



Destined for growth

As Malaysia becomes more popular with travellers from the Middle East, what exactly is the country doing to continuously prove itself as a haven for guests from this specific market? Mario Hajiloizis discovers

Malaysia registered over 24.5 million tourist arrivals in 2010, representing a 3.9 per cent increase in comparison to 2009, according to Tourism Malaysia.

The top ten tourist generating markets were Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand, China, Brunei, India, Australia, the Philippines, the UK and Japan, with the top five markets for growth including India, South Korea, Cambodia, the UAE and Iran.

Tourist arrivals are expected to reach 36 million by 2020, according to acting director general, Tourism Malaysia, Dato' Azizan Noordin, who explained to *TIG*: "We will focus on increasing meaningful support to tour operators, building partnerships with relevant stakeholders, promoting Malaysia's niche products to high-yield market segments, and establishing and maintaining long-term relationships with visitors to Malaysia."

Amongst these visitors to be targeted are those from the MENA region, as Noordin told *TIG*: "Malaysia is a family-friendly destination that is well-known in the Arab world. It is also a moderate Islamic country providing high comfort levels to Muslim visitors, for example, halal food is easily available, as is Middle Eastern cuisine. Furthermore, there are no visa requirements imposed upon visitors from the MENA countries."

A number of special events and activities designed with the MENA market in mind are set to be promoted across the year in Malaysia, with Noordin highlighting Tarawih prayers at designated mosques, selected Ramadan bazaars and the annual Samrah Festival.

TAKING TO THE SKY

Access for tourists travelling from the Middle East to Malaysia is facilitated by flagship carrier Malaysia Airlines, which recently revealed figures showing a 37 per cent increase in passengers from the region.

"The Middle East is a key market for Malaysia Airlines," regional senior vice president, Malaysia Airlines – Middle East, Africa and

South America, Merina Abu Tahir told *TIG*: "Malaysia is a very attractive destination for Middle Eastern travellers because it offers various attractions at an affordable cost, in addition to strong cultural links."

Tahir revealed to *TIG* that over the next five years Malaysia Airlines will be receiving up to 55 new Boeing 737-800s, up to 25 new Airbus 330-300s as well as six new Airbus 380s, making it amongst the youngest fleets in the region.

HIGH QUALITY SERVICE

Numerous world renowned hotel groups such as Accor have also identified Malaysia as key to their regional operations.

Already boasting five properties currently under operation in the country, vice president operations, Accor – Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore, Gerard Guillouet revealed to *TIG* that a 500-room Pullman Hotel is due to be opened in Kuala Lumpur later this year.

Guillouet also stated that beyond the traditional destinations such as Penang and Kuala Lumpur numerous new opportunities now exist in other areas.

"Tourists are today increasingly venturing to Sabah, Sarawak and to new destinations on the peninsula such as Malaka," he told *TIG*. "Accor has a presence in these destinations and we are confident that we will double our presence in Malaysia in the coming two years."

Hilton Worldwide's flagship brand, Hilton Hotels & Resorts also views Malaysia as a key destination, with four properties currently on offer to guests.

"Our properties in the market have become iconic landmarks within the cities where they exist and feature amongst the best F&B options in the country," outlined global head, Hilton Hotels & Resorts, Dave Horton. "Guests will see us making considerable investments into our existing product in Malaysia and introducing new brand initiatives in 2011. Hilton Petaling Jaya is undergoing an

extensive renovation and we have some exciting brand concepts in development."

Currently finalising development plans, Anggun Boutique Hotel is set to open in the second quarter of 2011 and is already harbouring aims to target Middle Eastern guests due to its location in Kuala Lumpur's main Bukit Bintang shopping district.

"Amongst our highlights is the fact that we can offer a personalised service to all our guests as we only have 18 boutique rooms," director, Anggun Boutique Hotel, Sharon Gan stated to *TIG*. "Our hotel also has suites and inter-connecting rooms which are suitable for Arab families whilst our Al-Mumbai Restolounge serves Arabic cuisine. We are also planning to include Arabic language in our printing materials in the future as well."

Also seeking to attract more Middle Eastern business is CapitalLand's wholly-owned serviced residence business arm, The Ascott Limited (Ascott), which recently opened a 207-unit property – Somerset Ampang Kuala Lumpur.

The company has also secured a contract to manage a 232-unit property in Cyberjaya which is to be named Citadines D'Pulze Cyberjaya and is due to open in 2014.

With the new properties, Ascott will strengthen its position as the largest international serviced residence owner and operator in Malaysia, with close to 1,400 units across 10 properties.

"Besides space, comfort and privacy, Ascott's serviced residences offer the high quality services expected in a hotel," country general manager, Ascott – Malaysia, Tony Ho told *TIG*. "But what truly differentiates us is our strong customer-centric approach and our focus on providing our guests with a memorable home-away-from-home experience."

Also offering serviced-residences in the country is The Nomad Group which currently has four properties under its portfolio across Malaysia. This year is set to see the portfolio increase through property acquisitions or through the securing



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management contracts according to group general manager, serviced residences, The Nomad Group, NK Yeoh.

Explaining how the group will seek to attract more business from the Middle East, Yeoh stated to *TIG*: "We will be participating at the upcoming ATM, and will also promote our products via local travel agents who have been active in promoting the Middle East market. Attention will also be given to online travel agencies, as we are seeing an increasing trend in Middle Eastern travellers booking their accommodation online."

An upcoming property slated to open in the second quarter of 2011, the four-star Four Points by Sheraton Langkawi Resort, is also aiming to capture the Middle Eastern traveller's attention.

Director of sales and marketing, Four Points by Sheraton Langkawi Resort, Vivian Choa explained to *TIG*: "This market is in our top five market mix so naturally we put plenty of emphasis here. We have hired Arabic speaking agents and we will block off rooms in our chalet section to ensure privacy.

"This year we will see a shorter Middle East season due to the earlier Ramadan so we are working on some attractive packages to entice them. We will also be participating at ATM and additionally we are fine-tuning our menus to cater to our Middle Eastern guests," Choa concluded.