1 Reminisce the good old days

Relive 1920s-era Singapore with story-telling tour, Singapore 1920s: Trails of Tan Ah Huat, by Let's Go Tour Singapore. The four-hour bicycle tour, which follows the crafted story of fictional immigrant Tan Ah Huat, offers glimpses of Singapore from a bygone era with the aid of multimedia slideshows and compelling narrations.

### 2 Brush up on Eurasian culture

The Eurasian Association, established in 1919, has upgraded its Eurasian Heritage Gallery to feature more multimedia and interactive exhibits, tours, food tastings and more than 100 artefacts, including World War II-era memorabilia.

The Eurasian Heritage Gallery will also offer tour packages that include a range of community experiences like a traditional Eurasian folk dance, as well as a cooking demonstration and food tasting by Eurasian chef Quentin Pereira.

### 3 Fengshui meets modern design

Singapore may be a beacon of modernity, but did you know that a number of its iconic landmarks and architectural marvels are built upon fengshui principles?

Guests of Capella Singapore can find out more about these storied structures on the Qi & The City sidecar tour, where participants will zip around in vintage sidecars while learning about the hand fengshui played in shaping Singapore's urban landscape.

### 4 Voyages to the Southern Islands

The little-trodden Southern Islands of Singapore have many secret spots. Yacht Cruise SG has launched the



country's first Southern Islands Cruise that takes patrons on a 2.5-hour journey beyond the shores of Singapore.

Lap up the luxury yacht life onboard *Le Tara* while cruising by places of interests like the Dragon Teeth's Gate and Machine Gun Post at Labrador Park, landfill-turned-biodiversity haven Semakau Island, coral-rich Sisters' Islands, former penal settlement St John's Island, and man-made Lazarus Island. The experience will also include a land tour on mysterious Kusu Island.

### 5 Behold Changi's shining Jewel

Jewel Changi Airport has added the Changi Experience Studio and Canopy Park to its suite of offerings.

The 3,000m<sup>2</sup> Changi Experience Studio includes a singing garden, a runway race, a quest to collect airport trolleys and a battle of smiles. Elsewhere, the 14,000m<sup>2</sup> Canopy Park features seven play attractions and creative gardens. Visitors can navigate through the Mirror Maze and Hedge Maze, bounce on the Manulife Sky Nets, explore the sculptural playscape of Discovery Slides, or savour the view from the glass-floored Canopy Bridge suspended 23m above ground.

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Tried & Tested

# Village Hotel Sentosa

On the resort island of Sentosa, **Xinyi Liang-Pholsena** discovers a new property that will appeal to families for its affordability, as well as thoughtful amenities for all ages



**LOCATION** The 606-room Village Hotel Sentosa, together with sister properties The Outpost and The Barracks (opening December 1, 2019), make up the trio of developments that Far East Hospitality has unveiled on Sentosa. Its location offers a unique vantage point on Sentosa, with Kidzania Singapore just next door and the Imbiah Monorail & Cable Car station located just a brief walk away. Other key attractions on the island, Resorts World Sentosa and Palawan Beach, are about five minutes away.

**ROOMS** Stepping into the 44m<sup>2</sup> Family Room – formed by two interconnecting Deluxe Rooms – I was drawn by the warm, cheerful vibes that the beige-and-white room radiated. Colourful illustrations adorn the wall, while an expansive window frames up views of the kids’ pools below, offering endless fascination for my two young children checking out the action below. Say goodbye to plastic bottles at this

hotel, as all rooms boast their own supply of potable water, dispensed via a Hyflux tap built into the sink. Also, complimentary tea, coffee and ice are available in the common pantry located next to the lift on each floor.



**F&B** All-day dining Native Kitchen is the only restaurant on-site, seating up to 133 pax in its light-filled, airy environ. In the lobby, there’s also a small café, Supply Depot, offering drinks, snacks and pastries on the go. In the works is the Mess Hall, a restored colonial heritage building that will house at least one Indian, Chinese and Japanese restaurant when fully opened.

