

Agent recognition of 'lucrative' adventure sector boosts sales

Image courtesy of Oman Tourism

While adventure travel sales are increasing every year, operators are cautious about forecasts, with product innovation remaining essential to secure bookings.

By Jane E. Fraser

TRAVEL consultants' knowledge of adventure travel has come on in leaps and bounds over the past couple of years, says World Expeditions chief executive Sue Badyari.

Agents have come to recognise the adventure sector as a "very lucrative proposition for them to sell" and have made a concerted effort with ongoing training.

"There's a much higher awareness of adventure travel," says Badyari.

"Most of the agency groups have made a real effort and agent knowledge has improved a huge amount.

"Adventure is, with cruising, the fastest growth segment in the market and to ignore it would not be very smart."

Badyari says while sales are up on last year, adventure operators are having to work hard for their bookings.

"There is growth every year but that does rely on companies being very innovative and keeping the market interested," she says.

"The adventure travel market is now very mature and people are looking for those very unique products and operators."

Badyari is cautious about 2012 and is watching the economy – and other operators – closely.

"I think it will be a very interesting 2012, as what happens in the retail sector tends to flow into the travel industry and the retail sector seems to

be really hurting at the moment," she says.

Badyari is also concerned about a culture of big discounting that has emerged over the past few months, with adventure operators offering 25 to 30 per cent discounts across the board.

"It's an indicator that things are not great," she says.

"I really don't think people's profits are going to be as healthy as they have been, unless they're getting massive sales growth."

'Adventure is, with cruising, the fastest growth segment in the market and to ignore it would not be very smart.'

Intrepid Travel's general manager of global sales, James Thornton, agrees the market is unpredictable but hopes interest rate cuts will combine with the strong Australian dollar to give people confidence to travel in 2012.

Intrepid's sales out of Australia are on par with last year and the company is targeting double digit growth in 2012, thanks to new products, the recently completed acquisition of Intrepid Connections and increasing sales of domestic product.

North America, Europe and Vietnam have also been strong performers, prompting the release of new trips in these areas.

Thornton says there is a continuing trend of travellers wanting to do trips of just one or two days.

Intrepid has carried more than 10,000 passengers on its short breaks program this year (a number it expects to double over the next two years), along with more than 30,000 on its Urban Adventures day tours, which offer travellers a different way of seeing more than 100 cities around the world.

"The Urban Adventures concept only soft-launched in early 2009 and since then we've never had a style of travel take off so quickly," says Thornton.

G Adventures says it enjoyed five record breaking sales days last month, matching last year's November sales when it was only halfway through the month.

The company puts the sales down to its new 'You'll Never Forget It' campaign, which Australian head Pete Rawley says "really resonated well with both agency partners and travellers".

"The purpose of this campaign is to allow travellers to engage with the concept of adventure travel and identify as travellers rather than tourists," Rawley says.

"Secondly, the fact that the campaign is visual, it means agents have been able to implement the videos into their selling process, which has provided huge benefits to them.

"We'll also be providing agents with these videos to use as a sales tool in the future, which we hope will encourage them to use multimedia in addition to the usual collateral."

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Oman trekking demand gathers momentum

OMAN Tourism says travellers are starting to discover trekking in Oman, among all the other adventure activities on offer.

The tourism board's country manager for Australia, Mona Tannous, says there is an excellent trekking guide available on arrival at the airport and there is a wide range of options, from easy walks to serious treks.

"For under \$200, you can buy all your trekking equipment and go and do some treks," Tannous says.

Diving is also growing in popularity, helped along by word of mouth and the growing profile of volunteer conservation projects.

"Oman is really starting to become very popular for deep sea diving and snorkelling," says Tannous.

Tourism Oman says April to July is the best time for diving but it



Sharqiah Mountains

can be enjoyed year-round.

Away from the water, one of the most popular soft adventure activities is four

wheel drive trips through the desert, visiting ancient villages and driving through old riverbeds. "That's a pretty soft adventure tour that people can do at any age," says Tannous.

"And it's all private touring, you're not buying a seat on a big coach."

For those looking for harder adventure, the options include big wave kite-boarding, surfing and serious mountain climbing. Oman is also popular for caving expeditions, both for amateurs and serious cavers.

