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### Today's issue of TD

*Travel Daily* today features seven pages of news including our **Luxury page**, plus a cover from **Tourism New Zealand**.

### QF advances lease

**QANTAS** has requested to bring forward the launch date of four additional wet lease Embraer E190 aircraft from Alliance Airlines by several weeks, bringing them into service progressively to Jun 2024.

The extra four aircraft takes the number of Alliance jets leased by Qantas to 26, with QF holding options for another four which are yet to be determined.

The Aussie airline's long-term lease deal with Alliance was locked in last year following the decision not to proceed with a planned full acquisition of Alliance (*TD* 19 Oct 2023).

## FCTG sets leisure record

**PROFITS** on leisure bookings at Flight Centre Travel Group (FCTG) have skyrocketed 30 times that of one year ago, according to the company's first-half results today.

The group today posted a \$106 million underlying profit before tax across the board (*TD* breaking news) for the half-year, which itself was up 565%, or \$90 million, on the previous year and double the volumes from 2019.

The result is the company's second best half-year in its history and now see profits exceeding pre-pandemic levels, while total transaction value (TTV) climbed by 15% to \$11.3 billion.

Key contributory events from the half-year included the launch of an 'Anywhere to Anywhere' flight booking capability, access to NDC content via its TP Connects aggregator and the addition of car hire and package holiday inventory onto its mobile app.

The result was impacted by deflation in airfare prices for three of the six months to start the 2023/24 financial year, with average international fares falling 13% compared to the prior year.



Plans to establish a group-wide Global Business Services unit tasked with implementing cost and productivity increases will ensure revenue growth outpaces cost growth, the company said.

In the coming months, FCTG added that it will retire a number of legacy booking systems as it consolidates and streamlines cost and efficiency benefits.

FCTG heralded key investments that will pay dividends in future as the relaunch of its Cruiseabout retail brand and the launch of the CruiseHQ wholesaler alongside the launch of Envoyage as the new principal trading brand for its independent agent network (*TD* yesterday).

"At a time when discretionary budgets are typically tightening, travel remains an outlier and a priority spend for many," said FCTG MD Graham Turner. *ML*

### Plan your own famil

**APPROVED** travel sellers can access discounted flights, hotels and experiences through Tourism New Zealand's 'Explore New Zealand' self-famil program.

For more details, see Tourism New Zealand's **cover page** today.

### Intrepid searches for greater impact

**INTREPID** Travel is recruiting for its first-ever Chief Impact Officer (CIO) to lead its global impact strategy, with candidates based in London, the United Kingdom, and the USA invited to apply.

Reporting to Chief Executive Officer, James Thornton, the newly created role will lead both Intrepid's purpose function and that of its not-for-profit, the Intrepid Foundation.

## AATKings

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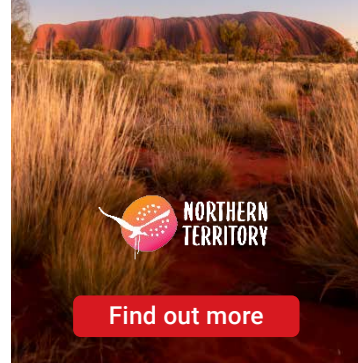
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## Apex moves in with TAG

**THE** acquisitions keep coming for TAG (The Appointment Group), with the company taking control of Apex Travel Group - its third major purchase this year.

Apex Travel was established in 2020 as a rebrand of McNamara Travel Solutions, founded by Niall McNamara and Luke Hardaker, who together bring two decades of experience to the table.

The company specialises in fully customised luxury itineraries complete with concierge services for discerning high-value clients.

TAG APAC Managing Director, Shane Barr, said the acquisition was a significant milestone for TAG as one of its largest to date.

“We have established a strong relationship with Luke and Niall, and we are thrilled to officially welcome their team into the TAG family,” Barr said.

“Apex Travel is highly respected in the industry, and their top-tier clients will now benefit from

TAG’s expansive global network.”

The latest buy is TAG’s largest in the Asia Pacific region and follows the 2023 purchase of Axis Events and CCM Travel Group Australia.

TAG’s empire also recently expanded into New Zealand with two acquisitions this year already in Sound Travels (*TD* 16 Jan) and Red Hot Travel and Events a month later (*TD* 14 Feb). *ML*

### Disney water perk

**GUESTS** staying at Walt Disney World Resorts in Orlando will receive free entry to one of its two water theme parks.

Beginning next year, guests can visit either the Typhoon Lagoon or Blizzard Beach water parks on the same day as they check-in.

