

TNW

TRAVEL NEWS WEEKLY

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SAX upsets with low fare strategy

SAVANNAH FREEMANTLE

WHILE SA Express has requested R1,74bn from Treasury to recapitalise the airline, it has re-entered the market with fares that are unsustainably low and will only prolong the airline's losses, according to industry players.

The carrier has also asked National Treasury if it can take credit lines with South African banks. **Siza**

Mzimela, SAX acting ceo, said the recapitalisation would go toward buying spare parts, overhauling the engines of its grounded aircraft and paying off creditors. She said the three-month grounding period meant SAX would not break even, or turn a profit, in the next 12 months.

The airline has also cancelled its leasing contracts, and stopped a R2,4 million fuel contract.

The SAX board told

Parliament's Public Enterprises Committee that the airline was currently 'dysfunctional' and that it had instructed its managers to review all major contracts to determine their affordability, cut costs and analyse the profitability of its routes.

But competing airlines report that the carrier has slashed fares on its return to the market. **Miles van der Molen**, ceo of CemAir,

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FCTG caters for trend to mobile

TESSA REED

FLIGHT Centre Travel Group has unveiled a travel app that allows South African travellers to search and book local and international flights. Other features include requesting a quote; viewing travel deals offered by Flight Centre; a navigation system; and the ability to search for activities, restaurants and shops.

FCTG Middle East and Africa md, **Andrew Stark**, says travel has gone mobile, citing the widespread use of smartphones, as well as

customers turning to their mobile phones for their travel inspiration, to manage their trips, checking in online or sourcing directions. "Introducing a Flight Centre App answers the obvious need among our customers to engage with us through mobile platforms."

Andrew adds that mobile is FCTG's largest source of traffic to its website, contributing 55% of all visits.

Michelle Bergset, gm Retail Flight Centre Travel Group, said the mobile app

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The Johannesburg leg of Thirsty's was held at The Bull Run restaurant, adjoining the Protea Hotel by Marriott Johannesburg Balalaika in Sandton. Pictured beside the restaurant's newly unveiled statue are (from left): **Jörg Zwinscher**, general manager Protea Hotel Balalaika; **Brenda Mitchell**, director of sales at World Leisure Holidays; **Mary Shilleto**, ceo Thompsons Travel; and **Ramon Geldenhuys**, ceo 360 Degrees Travel.

Photo: Jason Simpson

A toast to Joburg

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Hotel prices in Cape Town plunge

JADE KELMOVITZ

HOTEL prices in the Western Cape dropped by over 11% from May 2017 to May 2018 according to the consumer price index data published by Statistics South Africa.

On September 5, OTAs were displaying room rates as low as R2 000 for five-star properties over December.

Craig van Rooyen, director of Tour d'Afrique told *TNW* that the demand for travel to the region was

down 30% this year for the coming December holidays compared with the same period last year.

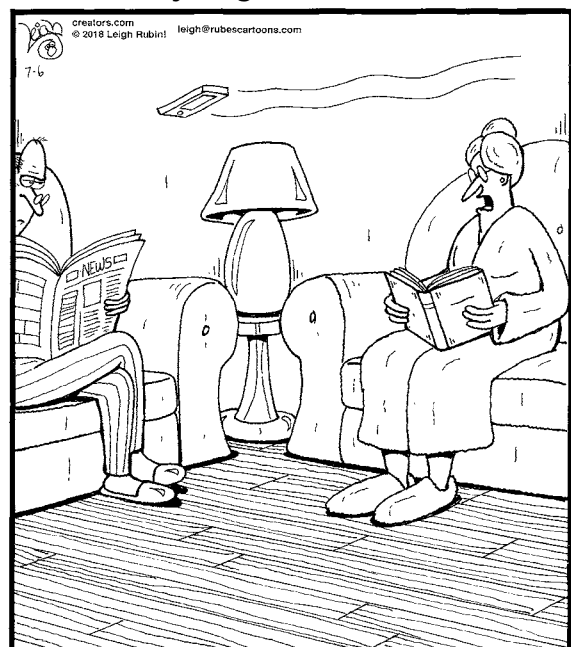
“The price drop, however, affords local travellers and agents an opportunity to book hotels in the Cape Town at lower prices.”

Federated Hospitality Association of South Africa ceo, **Tshifhiwa Tshivhengwa**, said there had been low demand from

international and regional travellers to the region in recent months and this was expected to be an ongoing trend for the rest of the year. Tshifhiwa highlighted Day Zero threats, the rand weakness and high inventory as some of the contributing factors for the decline in hotel prices.

Vanya Lessing, ceo of Sure Travel, said the price drop, however, afforded local travellers and agents an opportunity to book hotels in the Cape Town region at lower prices. ■

Rubes® By Leigh Rubin



“Left the phone in airplane mode again, eh?”

Development Promotions bags Topdeck contract

TESSA REED

DEVELOPMENT Promotions has been appointed GSA for Topdeck Travel in South Africa, effective September 3.

“We are delighted to incorporate Topdeck Travel within our touring portfolio, thus offering all segments of the touring market to our retail travel partners, from youth and small groups to specialist

touring,” said **Jackie Adami**, md DP.

Topdeck’s **Daniela Kelfkens** told *TNW* that by appointing Development Promotions as GSA, Topdeck was increasing its footprint in the market. Previously, the company was represented by two business development managers, one of whom will stay on the product, under DP.