For those with an interest in wildlife, Oman boasts whale watching, dolphin watching and turtle watching on and around the water, and excellent bird watching on land.

Those who enjoy camping can choose from a wide range of locations, from mountain tops and deserts to beautiful beaches and islands.

Improved safety boosts adventure demand – AWS/NFS



IMPROVED infrastructure and strict safety standards are giving travellers the confidence to undertake more adventure activities around the world, says the sales and marketing manager of African Wildlife Safaris (AWS) and Natural Focus Safaris (NFS), Praful Albuquerque.

"Besides this, we now have many more seasoned travellers who are always on the lookout for activities that are out of the ordinary," Albuquerque says.

"All of these factors are driving the demand for adventure activities."

Albuquerque says travellers with AWS and NFS have the freedom to include as much adventure as they can handle.

The companies offer a wide range of soft adventure activities such as walking tours in the foothills of the Himalayas or more active options such as canoeing on the Zambezi River in Africa or venturing into Brazil's Pantanal wetlands in search of wildlife.

LAN launches services to second Galapagos Islands destination

LAN Ecuador is now flying to the island of San Cristobal in the Galapagos Islands. The airline is operating flights from Quito/Guayaquil on Wednesdays and Sundays, with the A320 services

taking about two hours. San Cristobal is the second destination served by LAN Ecuador in the Galapagos Islands, with flights to the island of Baltra operating since late last year.

From Australia, LAN flies daily to the gateway of Santiago, Chile, where passengers can pick up onward connections to destinations including Ecuador.

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PNG cruises provide 'creature comforts' with exploration

THE Papua New Guinea Tourism Authority says cruising has emerged as a popular option for travellers who want the adventure and excitement of PNG without forgoing their creature comforts.

The fast-growing cruise sector is tapping into "the Australian fascination with our closest neighbour", says the authority's Australian representative, Michael Woods.

"The comfort of cruise ships is a massive drawcard for travellers who are looking for a relaxing holiday but who also want that

adventure hit," Woods says. "(They) are able to experience the incredible culture, snorkelling, landscapes and birdlife of PNG combined with the onboard comfort of a cruising vessel."

Woods says different cruise companies are able to provide different opportunities, such as cruising up the Sepik River to visit remote villages or accessing the beautiful islands off the coastline.

Orion Expeditions' luxury *Orion* and *Orion II* vessels will set sail in March and October next year, to explore PNG's islands under the

guidance of a specialist expedition team.

Coral Princess Cruises' *Oceanic Discoverer* is able to travel in shallow water, meaning it can travel up the Sepik River, visiting remote villages known for their artists and woodcarvers.

Aurora Expeditions is operating a special voyage in April to commemorate the 70th anniversary of Australia's involvement in the war at Kokoda, with the trip including a dawn Anzac Day service at Rabaul.

Another option for Australian travellers is cruising with North Star Cruises.

Intrepid releases new US road trip and sailing adventures

INTREPID Travel is launching two new product lines for 2012: self-drive adventures in the US and sailing trips in Croatia, Greece and Thailand.

General manager of global sales James Thornton says the new product ranges "are a great way to introduce people to adventure travel and easier than asking people to do group travel".

"Our USA self-drive adventures are based on Intrepid's most popular USA trips and are designed to let travellers live out their own USA road trip fantasy," says Thornton.

Intrepid provides the car, maps and accommodation, along with national park passes, a support phone line and camping gear.

"We'll even show travellers how to set it up," Thornton says.

Intrepid's new sailing adventures range from four to 10 days, with travellers able to sail with a crew through the Greek Islands, along the Croatian coastline or in Thailand's Andaman Sea.

Thornton is also expecting continued demand for Vietnam, which



has been one of Intrepid's strongest performers of late.

"One trend we are noticing is an increase in interest from our passengers on the culinary side of Vietnam," he says. "Our leaders tell us they are getting lots of requests from passengers about cooking classes and where to find the best local restaurants."

"This year we launched a new tour called 'Taste of Vietnam' which covers all the major sights of the country but has a special emphasis on food-based activities such as cooking classes."