The two water parks alternate operations each year, with Blizzard Beach open in the northern autumn/winter and Typhoon Lagoon in spring/summer.

## CT names new Chair

**TRAVELMANAGERS** CEO Joe Araullo (**pictured**) has been named the new Chair of travel buying network CT Partners, as it celebrates 20 years.

Araullo took over from outgoing Chair David Greenland on 14 Feb, with Greenland to be thanked for his contributions at the CT Partners 20th Anniversary dinner on 06 Mar in Sydney.

The TravelManagers chief said he is “honoured” to assume the role of Chair, adding “it’s a privilege to be part of a network that embodies such a strong ethos of independence and member success”.



## Coral goes Beyond

**JOURNEY** Beyond and Coral Expeditions have teamed up to launch a new train and cruise package for 2025, exploring the best of Australia’s Red Centre and remote landscapes.

The new offering combines Coral Expeditions’ Kimberley Pioneer cruise with Journey Beyond’s The Ghan train adventures, with the trip encompassing Adelaide, central Australia, Darwin, the Kimberley coastline and Broome.

“Journey Beyond and Coral Expeditions share a strong connection with and respect for the remote and rugged landscapes of this country, and this pairing will offer guests an authentic Australian journey of discovery,” Journey Beyond’s Executive GM of Marketing & Product, Justine Lally, said.

Packages are now on sale for travel dates across 2025.

For booking details and more details, see **HERE**.

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## TC's mind on the job



**THE** Travellers Choice Board gathered in Perth for its annual meeting earlier this month to discuss the group's strategic plan, with the Directors also participating in a workshop exploring the “Director Mindset”.

Managing Director, Christian Hunter, said the workshop led by Travellers Choice chair Trent Bartlett was based on a key module offered by the Australian Institute of Company Directors.

“It helps directors become more skilful in the way they interrogate a company's strategic plan, in part by guiding them to ask the most pertinent and perceptive questions,” Hunter shared.

“It's an excellent way of helping our directors continually develop their skills, while at the same time ensuring Travellers Choice is travelling in the right direction.”

During the annual meeting, the group's directors also brainstormed new ways to further “unlock the magic” in the Travellers Choice model. *JM*

The Travellers Choice Board is **pictured**: Mark Brady, Jacqui Wilson-Smith, Christian Hunter, Trent Bartlett, Greg Close, Trinity Hastwell and Phil Dalley.

## Green fees waived

**AROUND 400** licensed tourism businesses operating in Western Australia's national parks will have their annual licence fees waived by the state government for the next four years.

The decision applies to a range of boat and bus tour operators along with mountain biking, hike and walking tour businesses that take visitors to and through the state's conservation reserves.

Western Australia's Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions has also pledged its support to a Tourism Council WA initiative designed to encourage a greater number of national park tour businesses to life their game when it comes to sustainability and emissions standards.

## Window Seat

**AIRLINE** food gets a bad wrap sometimes, and this particular traveller's experience certainly doesn't do anything to dispel the stereotype.

A travel blogger from London claimed she was served the “worst plane meal” ever during a recent China Eastern flight from the United Kingdom to Australia.

Nicola Easterby, aged 29, documented her distaste over every meal, with the star of the show a “monstrous” mac and cheese topped with shrimp and “slimy” mushrooms for breakfast.

During the 28-hour journey, she was also confronted by a “bad smelling” fish pie, a couscous salad which she dubbed the “saddest thing” she'd ever seen, and a “weird artificial dessert”.

While Easterby conceded that the airline presented a few acceptable meals, including a prawn and potato salad and chicken edamame noodles, there was an eight-hour leg of the flight where she could not endure more than a single bite of anything, and was left famished.

“I would say if anyone was going to fly with China Eastern, just pack your own snacks,” she concluded.

## Baggage fees soar

**CHECKED** baggage fees earned airlines an estimated \$33.3 billion for the world's top 20 airlines in 2023, according to a new report from IdeaWorks Company.

The latest figure is a 15% jump on 2022 and sees bags account for around 28% of total ancillaries.