Jane Davidson, director

of DP, said while DP had established itself in the cruising space, the addition of Topdeck strengthened its position in the touring space.

She explained that while G Adventures, also represented by DP, offers small group touring (maximum 12 people) for all ages, Topdeck offers group coaching (up to 45 people) and focuses on the youth market. ■

SAX upsets

From page 1

told *TNW* that SAX was operating the JNB-BFN route at R1 109 and the JNB-KIM route at R1 099, including taxes and agent commissions. “When CemAir started flying the JNB-BFN route two years ago, SAX was charging around R1 600 for the flight.”

Rodger Foster, ceo of Airlink, said SAX had re-entered the market with low fares on all its routes in an attempt to ‘buy its way back into the market’. He said, based on his understanding of the average unavoidable cost of operating various routes, it was possible that SAX was selling these flights below cost. “The question is whether it is morally correct to do this on the taxpayer’s dime, and

whether or not the practice falls within the realm of legal competitive pricing.

“Given the difficulty it will face when returning to a market flush with competition, I would forecast that SAX will not

“SAX had re-entered the market with low fares on all its routes in an attempt to ‘buy its way back into the market’.”

easily be able to recover its direct variable operational expenditure,” said Rodger. “The more it operates, the bigger its loss will be.”

He added that, looking to open credit lines with banks appeared to be misguided.

“The shareholder should recapitalise SAX, rather than approve agreements and provide sovereign guarantees that will place the airline in more debt. And one should question the wisdom of burdening the fiscus further in the current recessionary economic environment.”

Travel agents canvassed by *TNW* have reported mixed sentiment from clients towards SAX. A number of agents said their clients were concerned about the safety of the aircraft and wary about supporting another SOE that kept requesting bailouts, although some clients have welcomed the carrier’s return, responding positively to the cheaper fares.

SAX was unavailable for comment at the time of print. ■

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SOUTH AFRICAN AIRWAYS

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TNW's Thirsty's

THE Johannesburg travel trade let its hair down at The Bull Run restaurant, next to the Protea Hotel by Marriott Johannesburg Balalaika in Sandton. Old friends caught up and new bonds were formed as

attendees joined in the Thirsty's name-tag swapping tradition. No one left with their name (tag) intact. Look out for an invitation to the next Thirsty's.

The next Thirsty's will take place in September. ■



Good to see you! From left: **Kate Nathan, TNW; Brenda Mitchell, World Leisure Holidays; Paulo Ines, Amadeus; Mary Shilleto, Thompsons Travel, and Debbie Duncan, Amadeus.**



From left: **Tracey Krog, MSC Cruises; David Bradshaw, Travel Vision; and Salome van Heerden, Cruises International.**



From left: **Sylvain Bosc and Sean Bradley from Fastjet, share a joke with Jane Davidson, Development Promotions.**



◀ **Cheers! Jean Adolphe, JA Travel Personnel and Ramon Goldenhuys, 360 Degrees Travel.**

▶ **Lina da Costa, Bidvest Car Rental, and Eugene Cronje, Virgin Atlantic.**



▲ **Mpho Maseloane (left) and Nonluthando Hadebe from aha.**

◀ **Chrissa Karanastasis, The Travel Concierge and Irshaad Yasseen, Cruises International**

▶ **Megan D'Arcy (left), Comair and Hermina Sennelo, World Leisure Holidays, cosy up.**



Photos: Tessa Reed, Savannah Freemantle, Jason Simpson, Jade Kelmovitz

Exchange rate spurred 2017 spike in Schengen travel

TESSA REED

TRAVEL to Schengen countries showed significant growth last year, according to stats from SchengenVisalInfo.com.

Schengen visa applications in South Africa grew by 21% from 170 436 in 2016 to 201 786 last year.

The growth is attributed to the favourable rate of exchange last year, but the current weakness of the rand will likely retard this growth.

In the beginning of 2016,

the euro-rand exchange rate was just under R17 to the euro, while it reached a low of R12,40 last year. On September 3, 2018 the rand closed at R17,36 to the euro.

“Although 2018 has started really well, we expect the growth levels to start slowing down mainly due to the weakness of the rand,” says **Carlos Luis**, Flight Centre Travel Group brand leader – Leisure Land and Sea Product.

For 2017, FCTG’s top-performing Schengen country was Italy. This is consistent

with the stats, which show that Italy received the most Schengen visa applications – for the second year running. Italy was followed by France, Germany, Spain and The Netherlands.

“Going forward I see Italy still performing well with the increasing popularity of cruising packages,” says Carlos. He says Portugal and the Czech Republic offer fantastic value, even in rand terms, and should continue to see good growth in 2018.

Visa applications to Portugal

showed the most growth at 52,4%, with Denmark following closely behind with a 50% increase. Other countries showing significant growth include Austria, Norway, the Czech Republic and Spain.

Only two countries showed a decline in applications – Slovakia was down 31,2% and Poland was down 4,5%.

In percentage terms, the consulate of Slovakia in Pretoria had the lowest amount of visa rejections – one out of 200 applications. Cape Town consulates with

low rejection rates included Spain with a 0,8% rejection rate, Germany at 1,1%, and France at 1,1%; in Pretoria, Germany was 1,2%, Austria at 1,2% and Switzerland at 1,2%.

The Lithuanian embassy had the highest rate of rejections at 12,8%, but also the second lowest number of applications at 218. Other Schengen consulates with a high level of rejections included Portugal (Pretoria) at 8,3%, Italy (Cape Town) at 4,7%, Belgium (Johannesburg) at 4,7% and Poland (Pretoria) at 3,6%. ■



Selling Dubai!

