

# Business tourism with a twist - Brunei emerges as a destination of great potential

By Peter Needham

ROYAL Brunei Airlines is enjoying a steady build-up of stopover traffic as passengers travelling between Australia and Europe combine the benefits of breaking their journeys with the chance to explore Brunei, one of Asia's little-known wonders.

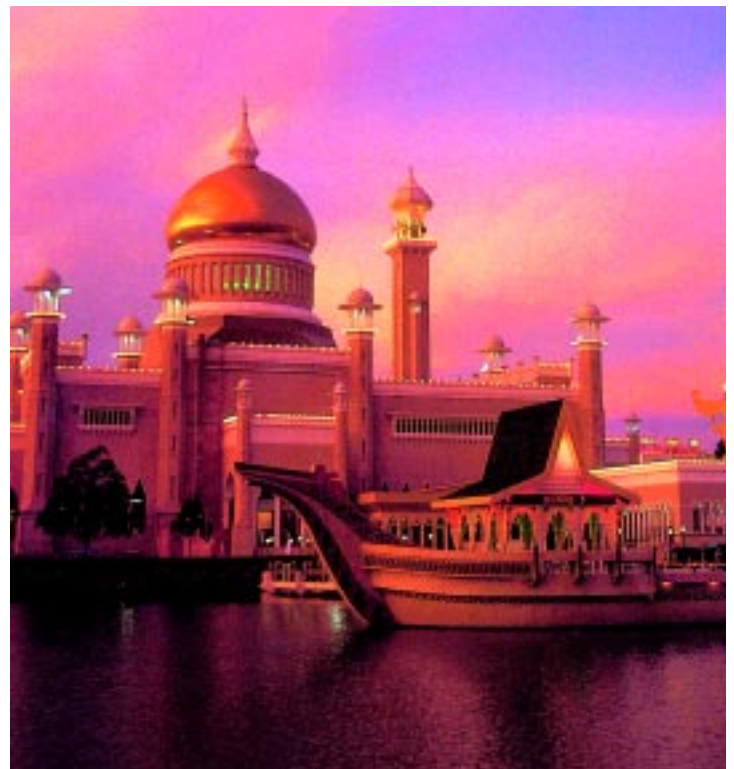
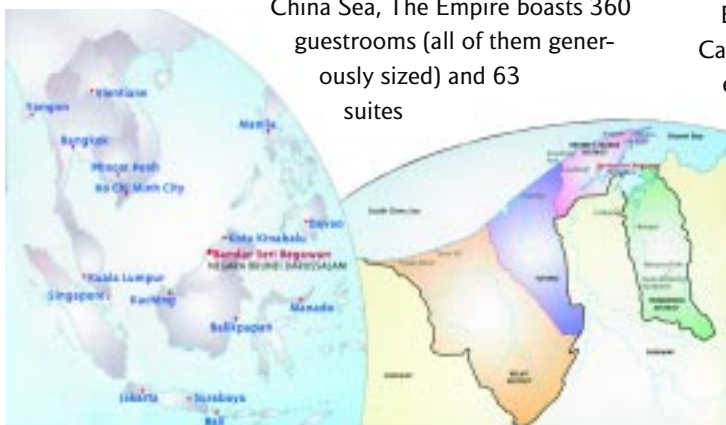
Brunei, which uses the taglines "Kingdom of Unexpected Treasures" and "The Green Heart of Borneo", is currently positioning itself in the Australian market as a purveyor of eco-tourism and wellness experiences. It also has much to offer the incentive and meetings market.

"Brunei is a unique destination," explains Royal Brunei Airlines chief executive Peter Foster. "There are several countries in South East Asia that have magnificent natural resources in terms of primary rainforest, but Brunei is the only country in the world where within one hour of arriving at the international airport, you can be in primary rainforest. This is a country that has gone to enormous lengths to protect its environment."

The dense forests of Borneo, preserved in Brunei, hold many secrets. Earlier this year, scientists found a new species of mammal there - an apparently new kind of fox. Only a handful of new mammals have been discovered in the whole world over the past 70 years. Six were found in the 1990s in remote forests in Vietnam.

Tiny 5765-square-kilometre Brunei also boasts one of the world's most magnificent hotels: the Empire Resort and Country Club, a vast and splendiferous establishment built for the APEC Summit in 2000. Overlooking the South

China Sea, The Empire boasts 360 guestrooms (all of them generously sized) and 63 suites



and villas, set in a 180-hectare tropical garden estate, alongside a floodlit 18-hole Jack Nicklaus-designed championship golf course. Colossal marble pillars higher than a 12-storey building and decorated with pure gold support a lobby of stupendous size, decorated with Baccarat crystal, limited edition Murano vases and gold camels.

Brunei, roughly two and a half times the size of the Australian Capital Territory, has embarked on a program of diversifying its economy by boosting activities such as tourism. The kingdom's wealth derives largely from crude oil and natural gas. Its 370,000 citizens pay no income tax and enjoy free education and medical services.

## Rainforests

Brunei's oil wealth means that the country has not needed to log its forests. These tropical rainforests remain a superb and easily accessible tourism resource. Their value increases each year as other parts of the island, run by other countries, are relentlessly logged by officially licensed operators and by

poachers. Brunei shares Borneo island with the Indonesian provinces of West, East, South and Central Kalimantan and the Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak. The World Bank predicts that all of the forests in these regions, outside protected areas, will have been logged by 2020.

