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Thousands stranded in ME

AROUND 115,000 Australians are stranded in the Middle East as airspace closures across major hubs like the UAE and Qatar continue to ground all passenger flights (**TD** breaking news Sat).

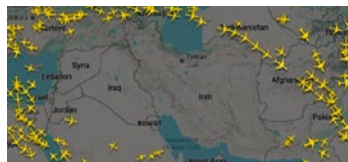
Foreign Minister Penny Wong said this morning that approximately 11,000 of that number regularly fly in and out of Australia using carriers like Etihad, Emirates & Qatar Airways.

It remains unclear how long the airspace above key aviation hubs will be closed for, with most carriers reassessing the situation on a rolling daily basis as military conflict between Iran and the United States/Israel continues.

Wong said there are currently no flights operating to get Australians home, and the government's ability to assist is limited by the security situation.

"First we need to see if commercial flights will restart, given the number of people in the region, people will get home most quickly if we can facilitate commercial flights," she told *ABC News Breakfast*.

Wong added this outcome would get Aussies home faster than repatriation flights, but she did not rule out organising rescue



services if they were needed.

Travellers stuck in the UAE are not only contending with grounded flights, but also fears for their own safety as Iranian missile and drone attacks yesterday struck Dubai and Abu Dhabi, which included damage to both the Dubai Int'l Airport and Zayed Int'l Airport in Abu Dhabi (**TD** breaking news Sun).

Major tourist attractions in the UAE have also been struck by Iranian attacks, including the Burj Al Arab hotel in Dubai and the Fairmont The Palm Hotel on Dubai's Palm Jumeirah.

VA has confirmed to **TD** that it has cancelled six Doha flights from its schedule today, with free booking changes, a travel credit or refund on offer for guests booked on Doha flights up to & including 06 Mar who no longer wish to travel.

Meanwhile, Qantas is in the fortunate position of not operating to any Middle Eastern airports, with a spokesperson confirming all flights to Europe will continue to operate using "a number of flight path options".

For the moment, Smartraveller has upgraded the travel advice to 'do not travel' to the UAE, Qatar, Israel and several other nations in the Middle East. *AB*

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Travel Daily today features six pages of travel industry news, plus full pages from:

- Qantas
- Tourism NT

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ATIA makes insurance call

THE Australian Travel Industry Association (ATIA) has doubled down on its goal to permanently protect the right of travel agents, tour operators and other accredited travel businesses to sell travel insurance at the time of booking.

A temporary exemption was secured by ATIA in 2021, however it is set to expire in Oct.

The industry body is now calling



on the federal treasury to make the exemption permanent, arguing that not doing so would be detrimental to travellers and would also undermine small and medium-sized travel businesses across Australia.

ATIA warned that a forced delay between booking travel and purchasing insurance would lead to more Australians travelling uninsured or underinsured.

Most already buy travel insurance when they book their trip, ATIA pointed out, and to disrupt that process would result in more people being exposed to major medical and cancellation costs, while creating reduced certainty for travel businesses.

"This is about protecting the right of accredited Australian travel businesses to provide a complete service to their clients," stated ATIA CEO Dean Long. *JM*

New TAF incentive

A NEW incentive from Travel Agent Finder (TAF) is inviting advisors to win a taste of the Margaret River.

The collaboration with Tourism Western Australia will see one lucky advisor win a Margaret River gift basket, plus a \$100 Prezzy voucher.

Complete the entry form **HERE** and answer three questions for the chance to win, with entries closing 20 Mar. *MS*

New Hale Mary play

GLOBAL Touring head of sales Bobby Hale has exited the business to lead Omniche Holidays, Spacifica Travel and Norfolk Island Travel Centre for Wave Hospitality Group.

Hale had been with the Flight Centre-owned Global Touring division since Sep 2024 (**TD** 02 Sep 2024), where he helped to grow and relaunch the Topdeck Travel and Back-Roads brands.

He joined following a two-year stint at On the Go Tours, where he served as head of sales for the Southern Hemisphere.

"I'm super excited to be moving into my first GM role and excited for the opportunity to be the custodian of these brands and help shape their next chapter," Hale (**pictured**) said on LinkedIn.

Wave Hospitality Group's flagship Omniche Holidays brand is an agent-focused wholesaler specialising in holiday packages to South Pacific destinations. *AB*



CFO reverses call

WEB Travel Group chief financial officer Tony Ristevski will no longer exit in May (**TD** 26 Nov 2025), withdrawing his resignation this morning.