Dubai Tourism hosted the trade at its South African roadshow at the end of last month in Cape Town, Durban and Johannesburg. The roadshow took the form of a workshop and provided tips on how to boost sales to Dubai and offered an introduction to the authority’s new Dubai Expert Certification programme. Agents also networked with Dubai suppliers. Pictured at the Johannesburg leg are (from left): **Zinhle Mokoena**, travel expert at Flight Centre; **Wilma van Vuuren**, head of yield management at Wings Travel Management; **Stella Fubara-Obinwa**, director Africa international operation at Dubai Tourism; and **Mandy Thiart**, travel consultant at Sure Blakes Travel. Photo: Savannah Freemantle



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TIC recently hosted workshops around the country to educate agents and corporates about the risks faced by travellers. Dr Albie de Frey, owner and operator of The Travel Doctor, gave an in-depth talk. *TNW's* Sarah Robertson reports.

Anti-vac movement causes outbreaks

OUTBREAKS of infectious diseases like measles and polio are becoming more prevalent. This was the warning from Dr **Albie de Frey**, owner and operator of The Travel Doctor, who was speaking to agents at a recent TIC workshop.

He said it was due to increasing numbers of parents not wanting their children to be vaccinated against the illnesses.

Last month a polio outbreak was confirmed in Papua New Guinea, which had been

certified as polio-free in 2000. DRC and Syria also reported polio outbreaks during 2017.

Over 14 000 cases of measles were reported in Europe in the last year. Romania, Italy, Greece and Germany were some of the countries affected.

Albie stressed that ensuring that childhood vaccinations were up to date was an important factor in establishing in pre-trip assessments if clients were fit to travel.

Yellow fever breaks out in the Congo

Last month the Congo Republic confirmed a case of yellow fever near its border, which the Ministry of Health has described as “an emerging event of epidemic proportions”.

The late 2015 outbreak in the Congo and Angola finally came to an end in early 2016 after almost 1 000 cases had been confirmed. This deadly disease is transmitted through the bite of an infected day biting species of mosquito.

Once a person is infected, doctors can only treat the symptoms, which include

fever, headaches, vomiting and back pain and can often be misdiagnosed as malaria.

As there is no cure for the disease, Albie explained that this was the only vaccine regulated by the World Health Organisation. He explained that, while it used to require a booster every 10 years, the vaccine was now valid for life for most people.

However, approximately 10% of people still lost their immunity over time so it was wise not to discontinue the practice of boosters.

Malaria a major killer

According to Albie, malaria is the disease that kills most people in Africa.

Over 200 million cases of malaria are reported and over 650 000 lives are lost each year. He said that due to the ongoing nature of the epidemic, the press were relatively quiet on the topic, which resulted in lack of awareness about how dangerous the disease was.

“The listeriosis outbreak earlier this year killed 180 people in total. Malaria kills 180 children per day. We are losing control in South Africa without regular spraying, and the disease is on the rise

locally. Internationally, 90% of malaria deaths occur in Africa,” said Albie.

He explained that it was vital for travellers to take malaria pills when travelling, especially in Africa and that if the traveller experienced symptoms approximately 10 days later it was vital to seek emergency medical care as patients could die within 72 hours without treatment.



Pictured at the Auckland Park TIC Travel Doctor workshop are (from left) **Monica Horn**, product manager, Harvey World Travel; **Dr Albie de Frey**, owner and operator of The Travel Doctor **Simmy Micheli**, manager – sales and marketing, TIC; and **Cheryll Shaw**, md KemShaw Travel. Photo: Sarah Robertson

Pre- and post-trip health evaluations are essential

Albie said companies were waking up to the fact that when they sent employees out of the country for work purposes they were responsible for them at all times while they were away.

As a result The Travel Doctor has a number of forward-thinking corporate clients who send their employees or contractors to them for pre-trip health assessments.

He said as most employees who travel internationally tended to

be at a senior level, their assessments often picked up on chronic illnesses such as heart disease and diabetes that the traveller was not aware of. He said, on average, 49% of the travellers they assessed were fit for duty, 45% were fit for duty with relative contraindications that the client needed to be aware of, and 6% were declared not fit for duty. Customers are often prescribed with tailored medical kits to reduce potential health

problems while travelling. The Travel Doctor also does post-deployment evaluations where they screen for malaria, Lyme disease, Lassa fever, typhoid, tetanus, rabies and hepatitis A.

Simmy Micheli, manager – sales and marketing at TIC, said it was notable that, although TIC did offer senior travel insurance policies, travellers over the age of 70 were not covered for cardio or cerebro-vascular diseases at all.

Did you know?

- Over 50% of TIC's medical claims are for accidents, including car or bike accidents. Clients are only covered relating to motor bike accidents if they hold a valid motor bike licence and if the motor bike that they are driving has engine capacity of up to 500cc. Special cover can sometimes be arranged.
- TIC's standard policies do not provide cover for professional sports events or competitions of any kind. Specific cover must be obtained for clients travelling for the purpose of

marathons, cycling races, triathlons etc.

- TIC reports that acts of terror are no longer confined to specific high-risk areas and can take place anywhere. TIC offers full cover for acts of terror, wherever they occur.
- Business trip suicides are on the rise according to TIC stats, but clients are not covered for cases of self-harm. Repatriation of remains can cost up to R500 000 and a recent hospitalisation and repatriation of a survivor came to R320 000. As

companies are required to foot the bill for this, TIC recommends that corporates roll out mental and general health pre-evaluations for employees before they travel.