In the 19th century, naturalist Charles Darwin described the island of Borneo as "one great, wild, untidy, luxuriant hothouse made by nature for herself". The description is true of Brunei, which occupies less than one per cent of Borneo's land area. Within an hour of touchdown at Brunei's international airport, a visitor can be sitting in a longboat in a mangrove forest on a tributary of the Brunei River, watching rare proboscis monkeys leap from tree to tree.

Ulu Temburong National Park, a 50,000-hectare expanse of rainforest in Brunei's rugged Temburong district, is



PETER FOSTER

especially rich in wildlife and biodiversity. It provides memorable eco-tour opportunities for conference delegates or incentive travellers, either on full-day trips or overnight stays in chalet-style jungle accommodation up river.

"The Temburong district is an extraordinarily beautiful place because it has been so well pre-

served," Foster comments.

"The environment is a primary concern of the Brunei government. As tourism becomes increasingly divided into niches, some destinations, such as Singapore, Hong Kong and Dubai, will cater for travellers seeking shopping and entertainment, while other destinations will provide experiences based on nature and the environment. Brunei has extraordinary potential — and better potential than many of our neighbours. That really is the positioning, not only of the country, but also of the airline.

"We believe also that Royal Brunei

Airlines, by continuing to improve its onboard and ground services and by continuing to improve its already extremely competitive airfares, is an airline that genuinely offers value for money. That's a reflection of the comments we get from our customers all the time. As a value-for-money airline, we will appeal to those people who can spot and recognise value for money."

Foster says that anyone doing a quick survey of Australian travel, will find that fares being sold by Royal Brunei airlines are "among the cheapest, if not the cheapest, of all medium-to-long-haul fares being sold in the Australian market. We are an extremely competitively priced airline to Brunei and from Brunei; our Blue Sky fares are some of the lowest in the region for full-service carriers."

Blue Sky fares, available only on-line from the airline's website include fares from Brunei to Kuala Lumpur of about A\$188, Brunei/Kota Kinabalu about A\$77, Brunei/Bangkok about A\$220, Brunei/Surabaya or Brunei/Jakarta

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# Sydney service gaining in popularity

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about A\$252, Brunei/Hongkong about A\$284, Brunei/Shanghai about A\$444, and Brunei/Denpasar about A\$252. Valid for the rest of this year, the fares exclude taxes and fuel surcharges. Maximum stay is 30 days, bookings are non-refundable and no changes are allowed.

Royal Brunei uses the internet "to get the product into the marketplace as quickly as possible", Foster says. "Our fares are available at the touch of a button to anyone who wants to buy them."

Families find Royal Brunei Airlines a special bargain. The airline's interpretation of what constitutes a child's fare is one of the most liberal in international aviation. For fare purposes, the airline defines children as anyone under the age of 17 accompanied by a fare-paying adult.

Royal Brunei's three-times-weekly B767-300 service to Sydney, which began last October, started with relatively low loads but has gained popularity now that Royal Brunei's name, presence, products and services are becoming better known in the Sydney market, Foster says.

"We are beginning to see some tremendous take up and we



have no doubt that it is going to be one of our best long-haul services." The airline also serves Brisbane, Perth, Darwin and Auckland three times weekly - and 16 other destinations throughout the world, including London and Frankfurt. Several new routes are likely to start up in the next year or so, including Ho Chi Minh City, Seoul and destinations in India and China.

"It's premature at this stage to say which of those routes we will be operating in the next two years," Foster says. "All of those areas have very compelling reasons to start flying there. India has huge demand for inbound and increasingly outbound. As for China, I don't need to elaborate. Vietnam is a leading inbound destination and also a source of outbound traffic; it's a very interesting opportunity for us, in close proximity to our hub. Korea is emerging from a consumer credit squeeze and is a mature economy. Our ability to hub traffic over Brunei to the rest of the region puts us in a strong position in regard to Korea."

## Agreements

The proliferation of Asian low-cost carriers is of little concern to Foster.

"Brunei has very liberal agreements with most countries and an open-skies agreement with Singapore. It's really not for an airline to make any comment on that, but the Government of Brunei has made clear its intention to operate in a very liberal framework, which is in the best interests of the country. As far as Royal Brunei Airlines is concerned, more capacity expands the market for all players, including ourselves. There's bound to be some initial dilution of traffic for the simple reason if you have any new capacity, there's a change in supply and demand dynamics. But the low-cost carriers in this region have been very effective in generating new markets - you've seen that particularly in Malaysia with Air Asia. So it would be wrong to say the effects would only be negative."

Royal Brunei airlines operates four Airbus narrowbodies and six B767 widebodies.

"All our capacity is now fully utilised," Foster says. "For the airline to grow we need to acquire new aircraft. That's under study at the moment. We expect a decision to acquire new aircraft to be taken during the course of this year."



## Brunei Fast Facts

Brunei is located on the north-western coast of the island of Borneo (Kalimantan). Brunei has a total area of 5,765 sq. km with 75 per cent covered by rainforest.

The main religion is Islam with around 65 per cent of the population practising. Other religions include Buddhist and Christian. The official languages are Malay and English. Climate is tropical marine, high temperatures and annual humidity range of between 67 and 91 per cent. Annual rainfall ranges from 2,540 mm (100 inches) on the coast to 5,080 inland. No dry season.

Festivals 23 February National Day; 15 July Sultan's birthday.

There are no public railways in Brunei. Brunei has good health and communications systems.