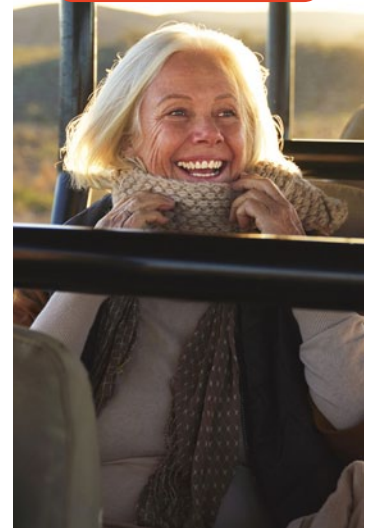


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## VJ connects to Laos

VIETJET has taken off on a new route between Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh City and Laos' capital Vientiane, which will operate four times weekly (TD 12 Dec 2023).

The service will expand Laos' connections to destinations in the region via Vietjet's growing international flight network.

## Travel survives cost cuts

AUSTRALIA may be in a cost-of-living crisis, but 91% of Aussies still plan to travel this year and almost half consider travel to be more important than other discretionary spending items, according to the new *Future of Travel 2024* study from Southern Cross Travel Insurance.

The study revealed that despite financial pressures, Millennials are the most keen demographic to ensure their travel plans go ahead by cutting costs, compared to other generations.

Nine in 10 said they are more willing to amend their holidays to make them more affordable.



"Australians are reclaiming their status as a nation of travellers now that travel is well and truly back to normal," said Jo McCauley, CEO at Southern Cross Travel Insurance.

"Continuing last year's trend, travel continues to grow as a priority pastime and it is how many of us want to spend our time and well-earned money.

"But the worsening cost-of-living crisis is impacting all areas of consumer behaviour and travel is no exception but in 2024 it's not so much 'if' we will travel, but 'how,'" she added.

As revealed in the report, 83% of Aussies admitted they will need to reduce travel costs, whether that's booking more affordable accommodation (41%), taking fewer trips throughout the year (41%), taking a shorter holiday (36%) or going to a cheaper destination (34%).

Meanwhile, 43% of respondents noted they are less likely to travel interstate over the next 12 months due to rising costs, and 53% said they had no plans to go overseas for the same reason.

Both are significant increases compared to last year (37% and 48% respectively). JH-M

## Time for coffee

DESTINATION Webinars will return its Coffee Cluster sessions to the market this week, updating agents about new product from Island Escapes and Albatross Tours in the first webinar.

Agents who attend two Coffee Cluster sessions can score a \$50 gift card - register [HERE](#).

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## Points to Kyrgyzstan

COMPASS Expeditions is preparing to launch its 4WD tour, 'Kyrgyzstan Discovered' in Central Asia, departing on 04 Aug.

Personally guided by Compass Expeditions co-founders Pete Vorst and Jerry Cook, the 14-day adventure will explore the wild landscapes of Kyrgyzstan, from Lake Karakol to the Silk Road and the country's mountain ranges.

"Launching Kyrgyzstan Discovered marks a pivotal moment in our journey. This trip is the culmination of years of meticulous planning, leveraging our extensive expertise from our motorcycle tours across this captivating region," Cook said.

Spaces are already filling rapidly and "an imminent sell-out" is expected, Compass noted.

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## Rain hits Coast's parade

**NET** profit for Coast Entertainment Holdings (formerly Ardent Leisure) plummeted by a massive 99.3% for the first half of the 2023/24 financial year, according to the attraction operator's consolidated results for the latest six-month period.

Compared to a \$669.5 million net profit posted in the same period 12 months ago, the group's results showed only a \$4.8 million result was managed in the latest timeframe.

EBITDA from continuing operations also fell sharply to a \$5.2 million loss from a \$700k deficit reported in the same period last year.

This was despite the company, which manages Dreamworld on the Gold Coast as its flagship attraction, reporting a modest 11.8% increase in ticket sales and 6.5% boost in overall visitation.

Results were impacted by major damage and brief closures at both Dreamworld and the neighbouring WhiteWater World following "a devastating cyclonic storm" over the peak Christmas and New Year trading periods which saw Dreamworld suffer its worst damage in three decades.

This was compounded by strong rainfall which persisted through much of Jan and impacted numbers through the turnstiles.

Overall, the company reported a \$43.5 million overall revenue result, with operating revenue in line with the corresponding period last year.



The company said it noticed a shift in sales mix towards annual passes from more regular guests which affected operating revenue.

Further damage sustained by Coast Entertainment's finances in the six-month first half included a \$4 million settlement from a class action lawsuit brought last year by shareholders.

This payment was a net cash outlay by the company related to an overall \$26 million insured settlement from the 2016 tragedy that saw four people killed on the Thunder River Rapids ride.