- TIC allows corporate clients to make an annual travel policy declaration, which ensures that staff, subcontractors or guests authorised to travel on behalf of the company are comprehensively insured. This eliminates the need to obtain quotes and issue policies for every trip. ■

Legacy launches new OTA

SARAH ROBERTSON

LEGACY Lifestyle, the Legacy Group's loyalty programme, has formed a new OTA, called Lifestyle Travel, which will sell travel products to its loyalty programme members and direct to the public.

Michael Levinsohn, md of Legacy Lifestyle, says the group noticed an increase in demand from members for travel products and, as a result, decided to establish an OTA to better fulfil this need for their clients.

Gm of Lifestyle Travel, **William Botha**, says Legacy

Lifestyle has funded the development of the OTA platform and provided access to its membership base of 850 000 people. He explains that the company offers a fully automated online booking solution which allows Legacy Lifestyle members to earn and redeem loyalty rewards, in cash back, when booking travel arrangements.

"A myriad of flights, hotels, transfers, sightseeing attractions and dynamic tour packages are available through our website.

"These offerings are

powered by more than 70 suppliers reaching and accessing content in more than 190 countries."

William says Legacy Lifestyle will also take its booking platform to market, targeting retail chains interested in branching out into travel sales for the first time.

He adds that Lifestyle Travel also has a white label offering for ITCs looking for an inexpensive white label booking engine solution for their business.

The company also provides ITCs with their own branded invoices, etickets and vouchers. ■



New ship for Regent

Regent Seven Seas Cruises' *Seven Seas Splendor*, will join the fleet in February 2020. During the Northern hemisphere summer, the ship will visit Zadar (Croatia), Koper (Slovenia), Bordeaux, Barcelona, the UK and the Greek isles, as well as the Italian and French Riviéras. The ship offers all-suite accommodation and can host up to 750 guests in 375 suites. Suites range from 20 sqm Veranda suites, to the 413 sqm Regent suite, which can accommodate up to six guests. Pictured: **Janine Pretorius**, owner of Encore Cruises, which represents Regent Seven Seas. Photo: Shannon Van Zyl

SAA adds two weekly JNB-Luanda flights

FROM September 9, SAA has added two weekly flights to its Johannesburg-Luanda route. SA080 operates from Johannesburg (JNB) to Luanda (LAD) on Wednesdays and Sundays and SA081 returns from LAD

to Johannesburg on Mondays and Thursdays.

From September 9-October 27 and March 31-October 26, SA080 departs JNB at 23h55 and arrives in LAD at 02h35 and return flight SA081 departs LAD at 03h55 and

arrives in JNB at 08h15.

From October 28 to March 30, 2019, SA080 will depart JNB at 23h55 and arrive in LAD at 02h25 and return flight SA081 will depart LAD at 03h55 and arrive in JNB at 08h15. ■

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Retail Travel Brands

Retail travel brands are facing growing competition, not only from online travel agencies but also suppliers. By Chana Boucher.

Future-proof your brand

AS TECHNOLOGY evolves, so too are the relationships between travel industry players, leading some agencies to feel threatened rather than supported by suppliers.

"There certainly are some suppliers who target customers directly or work with various loyalty programmes in the South African market to gain sales," says **Sue Garrett**, Flight Centre Travel Group (FCTG) product and marketing gm. While her group realises there is a cost to distribution for suppliers, Sue says preferred partners understand that FCTG has a strong sales force of more than 800 sales experts, driven to support partners that back the company's business model.

Joanne Visagie, sales and marketing director of Beachcomber Tours, says suppliers competing with agents by going direct are a growing problem, but adds: "We at Beachcomber Tours don't take direct bookings but refer them to the retail travel agencies. Travel agents have a choice of which tour operators to use, so hopefully they understand and appreciate our loyalty to the retail trade. We see this as a true partnership and what a preferred partnership should stand for."

Joanne says the company's loyalty to travel agents has worked well over the years but that Beachcomber also does substantial advertising to the public. "We draw the public to our hotels and grow our brand but then pass these bookings to the retail travel agents. It's a win-win situation and our brand is a strong one that people request from their travel agent. Our aim is to assist travel agents to earn the maximum commission in the most effective way, not to undercut them on price and take the bookings direct. Rather, we work with them in maximising our business together."

Undercutting agents

Mladen Lukic, gm of Travel Counsellors SA, says suppliers will always compete to some degree. "It is acceptable for suppliers to have direct dealings with end users but only when it won't disadvantage the travel industry in any way."

What is unfair, says Mladen, is when the industry is disadvantaged, for example, when pricing on direct channels is lower. He believes it is the process of booking travel that should allow people to distinguish between going direct or through an agent, and not the price. "If you want to work with a partner, you can't make that partner more expensive. It's a temporary win for suppliers, but works against them ultimately if they need the industry."

Travel Counsellors avoids working with suppliers that have an aggressive direct policy. Airlines, Mladen explains, are increasingly guilty of this with their direct sales channels and the NDC concept.

Service and choice

Karen Donkin, marketing and contracting, Serendipity Travel, says while suppliers going direct has had an impact, taking a portion of its business away, the company still considers suppliers as partners. "If you deliver good, fast and quality service to your clients, why would they go direct? Service plays a big role to retain your business."