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Oman continues to attract more Australian travellers

THE number of Australians travelling to Oman is growing as awareness of the destination's safety and activities increases, says Oman Tourism's manager for Australia, Mona Tannous.

It is difficult to determine total numbers due to the way statistics are collected but about 17,500 visas have been issued to Australians this year.

A leading hotel has also reported a doubling of room nights from the Australian market, according to the tourism body.

"The popularity of the destination is obviously becoming quite big as the trade are becoming more aware of it," says Tannous.

"Wholesalers and airlines are focusing much more on the region... particularly combining it (travel to Oman) with Dubai and Abu Dhabi."

Adventure activities are a big part of the attraction of Oman, which offers everything from desert safaris to world class diving and hard core kiteboarding. "A lot of wholesalers are still selling the basic, soft adventure tour programs, but the real hard adventure stuff is also starting to take off for this market," says Tannous.



Tannous says an important factor in the destination's growth out of the Australian market has been airline offerings such as free side trips on the way to Europe.

Oman has also benefited from its reputation as a safe place, while other Middle Eastern destinations have been troubled.

"Oman really does have a gentleness about it, there's really no conflict there," says Tannous.

"People feel the warmth of the Arabian people in Oman... it's a place that hasn't lost its soul."

Tannous says wholesalers are starting to offer longer packages, such as six or seven night itineraries, as

interest in the destination grows.

There are also new operators, such as Scenic Tours, heading into Oman.

And it helped when Lonely Planet recently listed the capital, Muscat, in its top 10 cities to visit in 2012.

Tannous says while some travel consultants in Australia know Oman very well and sell it consistently, many are still getting educated on the destination.

"A lot are still trying to position where it is and are not aware of how much it has to offer," she says.

"There are a lot of agents who are really not that confident in recommending anything outside Dubai or Abu Dhabi."

Tannous says Oman Tourism is ramping up its training program on its website and is preparing to host a 'mega-famil' in 2012.

The tourism board is finalising an airline partner to take about 40 agents to Oman; the largest contingent ever out of Australia and New Zealand.

Tannous says Oman Tourism's training program, which helps agents learn how to sell and position Oman, will be a pre-requisite for the famil.

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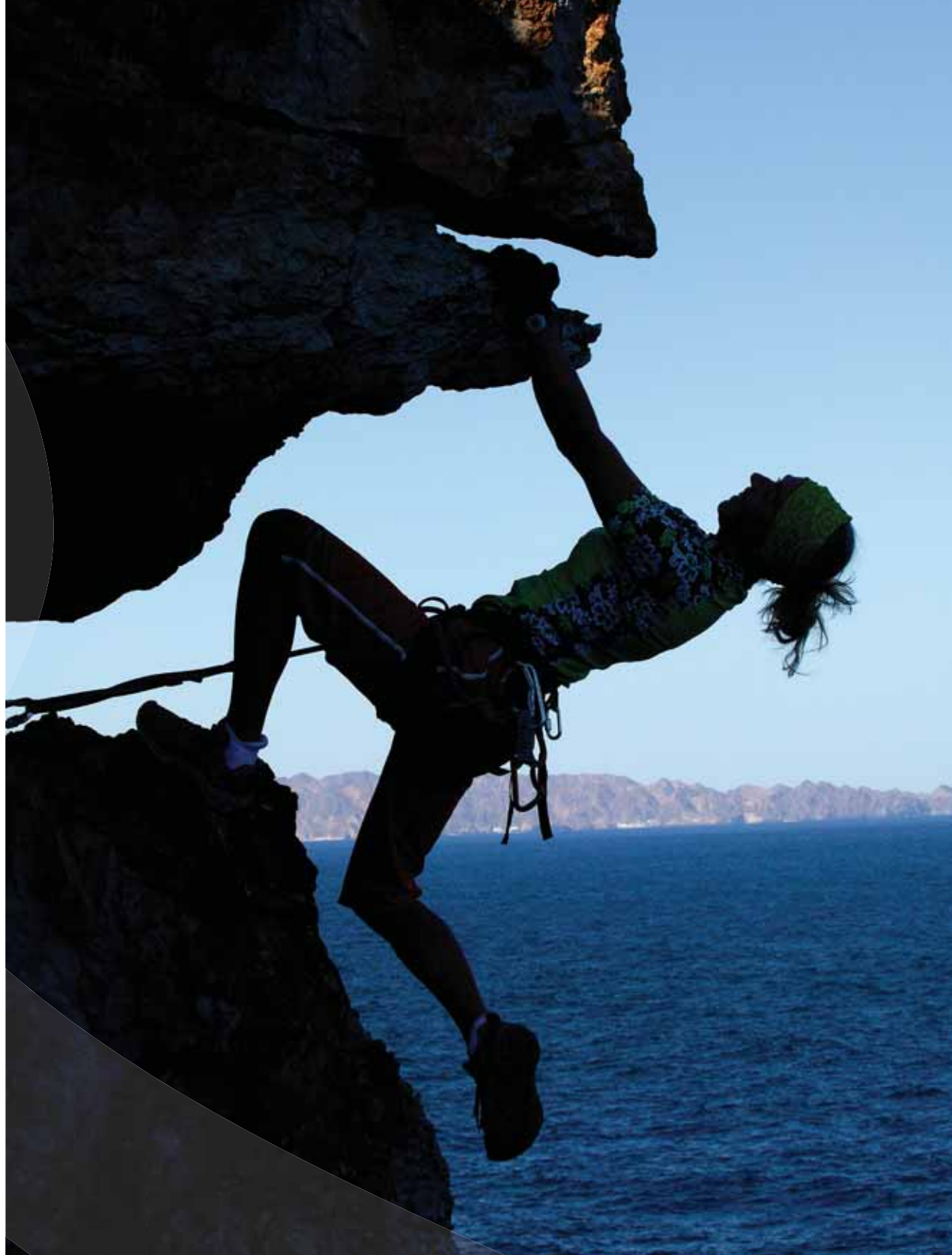