**FACILITIES** A major draw are the four different the-

matic experiences – a lazy river pool, children’s play pool, adventure pool and the infinity Pamukkale pool – which Village Hotel Sentosa shares with sister properties. The lazy river pool was a big hit for young kids like mine, who took pleasure in floating around the river lined with foliage, mini falls and whirling pools. A Volkswagen food truck stands in one corner, offering light snacks and drinks. Not to be missed is the Pamukkale infinity pool, which commands a stunning view of the South China Sea (especially at sunset), with a pool bar and deck chairs on the side. Note that this particular pool is accessible to adults only. As a family-friendly resort, Village Hotel Sentosa also has complimentary weekend activities lined up for children, while half-hourly shuttles connect guests to VivoCity shopping mall on the mainland. **SERVICE** A ladder for kids is placed next to the reception counter, enabling little ones to enjoy the check-in/out process with their parents. **VERDICT** Clearly a standout choice on Sentosa for families and leisure travelers alike. With its more affordable price point, Village Hotel Sentosa will make an appealing choice for staycations as well as excellent base for foreign visitors looking to a few days of fun on Sentosa. **Rates** Deluxe room from S\$280++ (US\$202), Family room from S\$370++, and Interconnecting room from S\$470++ **Contact** [www.stayfareast.com/Sentosa](http://www.stayfareast.com/Sentosa)



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## Destination

# Fast-track development

As Lombok's events calendar heats up, the island is racing to cement its position as a sports and entertainment destination. **Mimi Hudoyo** zooms in on the island's new and upcoming infrastructure projects and development works

Photo courtesy of Ministry of Tourism, Indonesia

**W**ith Indonesia gearing up to host the MotoGP races from 2021 to 2023, the Mandalika district on the island of Lombok, which will play host to the prestigious street race, is caught up in a race of its own: to establish itself as a sports and entertainment destination.

Ever since Dorna Sports made the MotoGP announcement this February, Lombok has received visibly more attention, not only from Indonesian president Joko Widodo and the relevant government officials, but also investors who are eyeing the sites in Lombok, particularly within the Mandalika special economic zone area.

News of the motor racing event has been met with “euphoria among the stakeholders of Lombok”, said Awan Aswinabawa, chairman of A&T Holidays in Lombok.

“People are very enthusiastic in developing villas, as well as restaurants and cafes, especially in the areas surrounding Mandalika,” he said. “I believe MotoGP was also one of the reasons AirAsia (Indonesia) decided to make Lombok a hub.”

Seeing the “excitement” that MotoGP has brought to Indonesia, Ricky Baheramsjah, head of investment and marketing at the state-owned Indonesia Tourism Development Corporation (ITDC), the country's integrated tourism developer and operator, said there are plans to bring more sports events to the destination.

“For us to have a sustainable business plan, we should do more races than just MotoGP,” he stated.

“In fact, we have signed the con-

**Above: Bukit Merese Hill in Lombok, which is undergoing a major facelift**

tract to host World Superbike in 2021 too. The World Superbike is the second biggest motorbike race in the world and we do not want to stop there. We plan to host more races, with the MotoGP as the ‘pearl’ of the calendar.”

With that goal in mind, ITDC is investing in the building of permanent and temporary infrastructure. A 4.2km street circuit complex will be developed from the ground up, housing a paddock area with 40 garages, 50,000 grandstand seats, a standing area for 138,000 spectators, and hospitality suites that can accommodate up to 7,700 people.

Ricky said: “We will have the first street circuit in the world that can accommodate motorbike racing. It is almost like the Albert Park in Melbourne, which is an F1 street circuit.

“This is not a conversion of an existing street, like in Singapore and Monaco, but a street specifically designed to host motorbike racing because the requirements to have a motorbike race is more stringent than, say, Formula 1,” he added.

For example, the race tracks in Mandalika will be designed with more run-off areas, or crash barriers, than car racing as a safety feature when racers unintentionally depart off the prescribed course.

Based on the latest data, there are 10 hotels which will be built by 2023, with a total of 2,485 room keys.

Currently, the 102-key Novotel Lombok Resort & Villas is operating in the area, while the 256-key Pullman Resort is set to open next year.

ITDC plans to run two races in 2021, and increase to four by 2022, and subsequently, eight, Ricky said.

The aim is to have back-to-back races on weekends that stretch into the following week to encourage longer stays, he added.

ITDC management feels that they can leverage the race infrastructure, when completed, to host more than just motorbike races.

“We are also developing a 27-hole championship golf course, and we also have the facilities and event planners to host a PGA golf tournament. We can also host marathons, triathlons like Ironman, and even yacht races between Australia and Lombok because we will also have a marina,” he said.

In the next stage, the Mandalika integrated resort complex will also feature a wellness centre, theme park and convention facilities.

With all these developments in the island's pipeline, Mandalika looks set to become more than just a beach paradise as it seeks to grow itself into an entertainment and sports destination, said Ricky.