Similarly, Sue says there has undoubtedly been a shift in revenue in the highly commoditised product space, but that it is not yet significant. "The cost of driving an enquiry or lead is far too expensive for many of our suppliers to replace our distribution channel entirely. Having a choice of product or supplier is very important to our traveller and that is what we offer," she says.

The suppliers' perspective

Kirby Gordon, vp: sales and distribution at FlySafair, calls this a "complex issue". He says: "I can totally understand where the trade is coming from in this regard because we are both supplier and competitor to the retail trade in that we sell direct too." He says, however, that there are two very different types of consumers, those who seek to buy direct (usually online) and those who still prefer the services, support and reassurance of dealing with a travel agent. "We concede that without providing travel agent service – which we don't – there's no way we can access the kind of client who visits a travel agent, other than to work with travel agents." Likewise, he says agents will struggle to access clients who prefer to purchase directly from airlines online. "The dynamic is set but it's all about providing the right fit to meet the client's needs."

Without direct sales, Kirby says FlySafair would not have a business. "The overwhelming majority of our tickets are sold by us directly or through very similar types of online platforms that focus on low-margin, light-touch, high-volume sales methods."

Lance Smith, executive: sales at Avis Southern Africa, says travel agency business remains one of the most important channels to the market and that the company will continue to ensure its travel partners have the most competitive offerings. He says the need to



Teresa Richardson

offer direct sales is driven by customer demand and is a global trend led by the advent of the Internet, smartphones and tablets.

Teresa Richardson, head of marketing at The Travel Corporation (TTC), says: "We have put a great deal of effort in working with travel agents and have

a number of initiatives in place to ensure that we support travel agents." She adds that agents and suppliers have been working a lot better together in the past few years due to a growing understanding between them.

But, she says sometimes clients do contact TTC directly and want immediate fulfilment. "Direct sales are a small portion of our overall sales. Most consumers who contact TTC directly are looking for answers to certain questions they have about our products, and are not looking to book directly," adds Teresa.

Thaybz Khan, contemporary brand manager at Cruises International, believes the retail agent's largest competitor is the online sphere and online consolidators. "Retail agents lose more clients to online competition than to suppliers. Our aim is to ensure we offer the support travel agents require to do their jobs." She adds that Cruises International has a price match guarantee to match a quote, provided it is a like-for-like basis. According to Thaybz, this is an attempt to ensure the travel agent wins the booking.

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Agents are the experts

Retail travel agents claim to be experts in selling travel, a competitive advantage over online travel agencies (OTAs), but is this accurate?

MLADEN Lukic of Travel Counsellors, says the more attractive direct channels become in the long run, the more frequently travellers will use them. The advantage the retail industry has is the value it can provide. "The days of agents being able to book products the public can't are in the past. Now access to product is ubiquitous, but the overall outcome will be better with us. You can build a garage yourself and go out and buy all the bits and pieces, but will the outcome be as good as if you used an expert? For some people it will work but for others it doesn't."

Karen Donkin of Serendipity Travel, says suppliers expect the retail agent to support them, but don't invest in training the agent on their product offerings.

Meanwhile, Flight Centre Travel Group's **Sue Garrett** says: "The key is to be selective about with whom we choose to enter into preferred supplier contracts – those suppliers that are considered platinum partners for FCTG Africa certainly do provide outstanding sales and

training support, coupled with marketing contributions to close sales."

Beachcomber Tours, says **Joanne Visagie**, undertakes travel agent training on a weekly basis. **Lance Smith** says Avis invests in sales teams and digital platforms dedicated to training and supporting travel agents.

With the need to invest marketing and training budgets wisely, FlySafair's **Kirby Gordon** says the low-cost carrier looks at a metric in each channel based on how much should be spent in marketing/training/communications per R100 of revenue received from that channel. "In the trade space, we are looking to grow the market so the amount we spend per R100 of revenue is significantly more than our spend in other channels at the moment."

The Travel Corporation, says **Teresa Richardson**, contributes a huge amount to advertising with its travel agent partners, offers travel agent training that includes online; in-person and workshops throughout the year and has a 'travel agent first' programme.



Helping you close

According to Mladen, agents should not expect suppliers to seal the deal for them. "No travel agent should rely on a supplier to close sales. If they did, then what would be the purpose of their existence – they become a post office."

However, he says for agents to be positioned as experts they need to be able to understand a product, and the availability of opportunities to experience a product has declined over the years. "Over the past 10 years or so, agents have lost a lot of understanding of products because they don't

get to travel. There are people booking flights on a daily basis who've never been on a plane. Suppliers need to take cognisance that product knowledge is not just about sending a brochure," says Mladen.

He adds that it is impossible to expect every agent to experience every hotel and destination and that technology is needed to substitute that. That is why Travel Counsellors is continually investing millions to develop its technology and improve counsellors' understanding

of global travel.

According to Kirby, it's up to the retailer to win their client based on the strength and value of the service they offer.

"There's no way we can discourage a client from purchasing through one channel versus another... what we can and do, is support the agents as best we can by ensuring they are informed about our offers and that they get great service from us when they need us to do something for them so they can assist their client."

First-hand experience

According to Karen, fam trips are few and far between. "We try to close the gap with regular product knowledge, but nothing can come close to the agent experiencing the product first hand," she explains.

The impact of the reduction of fam trips, says Mladen, can't be seen now, but in the long term will result in consultants being unable to judge the right outcome for a holiday. Agents need a better understanding of what a destination, resort or the like can offer. Alternatively, the client will question what an agent can provide that online sources like TripAdvisor can't.