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Ministry of Tourism

New resort opens on secluded PNG island

ONE of Papua New Guinea's most secluded areas has become more accessible to travellers, with the opening of a new resort in the Conflict Islands.

Made up of 22 islands, the Conflict Islands group is located in the Lower Milne area, at the top of the Coral Sea, and boasts world-renowned diving and fishing.

The Conflict Islands resort, which was originally developed as a private hideaway, is located on the island of Panasesa (via Port Moresby) and comprises six double occupancy timber bungalows, to give a maximum resort occupancy of 12.

The bungalows have beachfront balconies, air conditioning, en-suite bathrooms, mini bars, tea and coffee facilities and iPod docks and can be fitted with either a queen bed or two king singles.

The resort has a resident chef who uses the abundant local produce, including fish and lobster, to prepare meals for guests.

The Conflict Islands resort is available for individual or group bookings and more information is available at www.conflictislands.com.

'Phenomenal response' to Aurora Expeditions' program

AURORA Expeditions says it has had a "phenomenal response" to the release of its 2012/13 program, with large numbers of enquiries and brochure orders or downloads.

The program includes 20 voyages encompassing the highlights of the Antarctic Peninsula, the Weddell Sea, South Georgia and the Falkland Islands.

A new voyage is "South Georgia and Weddell Sea - Shackleton's Odyssey", following in the path of Sir Ernest Shackleton and celebrating "one of the greatest survival stories in Antarctic exploration".

Passengers on this trip have the option of completing 'Shackleton's Crossing', an alpine traverse of South Georgia's interior, from King Haakon Bay to Stromness.

Aurora's 2012/13 season also includes a choice of two ships, with the *Akademik Shokalskiy* recently added to the Antarctic Peninsula program.

The increased capacity allows for a greater variety of voyage lengths - from eight to 20 days - and more opportunities for adventure activities,



Above: Antarctic Peninsula Zodiac
(©Andrew Halsall)

Left: Antarctic Peninsula sunset drinks
(© Mark Jones RovingTortoise.co.nz)

with kayaking offered on 16 voyages.