"Both the board and Tony agree that it is in the best interests of the company for him to remain in the role," MD John Guscic said.

"Tony is a highly valued member of the executive team." *AB*

What's hot this year

TRAVEL Daily has released its latest special report, *Future Forward*, focusing on the biggest trends in 2026.

From the next hottest holiday hotspots to the opportunities for agents in 2026, the report is jam-packed with news and insights.

It also features commentary from industry leaders like Travellers Choice MD Christian Hunter, AmaWaterways MD Steve Richards, and NCL VP and MD APAC Ben Angel - read **HERE**. *JHM*

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FC gets productive

FLIGHT Centre has announced a new global product structure, designed to sharpen its competitive edge across its five core markets of Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the United Kingdom, and South Africa.

The restructure marks the next chapter for Flight Centre's global product function, with Monique Van Gelder now the global product leader.

The new role will see her steer Flight Centre's product vision and category strategy worldwide, while creating stronger product partnerships.

The restructure is also seeing Flight Centre seek a seasoned travel industry veteran for its now-vacant head of product flights & insurance role.

Maria Marendy has been appointed to the role of head of product, hotels, car & tourism; Tammy Marquet has become head of product, cruise & tour; and Jane Lodge has been named head of product operations.

Finally, in a newly created role, Kate Foster becomes product operations consultant enablement lead. *MS*

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ANZCRO trade push

ANZCRO has boosted its trade sales team to four with the addition of two business development managers.

Amy Mudge (**pictured**) has joined the team with more than a decade of experience with Flight Centre, and will work with store networks across Australia to drive engagement and build product confidence.

The agency has also welcomed Karma Clark on board, who is shifting over from ANZCRO's reservations team after more than three years.

Clark is tasked with delivering training and in-field engagement, with both new BDMs to work alongside account managers Jess Walker and Andrew Alloway. *JM*



ATIA responds to ME crisis

THE Australian Travel Industry Association's (ATIA) Incident Response Group is actively coordinating with airlines, agency groups, tour operators and travel insurance providers to deliver practical guidance to members amid major travel disruptions in the Middle East, the group said.

"All ATIA directors have been actively engaged over the weekend shaping and steering our response so members are supported from every angle," CEO Dean Long confirmed.

"Our Incident Response Group is working in real-time to give members clear, consistent and actionable information.

"Across the country, accredited travel professionals are working around the clock for their clients and we are making sure that effort is recognised publicly in every single mainstream media interview that we do."

Meanwhile, a number of cruises

have been caught up in the unfolding situation, including Celestyal Cruises' two vessels, *Discovery* and *Journey*, which are both in the middle of their Arabian Gulf season and have been forced to cancel voyages.

MSC Cruises' *Euribia*, as well as ships in the TUI Cruises and Aroya Cruises fleets, have also been impacted - see **CW** for details.

Interestingly, Terra Nova Expeditions' *RMS St Helena* is also off the coast of the UAE in the Persian Gulf, the vessel that will operate debut Antarctica sailings in Dec (**TD** 22 Jul 2025).

In further news, Etihad has confirmed all flights to and from Abu Dhabi will remain suspended until at least 2pm UAE time today.

Guests holding Etihad tickets issued on or before 28 Feb 2026, with original travel dates up to 07 Mar 2026, may rebook free of charge onto Etihad-operated flights up to 18 Mar 2026. **AB**

Rethinking US travel

MORE than half of Australians are now less inclined to visit the United States, as travel sentiment to the country shrinks.

Research from Southern Cross Travel Insurance (SCTI) has found the United States' political uncertainty is impacting travel intentions, as Australians become increasingly more selective about where they visit.

One in two Aussies (51%) who had always wanted to visit the United States are now less likely to do so in the next few years.

Cost and safety are playing important roles in destination decisions, SCTI found, while nearly two-thirds (63%) cited politics as their main concern.

More than a third (36%) of Aussies also said they don't want to visit the Middle East, and 28% are less inclined to visit China.

Crime (42%), high costs and health risks (both 32%) and negative word-of-mouth (30%) were other big deterrents. **MS**

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Cox & Kings "months away"

EXCLUSIVE



THE return of the Cox & Kings brand to Australia is drawing closer, with parent company Abercombe & Kent Travel Group (AKTG) confirming its relaunch is now only "months away".

A spokesperson for AKTG told *Travel Daily* that the recruitment for the foundation of the historic luxury brand's return is underway for a push later this year.