Joanne says: "Humans enjoy human interaction, especially when the exchange is engaging, helpful, professional and knowledgeable. There can be useful storytelling and personal tips/experiences to share from travel agents who've experienced a product first hand."

FCTG's brand DNA, explains Sue, is built around

providing expert travel advice because agents are travellers themselves. Travel experience is a prerequisite for new recruits to FCTG, and the brand drives educationals more now than ever before. "We firmly believe that this is a key element in delivering on our promise of expert advice." She says these educationals are funded 100% by FCTG.

Teresa highlights that TTC offers various incentives and fam trips including the Trafalgar acclaim trip, which allows agents to experience the product "so they know how to sell it better".

To assist knowledge building, Cruises International offers a cruise expert programme, which is an online training platform, including webinars, says **Thaybz Khan**. The programme is linked to an incentive giving agents a chance to win a cabin on a cruise. Further, it has the travel agent portal called Shipmates, an external sales team and generic training materials.

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Travel agents still on top

Online travel agencies offer travellers some services and/or functionalities that retail agents might struggle to compete with, but that doesn't mean agents are losing relevance.

BEACHCOMBER Tours' **Joanne Visagie** says agents remain the preference for most travellers and that only a small portion of the public choose to go via a different channel. "The public believe the travel agent will source them the best deal. Clients have more options and flexibility with a travel agent versus a massive booking engine and there are fewer 'catches'."



Joanne Visagie

work outside office hours.

Teresa Richardson of The Travel Corporation believes travel agents should be able to offer clients immediate answers and valuable advice and suggestions. TTC's online booking systems for the trade eliminate any delay in response, she adds. "When the consultant has all the details at their fingertips and is able to answer questions on the spot, it's all very impressive to the prospective traveller."

According to Travel Counsellors' **Mladen Lukic**,

time is not really a deciding factor for travellers. He says booking travel is a long process and that the perceived value lies in whether the traveller wants to do it themselves or get assistance and a better outcome. While he adds that price plays a part and that agents can be very competitive in saving clients money, the most value is matching the outcome they expect. "An OTA is never going to provide the ultimate process because it's all automated and subject to the number of connections they have," says Mladen. "An OTA can never guarantee the best product. Nothing is personalised – that's the biggest difference between OTAs and us. If a client needs a quick flight to Johannesburg, few agents can improve on that, but good luck to that client rebooking the flight online because of bad weather."

Lance Smith of Avis, says to remain relevant and competitive travel agents must ensure they continue to provide relevant information and services using the appropriate technology. "We ensure that exactly the same

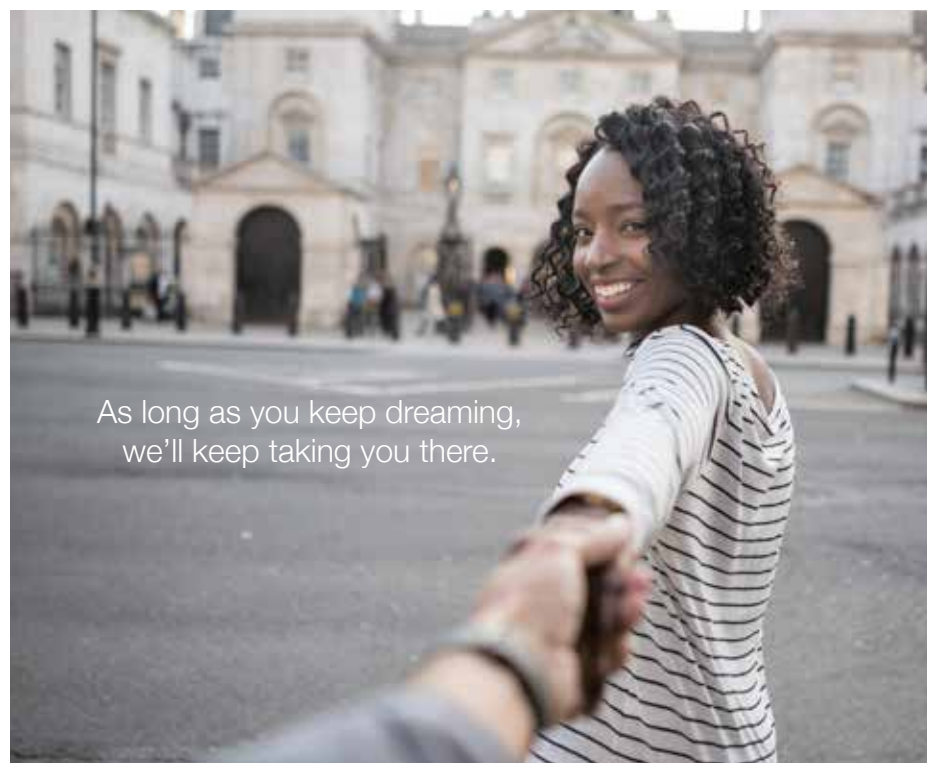


value propositions available to OTAs are made available to our travel agent partners."

Meanwhile, **Fiona Angelico**, gm domestic sales at Hertz Rent a Car Southern Africa, says the continued development of technology within the travel industry is revolutionising the way travel arrangements are managed and made. "Retail travel agents' commitment and spend on research and development will no doubt ensure their place and continued growth in the car-rental segment."