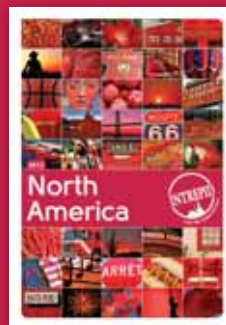
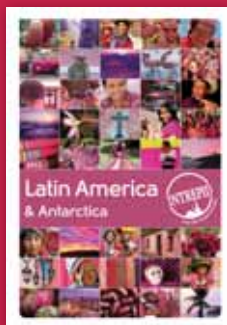
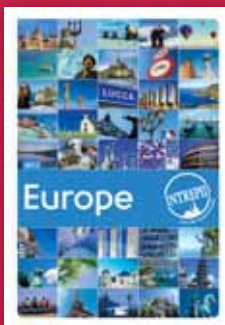
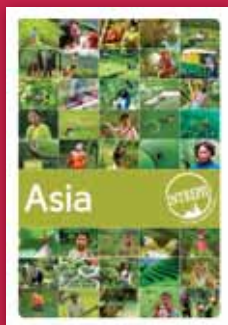
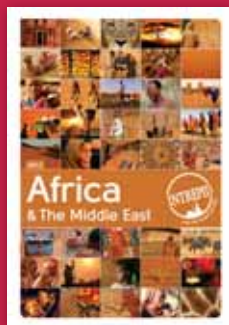
Aurora has also increased its 'Fly and Sail' options, which proved popular in the 2011/12 season. Fly and Sail options allow travellers to see more in a shorter space of time, by

cutting out one sea crossing. The trips include either a flight in from Santiago or Punta Arenas in Chile or a flight out from King George Island or Stanley in the Falkland Islands.

Prices for the 2012/13 season start at \$US6365 for an eight-day cruise.

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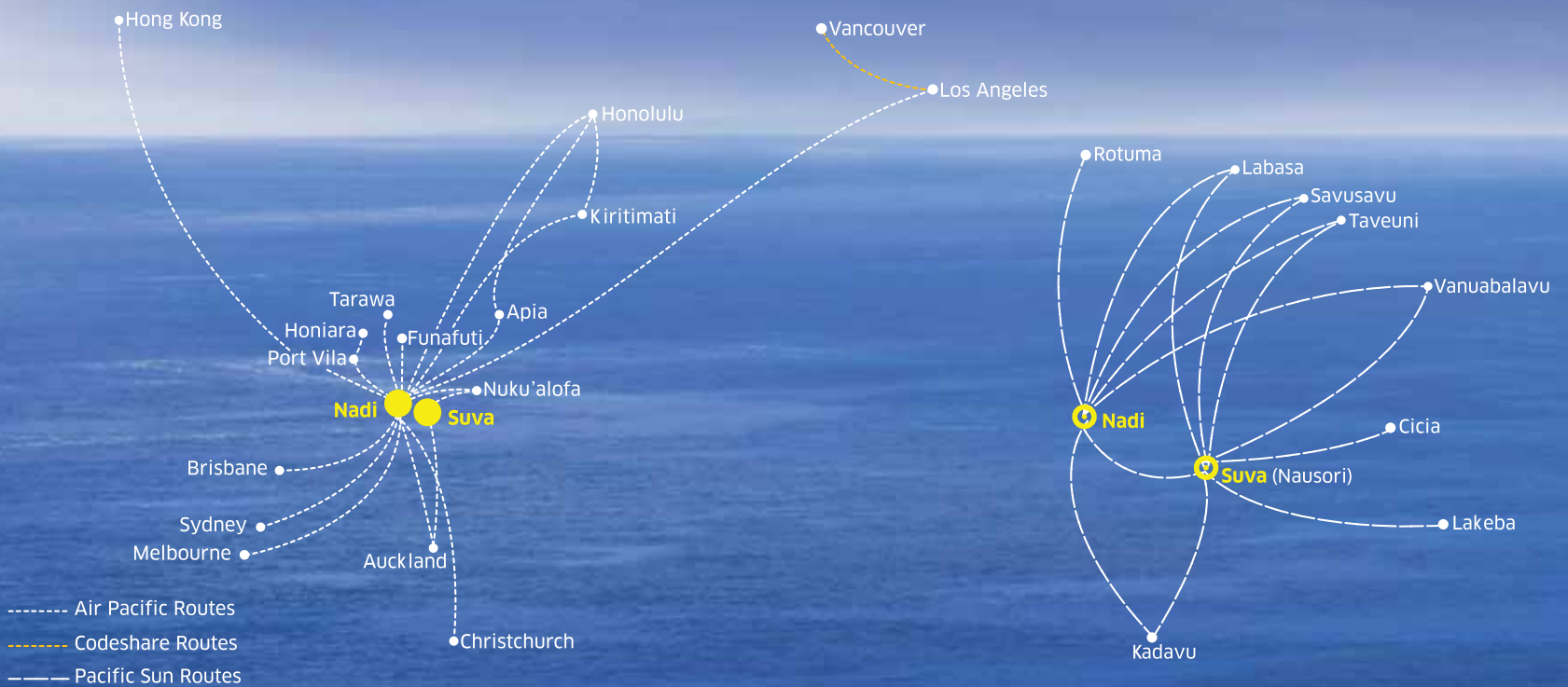
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World Expeditions tips Myanmar, Uganda as next hot spots