Among the roles being sought is a sales director position to be based locally in either Sydney, Melbourne or Brisbane.

According to the job description, the position will be charged with developing and implementing a strategic plan to drive business for all Cox & Kings product types, as well as support the broader relaunch of the brand in the Asia Pacific region.

AKTG acquired Cox & Kings

in 2019 (*TD* 26 Nov 2019), and only last year revealed its intentions to revive the brand in Australia (*TD* 08 Apr 2025) after it sensationally collapsed under the mismanagement of the previous owners in 2019.

The latest insight follows parent group AKTG appointing Debra Fox as chief sales officer to lead its global trade sales strategy last month (*TD* 24 Feb). *AB*

Collette evolution

GLOBAL travel company Collette is now elevating Colette Explorations as its main group travelling offering, featuring a range of new agent initiative.

These include an agent referral program, enhanced agent rewards, roundtrip home-to-airport private chauffeur service with every Explorations booking, and exclusive solo pricing.

Collette Explorations offers tours with 19 guests on average to allow for greater immersion.

According to Colette managing director for Australia Karen Deveson, the data has shown that "small group touring is where Collette truly stands out because it delivers premium experiences that feel considered, well-paced, and genuinely different." *JHM*

A bite of the Big Apple



INDUSTRY trade professionals and travel agents let their hair down at a glamorous industry event hosted by NYC Tourism and Conventions last Fri in Sydney.

Held at the glamorous McRae Bar at Capella, attendees sipped on cosmopolitans while connecting with one another and a DJ played a hip-hop soundtrack, inspired by the Big Apple.

Visiting representatives also shared updates on the latest news across all five boroughs of New York City, from iconic experiences to emerging neighbourhoods, luxury offerings and MICE opportunities.

New York City partners came from the American Museum of Natural History, Hotel Beacon, New York Hilton Midtown and Rockefeller Center, as well as United Airlines.

Last year, 12.7 million international visitors landed in

New York City, 513,000 of whom were Aussies.

This made Australia the seventh biggest market for the Big Apple, said Reginald Charlot, director of tourism development and international MICE from NYC Tourism and Conventions.

It is expected that in 2026, Australian visitation will increase by 5%, fuelled by the upcoming FIFA World Cup, he added.

Charlot also discussed new initiatives for agents to share with clients, including immersive itineraries highlighting the city's unique neighbourhoods.

In addition, Charlot noted the online resources available for agents, including the Travel Trade Academy, which features eight modules focusing on the city's boroughs, sports events and luxury offering. *JHM*

Pictured: New York City representatives last Friday night.

New SYD rideshares

SYDNEY Airport has launched a new premium taxi and Uber booking service WeKnow, which will make its debut at the T1 international terminal.

The service will offer arriving passengers a faster, more seamless way to book their journey from the airport.

WeKnow allows passengers to pre-book and pre-pay for onward travel via digital self-service kiosks located in baggage reclaim and arrivals hall areas. *MS*

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Expedition taps UTC

THE Unique Tourism Collection (UTC) has been appointed by Ecuadorian destination management company Expedition Tours as its sales & marketing representative in ANZ.

The two will work together to develop strong international travel to Ecuador, including in sectors such as special interest and educational journeys, as well as incentives and meetings.

Expedition director of operations, Ana Maria Cordova, said it appointed UTC due to its deep market knowledge and strong positioning within the Australian travel landscape. *MS*

Influencers fail to impress

MORE than half (57%) of Australians have been left disappointed after following travel advice from social media influencers, new research from Insure&Go has revealed.

Of the 35% of Aussies who booked travel in FY25 based on social influencer inspiration, less than half (43%) were left impressed by their experience.

While the disillusionment spanned all generations, those aged 50 and over were left especially underwhelmed, with two-thirds (61%) saying influencer-inspired trips failed to



live up to the hype, with more than half (52%) of under-30s reporting similar feelings.

Almost half (47%) of all respondents now believe that influencers can't be trusted and are just "selling something".

"Social media still inspires wanderlust among a third of Australians, but many are learning that travel decision-making requires much more than feeling inspired by some stunning shots online," said David Mayo, Insure&Go commercial and marketing director.

"Many may begin to tune out the filters and prioritise more thorough research, seeking substance over selfies for their next holiday," he added.

Worryingly, more than a third (37%) of adults aged under 30 admitted they have even risked safety for social media pics. *JM*

Window Seat

RACERS from last week's US Half Marathon Championship are up in arms, after they were potentially cost a victory when a guide vehicle took them the wrong way.