Trade and hotel operators are upbeat about Lombok's future, given all the buzz surrounding the MotoGP.

Sudarsana, general manager of corporate business development and marketing communications at Santika Indonesia Hotels & Resorts, said: “We are observing three possible locations around Tanjung Aan in Mandalika to build a five-star property, probably an Anvaya.”

The Indonesian hotel group is also expanding its other brands to other parts of Lombok.

It recently launched The Kayana Beach Lombok boutique villa (see page 21) and is currently building Santika Premiere on the other side of

the island, about a 90-minute drive from Mandalika.

Ericht Alessandro, general manager of The Kayana Bali and Lombok, sees The Kayana Beach Lombok as a complement to Mandalika's development.

“Lombok has (limited) accommodation options. The Kayana Beach Lombok serves as an upmarket accommodation option in a different location with a different product offering from those being built in Mandalika,” he said.

Meanwhile, Awan is upbeat that the MotoGP will attract travellers not only for the races but also to explore Lombok and nearby Bali or surrounding islands.

What tourism stakeholders in Lombok ought to do, urged Awan, is to step up destination promotion efforts to encourage longer stays.

“On the other hand, we also need to prepare and get ready (the infrastructure) to manage the influx of (over 100,000) spectators expected to come to the island during race days,” he said.



**There is a lot of excitement with us bringing MotoGP into Indonesia. However, for us to have a sustainable business plan, we should do more races than just MotoGP.**

**RICKY BAHERAMSJAH**  
Head of investment and marketing, Indonesia Tourism Development Corporation



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Hotels

# Up-close and personalised

Indonesia’s growing midscale hotel segment is fusing lifestyle elements and customisation into their offerings to meet consumers’ demand for experiential travel, writes **Mimi Hudoyo**

Midscale hotel operators in Indonesia are integrating more lifestyle elements into their properties as they compete to elevate the guest experience. Standard rooms and basic amenities are no longer sufficient for hotels to edge out the competition.

Speaking at the 7<sup>th</sup> Tourism, Hotel Investment & Networking Conference in Bali in September, Armand Steinmeyer, director of business development and investment, Tauzia International Management, said: “In the past, midscale hotels started out simple but the proliferation of the middle class and their varying needs and experiences progressively changed (the way hotels operate).”

“We have, for example, seen the growth of meetings and incentives or people celebrating birthdays in hotels that we didn’t 10 to 15 years ago.”

He noted that while domestic travellers used to be contented with simple homestays, more are now opting

for professionally-run properties.

Another panellist, David Wray, senior vice president, acquisitions and business development, South-east Asia and Pacific Rim at Wyndham, also observed increasing integration of lifestyle elements in hotels amid growing demand for midscale hotels in South-east Asia, including Indonesia, and traveller interest in experiences.

Nathalia Wilson, director of development, South-east Asia and Korea, at InterContinental Hotels Group, agreed: “There is quite an interest in lifestyle (experiences) in the midscale segment in Indonesia. It does not only appeal to the millennials, but also those wanting a hotel stay where they can relate to the neighbourhood in terms of arts and culture. People want to relate more to the places where they stay and the experiences they get, and engage more with the community.”

Steinmeyer said: “In the past we saw more standardised hotels, but

the future of the hotel is moving towards guest experiences.”

For example, Tauzia’s Yello Hotels lifestyle brand, according to Steinmeyer, is customised to fit local preferences.

“While the room sizes and the brand’s core identity as urban art and technology is the same, a Yello Hotel in Jakarta is not the same as the one in Manado, for example, to adapt more to the kind of experiences guests want in that city. How we manage the building has to change and evolve to meet the expectations of the guests in that area.”

He said that a bar may be de rigueur in a Jakarta hotel, but less so in Indonesia’s secondary destinations.

Wilson also stressed the need to adjust brand standards to make them more relevant to the destination.

“A lot of the hotel owners we are working with are (first-time) owners. We do come up with the number of room keys that would be feasible but room sizes may differ from one loca-

tion to another (due to land size or market needs),” she said.

“For many hotels outside of Bali, the government-run business event sector is an important sector, so some of the facilities at (the hotels) need to cater for that.”

“I think that it’s also critical to note the type of hotels and what the trends are (in a destination),” added Wilson.

“Some of our hotels’ features, which may be our brand standards initiated in the US or Europe, may have to differ slightly for products that are in Indonesia where we see the MICE business coming from the government. Also, the wedding business is very important for a lot of hotels in secondary cities.”



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