

Exchange rate intensifies demand for island escapes

The strong Australian dollar is intensifying demand from Australian travellers for island holiday destinations, with most Pacific tourism bodies and airlines forecasting solid sales for the year ahead.



Practicing surfing in Samoa (Photo Credit: Kirklandphotos.com)

By Jenny Burns

AUSTRALIANS' love affair with international island holiday destinations shows little sign of abating.

All the major destinations and the airlines servicing those destinations are reporting strong sales.

A strong dollar, Australians' love of sand, sea and the cultural experiences on offer on these islands plus increased ease of access have all played a major role in the increasing tourism numbers.

More than 25,000 Australians visited Samoa last year and more are expected this year. A successful roadshow which is likely to result in more Samoan products available for sale in Australia is one of the reasons for the predicted increase in numbers.

A desire for those who have already visited to return is another, according to Samoa Tourism Authority Australian representative, Peter Sereno.

"I think what separates Samoa from our main South Pacific contemporaries like the Cook Islands and Tahiti is because of what we have to offer, the value for our dollar and the numerous activities and sights we offer, Samoa is more likely to attract return visits as opposed to Tahiti and the Cooks," he said.

"Tahiti and The Cooks are dream destinations which many perceive you only need to visit once. Samoa always leaves you with a desire to return for more. Now that we have been voted

as best value destination in the South Pacific, it's realistic to do so."

New Caledonia is predicting a strong year ahead following on from good growth in 2010.

"October and November figures were up 21 and 23 per cent respectively from around the world and Australians accounted for a

industry promotions to ensure New Caledonia stays front of mind with Australian travellers."

Sayer said a number of amazing events in the next few months further added to New Caledonia's appeal.

"These include the first ever New Caledonia Great Lagoon Regatta from June 9-13, the Car Rally



Image credit: Tahiti Tourisme and Ty Sawyer

high percentage of this growth," said New Caledonia Tourism South spokesperson Janet Sayer.

"New Caledonia is the closest Pacific island to Australia. It has the unique distinction of unspoilt beauty of a Pacific island plus the sophistication of a cosmopolitan city – the best of both worlds.

"We will continue with our extensive retail and wholesale travel

Championships from June 17-19, the South Pacific Games from August 27 to September 10, PGA Golf Tournament from September 12-17 and the Gypsy Jazz Festival from November 16-19 with music this year dedicated to Djanga Reinhardt and Stephane Grapelli," she said

The Cook Islands are also looking for a good year ahead thanks to extra flights ex Australia with Air New

Zealand. "This new service, along with the strength of the Australian dollar against the islands' NZ dollar currency, will have a major impact on the country's economy and tourism growth opportunities," said Cook Islands Tourism Corporation chief executive officer, Carmel Beattie.

"Watch out for the Cook Islands becoming the hot new South Pacific destination once Australians discover how easy it is to reach this truly authentic island paradise.

"They will love the warmth and accessibility of the unique Cook Islands Maori culture and fabulous range of holiday experiences on Rarotonga and beyond."

Forward bookings to Tahiti are also looking very good according to Tahiti Tourisme Australia regional director Robert Thompson.

Last year arrivals were up 5.9 per cent and an increase of at least five per cent is predicted in 2011. Already January visitor arrivals are up 23 per cent on the previous year.

"The news from our partners is that first quarter together with forward bookings are very strong," he said.

Strategic Airlines is also reporting strong demand for Bali as a result of its flights.

"We have seen strong demand out of Perth and with our Queensland service now operating that demand is only set to grow," said Strategic's chief commercial officer, Damien Vasta.

Air Pacific launches autumn fare offer

AIR Pacific has released the fare initiative, "Autumn in Fiji", which is valid for sale to June 11 for travel from December 7 ex Brisbane, and December 14 ex Sydney and Melbourne.

The fare levels of \$450 return ex Brisbane, \$490 return ex Sydney and \$606 return ex Melbourne are all inclusive of fuel surcharge, excluding applicable taxes and apply to all direct flights with Air Pacific. Special children's airfares are also available.

There are also special airfares available from offline ports including Adelaide, Canberra, Perth, Townsville and most regional ports in Australia.

In other news, Air Pacific has announced supplementary B737 services ex Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane.

An extra service will leave Sydney during July, December and January, ex Melbourne June, July, September and October and ex Brisbane July and December and January.

In other news Air Pacific is reminding agents to advise their clients that all Air Pacific flights across the network will be closed for check-in one hour before departure to ensure on-time performance.

Diverse product, Kokoda drive demand

THE Papua New Guinea Tourism and Promotion Authority is predicting a good Kokoda trekking season.

"Forward bookings are looking strong and recent research has shown that people's experiences along the track are overwhelmingly positive," said PNG Tourism and Promotion Authority Australian and NZ sales and marketing manager Vera Huntink.