In more positive news, Coast Entertainment said construction has now begun on 'Rivertown', a new themed land which will feature a new rollercoaster. *ML*

### Stefani's Jubilee

**CARNIVAL** Cruise Line recently celebrated the naming of its newest ship *Carnival Jubilee* in Texas, with the Hollaback Girl herself, Gwen Stefani, on hand to bless the hyped new addition as her official Godmother.

*Jubilee* will be homeported year-round in Galveston, where she will sail week-long Western Caribbean cruises, accommodating 6,500 guests.

### A-ROSA adds more

**A-ROSA** has added 50 new options to its 2024 River Cruises excursion program across all five cruise regions.

There are five new excursions available on the Douro, including the chance to enjoy a lunch prepared by a Countess at her estate in the Douro Valley, along with a tour of the property.

Other offerings include a flight experience for two in the new port of Vlissingen, bike excursions exploring the landscapes of the Cotes du Rhone region, and a trip to Godollo Castle near Budapest.

Discounts of up to 15% are also on offer when three or more excursions are booked.

### New cultural tours

**CULTURAL** Attractions of Australia has released two new experiences: 'Become the Artist at the Art Gallery of New South Wales' (AGNSW) and the Keepers Collection Tour' at the MCG.

At the AGNSW, guests are taken on an exclusive private guided tour through the gallery, followed by a three-course lunch featuring local ingredients and matching wines at the Gallery restaurant.

Meanwhile, the new experience at the MCG provides a behind-the-scenes guided walkthrough of the Australian Sports Museum Collections, looking back through the MCG's unique archives dating back to the 1800s.

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### Anantara Dubai

**THE** idyllic Anantara Santorini Abu Dhabi Retreat is now open, bringing a taste of the Greek Islands to the UAE, complete with iconic whitewashed walls and views of the Gulf from each of the 22 rooms.

Lavish facilities include an infinity pool and wellness sanctuary, Anantara Spa, with a plunge pool, Himalayan salt sauna, spa bath and Moroccan hammam.

This is complemented by a 24-hour butler service, 24-hour gourmet in-room dining and two restaurants.

### Chef Adam Liaw leads culinary cruise

**CELEBRITY** chef Adam Liaw is set to join Silversea's *Silver Muse* this year in partnership with Gullivers, embarking on an 11-day foodie adventure through Japan & South Korea.

Liaw will share his extensive knowledge of East Asian cuisine and lead a range of culinary activities, from a bulgogi cooking class in Busan to beef and sake tastings in Kobe.

Travel agents will receive a \$600 commission for each booking, potentially earning up to \$1,200 for every suite booked when it accommodates two guests.

## LUXURY FUELS FLIGHT CENTRE REBOUND

**FLIGHT** Centre Travel Group's (FCTG) Travel Associates and recently acquired Scott Dunn divisions provided a strong driving force behind the company's pleasing first half TTV results (**TD** breaking news).

Luxury TTV alone was up 44% on the same period last year, while profit before tax for FCTG's luxury brands managed to double pre-pandemic volumes.

Despite the company's luxury arms clearly enjoying a successful half, FCTG is bullish on pursuing further acquisition and merger opportunities to support the upward trajectory in bookings fuelled by organic growth.

Speaking with *Travel Daily* at the Luxury Product Showcase on the Gold Coast last week, FCTG Global MD Luxury and Independent brands, Danielle Galloway, talked up the need to



accelerate FCTG's luxury growth trajectory through strategic purchases (**TD** 26 Feb).

Grouped under the Luxury Travel Collection banner, expansion of its thriving luxury brands was labelled a "long-term strategic priority" in the latest financial report, describing its premium wing as a "highly scalable" business, along with the growing Independent division.

The increase in luxury sales helped fuel an 18% rise in leisure

TTV for FCTG to \$5.2 billion for the six months to 31 Dec.

FCTG Managing Director, Graham Turner, noted that bookings momentum was strong in the first two months of 2024, with that trend likely to gain even more traction through to the middle of the year.

Part of the encouraging profit result was also the ability to increase margins by 11.4%, driven in no small part by the thriving luxury divisions. **AB**

### Qatar Airways and Our Habitas unveil resort

**QATAR** Airways and Our Habitas have just opened a new ultra luxury desert resort on the West Coast of Qatar.

Surrounded by white cliffs and views of the Qatari desert and the Arabian Gulf, Our Habitas Ras Abrouq offers one- to four-bedroom villas, each with private pools and large outdoor decks overlooking the sea.