Kirby Gordon of FlySafair, says no industry can force customers to purchase in a way that isn't comfortable for

them. "If we look at the retail books market we saw the likes of Amazon.com in the US taking over, with the majority of customers preferring to get their books online or to buy ebooks... That said, it's not as though there's no bricks-and-mortar book retail industry in the US today – it's still a very sizeable industry because there will always be people who want to go into bookstores and browse, and get the advice of shop owners. The same is true for retail agents – there will always be customers who want to deal with a person who can advise them and offer a personal, bespoke service. That's the industry's strength."



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What the future holds

Serendipity Travel's **Karen Donkin** doesn't think retail travel will ever disappear and things will look very different in the next 10 years.

Travel Counsellors has a particular view regarding the future of the retail travel industry. According to Mladen, the traditional segmentation of the industry is already cracking as the lines between the different divisions blur. In future, he says, there will be three segments; those who own products, the tech environment – which is the ultimate version of an OTA in that it satisfies an end user's need at the time and is transaction fixated – and the third space where the focus is on outcomes rather than the transaction. "It will be easier for us to compete once there is a clear understanding of

what each can achieve. Travel agents must pick a space. Now, companies are trying to be present in all of these markets."

Joanne predicts that it will be tough to grow profits and that retail brands will need to win business on professionalism, efficiency, knowledge and keeping costs to a minimum. Flight Centre Travel Group's **Sue Garrett** believes the future of travel retailers is brighter than ever. "With the volatility of the rand, security breaches and choice, our market will seek out experts to ensure their choice for their holiday is safe, secure and selected with their personal holiday experiences at the forefront." But she adds that having a blended approach, offering both

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What the future holds

online and offline services, is critical.

Teresa says consumers are turning to the travel agent more than ever before. "According to various new studies, even the younger millennials have discovered the value of relying on travel agents. They turn to travel agents not only to book their trips, but also for expert advice on destinations, accommodation and other aspects of their trip."

For Fiona, the future holds "a seamless travel experience, supported by powerful travel management technology, the growth of virtual travel assistants, real-time information and the creation of a more personalised travel experience".

Kirby says it would be naïve to deny the continual growth of ecommerce. "This trend is going to put pressure on agents because the offers



Kirby Gordon

will be faster, available day and night, and probably cheaper. This is all facilitated by the fact that the route to market is digital without the intervention of people... but therein lies the exact benefit of the travel agent: their service is deep

and personal."

As an example, Kirby says if wealthier people are identified as being willing to pay for bespoke service, perhaps travel agents could cater more for their needs. "Perhaps agents will build businesses where they aggregate bespoke services around the flight service being offered by the airline, like airport valets who guide clients through check-in and take them to the lounges. Maybe they move out of their offices and rather go and consult with their clients at the client's home or office, like we see private bankers now doing. Whatever the outcome, the key is always going to lie in understanding the client and the specific things that those clients appreciate about their service. The winners will be those who build innovatively on that benefit," he comments.



Yuppichef started online and has opened physical stores.

Case study: Long live bricks-and-mortar!

A FEW years ago, global travel experts predicted that 'high-street' travel agencies were nearing extinction. But this prediction is not unique to the travel industry.

Last year, much was reported about the 'retail

apocalypse' – the death of bricks-and-mortar stores in the digital age. The trend of retail stores of all types closing down started in the US in 2010 and many have predicted the same fate for travel agencies. Interesting then, that

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RETAIL TRAVEL BRANDS

some businesses that were born online are investing in bricks-and-mortar stores. Locally, kitchen and homeware shopping group Yuppiechef has done just that by opening two stores in Cape Town with a third on the way.

“We believe the future of retail is omnichannel,” says **Andrew Smith**, Yuppiechef md and co-founder. Andrew says that among many reasons, the company was influenced by the insight that it’s not a



“You still get those clients who choose to come in and see you, versus those who are happy to transact via telephone and email.”

Karen Donkin

choice between online and offline, but about offering the best of both. “Customers won’t see Yuppiechef as an online retailer or a physical store. In their minds we are a single retail brand and they want to interact with us on their terms, whenever and wherever they are.”

He adds that, for many South Africans, setting foot in stores is a favourite pastime. “Online is still only about 2% of

retail in SA. That is partly because there haven’t been good places to shop online, but also because people like the physical shopping experience – browsing, getting advice, the immediacy of purchase, seeing and being seen,” says Andrew.

Yuppiechef put some “non-negotiable” principles in place including pricing and specials always being the same online and in stores. It has also integrated online customer reviews into in-store price labels as well as scannable QR codes to access more product information. Andrew says a physical store offers customers the ability to touch and feel products but, most importantly, lets them talk to someone in person to get advice and guidance. “We place a great deal of importance on employing store assistants who not only are friendly and helpful, but also have a huge passion for cooking and the tools that we sell,” says Andrew.

Karen Donkin of Serendipity Travel, says physical stores and an online presence cater for different clients. “You still get those clients who choose to come in and see you, versus those who are happy to transact via telephone and email.”

Sue Garrett of Flight Centre Travel Group, says when investing in a holiday, the majority of South Africans want to deal with a person. “A holiday is a big investment, and very often a first-time experience for many South Africans, and being able to ask advice, gain insider tips and the feeling of security is critical in our market.”

“Due to our large footprint across SA, we offer this as a massive point of difference [compared to an OTA],” adds Sue.