Athlete Jess McClain was comfortably in front of Ednah Kurgat and Emma Hurley during the Atlanta race, when the three participants were led off the course.

The shocking mistake at the major visitor attraction saw Molly Born, who had been more than a minute behind, end up winning the race.

McClain wound up in ninth spot, as Hurley finished 12th, and Kurgat 13th.

USA Track & Field said a protest by the three athletes had been rejected, although they have since appealed.

The jury of appeals found the course was not adequately marked at the point of misdirection, but that there is no recourse within the rule book to alter the resulting order of finish. *MS*



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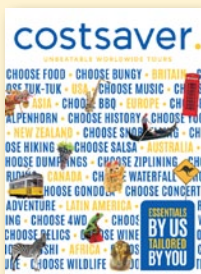
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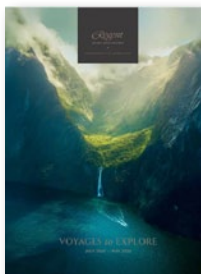
THIS week's Brochures of the Week is brought to you by
Ponant Explorations.



Ponant - March to November 2027
Ponant has unveiled its brochure for the 2027 season, encompassing journeys across the Arctic, Northern Europe, the Mediterranean, Asia, Oceania and beyond. New small-ship luxury expeditions reveal the hidden treasures of the Philippines and Borneo, the North Sea and Iberia, plus immersive journeys through Puglia and Sicily aboard *Le Ponant*, the world's first Relais & Chateaux sailing yacht. Agents can enhance their client's journey with curated pre- and post-programs and take advantage of earlybird savings, back-to-back offers, solo supplements and exclusive rewards to maximise value. Access the new brochure **HERE**.



Costsaver - Worldwide Tours 2026-27
The Travel Corporation's budget brand Costsaver has released its latest brochure, which showcases its tour offering for 2026-27. Agents and their clients can discover itineraries across Europe and Britain, the USA and Canada, Latin America, Asia and Africa, as well as Australia and NZ. The digital guide (see it **HERE**) features information on inclusions, ways to tailor the tours to suit any traveller, and optional add-ons. There are detailed descriptions of each itinerary, including sightseeing highlights, dates and prices.



Regent Seven Seas Cruises - July 2026- May 2028
Perfect for travellers looking to plan their next luxury voyage, Regent Seven Seas Cruises has published a brand-new brochure for the 2026-28 sailing season. From Alaska and Asia to the Mediterranean and the South Pacific, agents and their clients will find all the details they need about the cruise line's upcoming journeys. The comprehensive 152-page guide also highlights several new land programs, including the three-night 'Africa's Captivating Cape' and the three-night 'Cultural Treasures: Tokyo to Hakone'. Download the brochure **HERE**.

First look inside Cormorant



THE first interior designs for Silversea's 150-key hotel, 55 Cormorant South in Puerto Williams, Chile (**TD** 10 Dec) have been revealed.

The world's southern-most hotel, designed to accommodate guests travelling on Silversea's Antarctica Fly Cruise program, blends the cruise line's signature elegance with the natural beauty of Patagonia.

Each room offers a view of the Beagle Channel with interiors that feature warm wood tones and earth elements alongside artworks created by local Chilean artists.

Latitude 55, the signature restaurant, will embrace traditional Chilean cuisine as well as incorporating recipes and ingredients synonymous with the Patagonia region.

The other gastronomic concept, Bar Sur, will offer small bites and tea throughout the day and alcoholic beverages, including signature cocktails, by night.

Accompanying Bar Sur is the Fireplace Lounge, where guests can socialise while enjoying fine wines or cocktails, complemented with views of the wilderness.

The hotel remains on track for an Oct completion, despite some initial delays. *JB*

A new look for Ama

AMAWATERWAYS has made extensive fleet-wide upgrades in time for the 2026 sailing season.

Each vessel has been given a new paint job on both the interiors and exteriors, alongside each cabin being provided with fresh amenities by Marie-Stella Maris such as linens, bathrobes, slippers, as well as skincare and make-up products in partnership with Laura Gellar.

Guests can also enjoy new culinary offerings, including Italian lunches at the Chef's Table restaurant and bespoke dinners by culinary director Chef Robert Kellerhals, while onboard lounges - now called The Lark - will offer an updated all-day menu.

AmaWaterways has expanded its wine offerings, now featuring over 30 reds, whites and roses.

The cruise line has also partnered with local chocolatiers to offer selections unique to each itinerary. *JB*



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