Huntink said visitation numbers had been buoyed by the improving operations along the track and increasing positive word of mouth.

"Over the last two years significant work has gone into raising standards along the track, encouraging community engagement and giving back to communities. This has improved trekker safety and experiences along the track," she said.

Major improvements along the track have been undertaken by the Kokoda Track Authority (KTA) which has been supported since 2008 by a joint initiative between the Australian and Papua New Guinea governments.

The KTA ensures that all tour operators along Kokoda obtain a licence and all trekkers pay trekking fees.



Huntink said there were potential for significant growth in tourist numbers to PNG not only with more trekkers heading to Kokoda but also by promoting the other attractive tourism products around the country.

"Improvements to the Kokoda Track are certainly translating to growing numbers along the track but we are also focused on raising awareness about the other niche segments

including world-class diving, surfing, bird watching and fascinating cultural experiences," she said.

"Major Australian wholesalers are also recognising the potential of Papua New Guinea's diverse product, with Adventure World and Coral Seas now packaging cultural tours to PNG's highlands and Madang and Wild Earth Expeditions covering Mount Hagen, Sepik River and Kimbe Bay."



Jenna lounging around at Matareva Beach

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Samoa showcases expanded accommodation options

SAMOA tourism officials are expecting to see more Samoa product than ever before available in Australia as a result of a highly successful roadshow.

“The feedback to our recent Fa’a Samoa Roadshow was excellent,” said Samoa Tourism Authority Australian representative Peter Sereno.

“I believe as a result of the show we will see more accommodation, transport services and tours available in Australia.

“It also provided the ideal opportunity for agents to meet with Samoan operators.”

Sereno said the timing of the roadshow was ideal as Samoa had more properties than ever before and as a result could cater for all markets.

“For couples you have glorious boutique seaside resorts such as Sinalei Reef Resort and Spa and Coconuts Beach Resort along the south coast of Upolu and Le Lagoto on Savai’i,” he said.

“For families, Sa’Moana at Upolu’s south coast and Siufaga Beach Resort at Savai’i offer the perfect beach family getaway. Aimed at young families, these beachfront locations offer a variety of free watersport offerings such as kayaking and snorkelling.

“The Tanoa Tusitala, the newest resort in town, offers the latest in mod cons, is within a stone’s throw of the town centre and is within easy walking distance to gourmet restaurants and cosmopolitan harbour-side bars.”

There is also a range of traditional accommodation on offer for backpackers and those seeking an authentic Samoan experience.

“For a memorable and cost effective



Upolu beach (Photo Credit: Kirklandphotos.com)

accommodation option guests can stay in one of Samoa’s many beachside Fales – the traditional thatched hut located around the coast,” Sereno said.

“There are such properties as Litia’s Fales, Taufua Beach Fales and Fao Fao Beach Fales, located at the spectacular stretch of beach at Lalomanu – recently voted by Lonely Planet as number seven in the top 10 Beach Paradises in the world. Upmarket options are available in Savai’i at Stevenson’s at Manase, where fales come with an en suite!”

Sereno said the extra infrastructure ensured the island could cover the closure of the Aggie Grey’s Lagoon, Beach Resort and Spa from May 16 to September 16.

“Aggie Grey’s Lagoon, Beach Resort

and Spa are working closely with sister property Aggie Grey’s Hotel and Bungalows and elegant beachfront properties Le Vasa Resort and Le Lagoto and Siufaga Beach Resort in Savai’i on alternative accommodation,” he said.

“The islands of Upolu and Savai’i offer a range of alternative accommodation options in the deluxe, superior, budget and fale categories.”

These islands are attractions in their own rights.

“Savai’i for example, is rugged in its beauty and boasts stunning inland trenches and waterfalls, steep gorges, lava fields and spectacular blow holes, both the young and young at heart will be mesmerised by the island’s natural wonders,” Sereno said.

Meanwhile, Samoa has been voted best value destination in the South Pacific, ranking number two in the world according to the twice yearly Expedia compiled HiFX foreign exchange Index.

According to the survey the strong Australian dollar has contributed to the high ranking, appreciating by more than 19 cent against the Samoa tala.

At the same time according to Sereno the value gained in the destination exceeds the dollar factor.

“While the Australian dollar stretches a lot further in Samoa than many other destinations in the world, the beauty of Samoa is that it takes very little effort or money for one to become incredibly rich with experiences,” he said.

GDS connectivity expected to further boost Strategic’s Bali and Phuket demand

NEW full service international carrier Strategic Airlines is predicting accelerated growth in Australian holiday business to Bali following strong support for its new services to Denpasar and the imminent distribution of Strategic Airlines product via GDS.