Other facilities include a terrace lounge, on-site

restaurant, state-of-the-art gym, beach club, infinity pool and padel tennis courts.

Our Habitas Ras Abrouq also hosts a wide range of workshops including pottery, sunrise yoga, breathwork, calligraphy, sound ceremonies and traditional weaving workshops.

Sports on offer include mountain biking, kayaking, desert exploration and survival training and more.

### Crystal serves up

**LUXURY** cruise line Crystal is teaming up with world-renowned restaurant Beefbar, offering guests exclusive dining experiences.

Known for its innovation and prime cuts, Beefbar is located in 20+ global cities.


The Beefbar menu will be available for lunch and dinner and feature vegetarian and vegan options, as well as specialty cocktails.

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A new ballroom and several meeting spaces are set to make their debut at **JW Marriott Auckland** in Aug, after the hotel's announcement of a multi-million dollar renovation project. The design will feature natural textures with modern touches, warm wood tones, and a calming palette across the additional three spaces. An extra 50m<sup>2</sup> of LED walls and dynamic lighting that can easily be adapted to guests' needs will also be installed.



The **Oulton Hall Hotel, Spa & Golf Resort** in the UK has recently upgraded its historic bedroom suites. All seven suites have been refurbished while respecting the building's original features, offering guests a blend of refined elegance and modern comfort.

Known for hosting musicians, footballers and politicians, the hotel is nestled in more than 300 acres of landscaped gardens and grounds in Leeds, and also boasts a spa and health club.



Set to re-open in Apr, up to 21 suites at the **Hilton Molino Stucky Venice** have undergone a refresh. The announcement also coincides with the opening of 24 new suites, including six King Molino Family Suites and 20 King Molino Executive Suites, 11 of which offer a view of Venice. Each suite will feature a main bedroom and a living area, with interconnecting options suitable for couples, friends and families.



**Marriott El Paso** has announced the completion of the first phase of its total revamp, which includes all guestrooms and suites. Located in the heart of the Sun City in the US, the hotel comprises 296 rooms and is in close proximity to the El Paso International Airport, yet distant enough for a quiet and pleasant stay. Phase two of the renovation is set to be completed by Sep.



Unveiling a US\$11 million dollar update later this year, **Beach House Resort, Hilton Head Island**, will boast a refurbished resort pool and an all-new beachfront pavilion for events. The renovation will also transform the region's only on-the-beach live music venue, Tik Hut, and for the first time in 50 years, with the space to host weekend brunch services and live performances.

## Operators need education



### EXCLUSIVE

**TOURISM** operators are beginning to realise that the attention of the world is on the "horrible" treatment of elephants in the tourism sector, founder and CEO of Animals Asia, Jill Robinson (**pictured**), believes.

Speaking to **TD** last week on the eve of her speaking appointment at the 'A Force for Good' event in Sydney on 08 Mar, Robinson said in countries like Vietnam, the government has made great inroads into phasing out the practice of elephant riding and bear breeding.

"The Vietnam Government has been so influential and respectful in stopping this industry and indeed the bear farming industry as well," Robinson said.

When asked about how Aussie tourism operators can avoid being caught up in unethical animal practices when curating their own itineraries, Robinson said the key message for brands was to make sure they "do their homework".

"Some businesses may not think they're contributing to [animal abuse] by going on elephant rides, having their photo selfies taken with animals, or going to circuses...but more research is needed to understand how tigers jumping through rings of fire in

Asia, for example, is completely alien to their natural instincts and also so frightening.

"They are goaded by fear and cruelty, so the onus is on us to start dismantling horrible exhibits like these and understand how we can protect our natural world in tourism," she added.

Robinson will also be in Australia to discuss animal welfare at Adventure World's Australian expo this week. **AB**

## Vibe in Docklands

**MELBOURNE** will open a second Vibe hotel in its trendy Docklands precinct from 08 Apr when TFE Hotels takes over management of the former Four Points by Sheraton property.

The rebrand of the property to Vibe Hotel Melbourne Docklands comes after the property was sold to MA Financial Group.

Featuring 273 rooms and suites with floor-to-ceiling windows, Vibe Melbourne Docklands also offers the Storehouse Restaurant and a rooftop pool.

The Docklands precinct is in the midst of an urban renewal period which includes a \$250 million upgrade of Marvel Stadium which will see a range of new visitor experiences added.