Nepal has been a strong performer for World Expeditions

WORLD Expeditions is banking on big growth to Myanmar (Burma) now that travellers are being encouraged to go there.

Chief executive Sue Badyari believes tourism can be of great benefit to the people of Myanmar, so long as operators ensure the money is getting into the right hands.

World Expeditions is also predicting the Rwenzori Mountains in Uganda will become a hotspot for more adventurous Australian travellers.

The area was "off the map" when the Rwanda civil war took place but

is now "Africa's best kept secret", with mountain scenery varying from tropical rainforest to alpine valleys and glaciers.

World Expeditions' Rwenzori trip includes a challenging climb up Africa's third highest mountain, Margherita, using ropes and crampons on the final ascent.

Badyari says Africa has been a strong performer in recent times. "It's really cyclical, Africa, but it is going really well at the moment," she says.

Demand for locations such as Madagascar and Namibia indicates

there are a lot of second time travellers.

Badyari says Nepal has also been strong, after a period of political stability. The market had shrunk to the Everest and Annapurna tourist trails but people are now getting back out into remote areas.

In general terms, there has been a lot of demand for family holidays, along with culinary trips.

"We've developed a series of (culinary) tours this year and most of them are full, and filled up very quickly," says Badyari.



FJ to add new A330-200s to fleet

AIR Pacific has ordered three new A330-200s to replace its fleet of B747 and B767 aircraft, after undertaking a review of its fleet.

The carrier says the new aircraft will start arriving in early 2013 and will be used on the Sydney route among others.

"This decision is a significant milestone in our 60-year history because it will be our first-ever purchase of new wide-body airplanes, and these state-of-the-art A330s are clearly going to be planes that our customers will be thrilled to fly," says managing director David Pflieger.

Pflieger says the new aircraft will be fitted with the latest seats and inflight entertainment and will have a look and feel that is "truly Fijian".



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Monument Valley

Peregrine launches North America adventure holiday options

PEREGRINE is venturing into North America for the first time in its 33-year history, with a program of more than 20 adventure holidays.

There are camping, lodge and hotel-based trips, taking in activities such as hiking, four wheel driving, horse riding and cycling.

Peregrine destination manager Steve Wroe says the company has been considering getting into the US market for a number of years.

A trip that is expected to be particularly popular is a seven-day "Canyons and Indian Lands" itinerary, starting in Las Vegas.

The trip takes in the Zion Canyon, "for some of the best hiking in the desert terrain of America's south-west", then continues on to the sandstone spires of Bryce Canyon,

where travellers hike on Navajo trails. The trip continues to Monument Valley, the Grand Canyon, a section of Route 66 and the Hoover Dam, before returning to Las Vegas.

The seven-day trip is priced from \$1419 per person and there will be regular departures, year-round.

Peregrine has also introduced new tours to Morocco, a destination to which it says travellers are turning "in the wake of regional unrest".

A 16-day "Moroccan Caravan" itinerary takes in a camel ride in the Sahara, a night in a Bedouin camp, visiting Kasbahs and exploring Roman ruins, with monthly or more frequent departures and prices from \$2195 per person.