The new airline’s maiden flight took off from Perth to Bali in June 2010 and it has continued to steadily increase its Australia-Bali services after being successfully granted the largest share of available capacity between Australia and Indonesia.

Latest moves from Strategic include Melbourne-Phuket and Brisbane-Denpasar services.

Brisbane-Bali non-stop services now depart every Wednesday and Saturday, operated by a dual-aisle Airbus A330 aircraft featuring 30 business class seats and 243 economy seats.

The company also flies Perth-Bali direct and Townsville-Bali direct.

Strategic’s chief commercial officer, Damien Vasta said the carrier had received positive



Strategic is offering full service on the ‘reasonably long’ flight to Bali

feedback from the travel trade to launch full service flights to Bali.

“Currently Bali is enjoying huge popularity with Australians and yet most airlines offer a

no-frills service on what is a reasonably long flight,” he said.

“We believe our passengers will really enjoy flying on a wide-bodied Airbus A330 with the

comfort and customer service of a full service carrier, at very affordable fares.”

Vasta said Bali had always been one of the most popular international destinations for Brisbane holiday-makers due to its affordability.

“We are intent on not only creating a new service to fulfil this need, but providing the most competitive fares available,” he said.

“Support from the trade for our Bali services has been very encouraging even with limited distribution ability via our internet booking engine.

“As a new entrant that gives us confidence that we are on the right track with an appropriate product.

“We also appreciate that GDS connectivity is not only important to agents and wholesalers but essential to grow our own business and we are delighted to confirm full GDS accessibility is coming in the next few weeks via new agreements with Travelport/Galileo, Amadeus and Sabre.”

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Direct flights to boost demand for Cook Islands



Aitutaki Lagoon Resort & Spa overwater bungalow

COOK Island Tourism is predicting a major increase in Australian tourism numbers as a result of non-stop flights from Sydney to Rarotonga.

The Cook Islands government has entered a three year partnership with Air New Zealand to operate a B767 direct from Sydney on a weekly, year round basis from July 5.

The launch follows the success of a

four month trial last year.

“We expect the Cook Islands will become the hot new South Pacific destination once Australians discover how easy it is to reach this truly authentic island paradise,” said Cook Island Tourism Corporation (CITC) chief executive officer Carmel Beattie.

“They will love the warmth and

accessibility of the unique Cook Islands Maori culture and fabulous range of holiday experiences on Rarotonga and beyond. We expect Australians will want to explore the family of islands as they are already the largest market for the island of Aitutaki.”

In the lead up to the launch of direct flights CITC is increasing its

focus on generating Australian media coverage, working with local public relations company PEPR to help build understanding of the destination’s distinct attractions and positioning, varied islands and location.

“I believe that it is imperative for us to raise the nation’s profile with the consumer in all major markets in order to drive the demand for holidays in the Cook Islands,” Beattie said.

“One of our goals is to introduce Australian visitors and, especially repeat visitors, to the outer islands beyond Rarotonga and Aitutaki – in particular the coral island of Atiu, which combines well with flights to Aitutaki and Rarotonga and more off the beaten track Mangaia (the southernmost island, first island colonised and oldest in Pacific; known for its double ‘makatea’ or caves) and Mitiaro, famed for its beautiful arts and crafts, the hats women wear to church, weaving and the women’s lagoon.”

The direct service will be operated by a 234 seat Boeing 767-300 with a flight time of six hours from Sydney and seven hours 15 minutes from Rarotonga.

Flights will depart Sydney on Tuesdays at 9pm arriving in Rarotonga at 7am on the same day.

Return flights depart Rarotonga on Monday at 4.35pm arriving in Sydney at 7.50pm Tuesday.

The new service adds to the already daily connections to Cook Islands from Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane that travel via Auckland.

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Agents jump on Tahiti social media

TAHITI Tourisme is reporting strong travel agent interest in its social media platforms.

According to Tahiti Tourisme Australia regional director, Robert Thompson, TTAU’s twitter (<http://twitter.com/TahitiTourismAU>) and Facebook (www.facebook.com/TahitiTourismAU) were fast becoming a source of information on Tahiti for the travel agent community in Australia.

“Despite being started as a consumer social network, more and more agents are calling us to ask questions about property updates, specials and general information from Facebook status updates,” Thompson said.

At the same time consumer enquiries on the page had resulted in a number of bookings being made with travel agents.

To ensure the strong arrival figures already reported the organisation will continue with its You Deserve Tahiti campaign.

“We will also be running a range of other more targeted consumer initiatives in partnership with various wholesale and retail chains,” Thompson said.

“This will be complemented by our PR efforts with press trips throughout the year



that will build on the consumer marketing activity.

“We are also planning a series of familiarisations for our qualified Australian Tiare Tahiti specialist agents.”