Flight Centre Travel Group (FCTG) staff will climb Kilimanjaro in March next year to raise funds for a worthy cause. The Flight Centre Foundation is a registered NPC and PBO with the main focus of providing education. Projects include an ECD (early childhood development) centre and a school in Diepkloof, Soweto. In addition to the support the foundation gets from FCTG, it runs a number of fundraising events, the largest of which will be the 25 people climbing Kilimanjaro to raise money to build a school library. Other fundraisers coming up are a Barnyard Theatre event on October 25, a golf day on November 15 and a cycling event on November 24. For more info on these events, contact Diane at diane.cleary@flightcentre.co.za. Pictured: **Nicolle Hope** from Flight Centre UK interacting with the children at the foundation’s school in Soweto.

Flight Centre climbs for a cause



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Newsflash!

BidTravel has acquired Lloyds Travel in Bryanston, Johannesburg. Commenting on the purchase, **Lidia Folli**, BidTravel ceo, said: “Harvey World Travel – Lloyds Travel is a very successful and well-established agency which has been operating for the last 20 years from the Bryanston Shopping Centre. BidTravel and Harvey World Travel are very excited to welcome the management and staff on board and look forward to the future success of the brand.” ■

TNW8846SD

Ethiopia



One of the stone castles in Fasil Ghebbi, Gondar.

Dubbed 'Land of Origins', Ethiopia is believed to be the place where hominids walked upright for the first time and is the birthplace of coffee. Tessa Reed looks at this largely untapped destination.

And now for something new

DESPITE being home to nine Unesco World Heritage Sites – including the renowned stone churches of Lalibela that are referred to as the eighth wonder of the world, Ethiopia is yet to attract a significant share of the South African market.

Gordon Triegaardt, owner of Traveltroll Africa, puts this down to a lack of knowledge about the destination and negativity in the press. South Africans tend to be wary of travelling to relatively unknown countries in Africa, like Ethiopia.

Abel Alemu, Ethiopian Airlines regional manager Southern Africa, expounds on the country's cultural and historic offering – the people of Ethiopia speak more than 80 different languages; it is believed to be the first Christian nation in the region, while the peaceful co-existence of the Christian, Muslim and Jewish religions is testament to the tolerance of the people.

The country is still largely untapped as a tourism destination but Gordon points out that the growth of Ethiopian Airlines has piqued interest. **Trish Clayton**, divisional operations manager of Tourvest Travel Services, also says that, while the country is relatively uncharted in terms of tourism, the destination is on the rise. It shouldn't come as a surprise then that *Lonely Planet* listed Ethiopia as one of its top 10 travel destinations last year.

The time to start selling Ethiopia is now. Trish advises travellers to make their way to Ethiopia soon, arguing that the destination's appeal is that it's undiscovered and that when the country establishes itself as a tourist destination, its offering will be different. "I really enjoyed Ethiopia as it is still a virgin country to visit and you really feel the culture and traditions of the people, who are very warm and friendly," she says. Ethiopia was voted the most welcoming country by readers

of *Rough Guides*.

When it comes to Africa's cultural offering, Gordon says there are three countries that stand out: Morocco, Egypt and Ethiopia. He says clients who are interested in Egypt and Morocco and are interested in history are prospective clients for Ethiopia. "It has a history that is as old as Egypt and people don't realise this," he says.

For first timers, he suggests a circuit of the historic northern parts, starting in Addis Ababa and visiting Lalibela, Axum and Gondar. He adds that Ethiopia is not an expensive destination, especially when compared with similar alternatives.

Lance Zackey of Rove Africa



Abel Alemu

suggests no fewer than seven nights for travellers wanting to see the country's historic sites, with an additional two to three nights for travellers also wanting to visit the Simien Mountains, where the country's endemic wildlife – including the Walya ibex, Gelada baboon and Ethiopian wolf – can be found.

The Ethiopian Travel Organisation says that while the country can

be visited all year round, visitors may want to avoid the rainy season between June and August, with September to early October being the optimal time to visit. Travellers may also want to time their trips to coincide with the religious festivals of Timkat or Meskel.

Three must-see historic sites

1. Lalibela

The 11 medieval churches found in Lalibela were hewn by hand from rock in the 12th and 13th centuries. The monolithic buildings have been carved from a sloping mass of red volcanic rock and are interconnected by a network of tunnels and passages, some of which open into caves and catacombs.

The labyrinth of churches is the world's largest rock-hewn excavation and is referred to as the Jerusalem of Africa. It is believed that the king of Lalibela

built the churches as a symbol of the Holy Land, when pilgrimages to Jerusalem were stopped by Muslim conquests. The churches are still the focus of pilgrimage for Coptic Christians today and the stone churches have remained in active use since their excavation nearly a thousand years ago.

"Each of the rock churches is carved out and crafted beautifully from a single volcanic rock," says Lance, adding that the site of the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela will take travellers back to the 11th century.



A medieval church in Lalibela. Photo: Kate Nathan

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The remains of the largest obelisk lie where it fell centuries ago.

2. Axum

The ancient Kingdom of Axum existed from about AD100 to AD940 and is a Unesco World Heritage Site. It was the capital of an ancient empire that once stretched from northern Ethiopia to parts of Sudan and Yemen and is believed to have once been ruled by the Queen of Sheba.

Tourvest's **Trish Clayton** points out that Axum was the most powerful state in its time between the eastern Roman empire and Persia (Iran). "It is believed that the Sanctuary houses the original Ark of the Covenant. Although you cannot go into the Sanctuary or see the Ark of the Covenant, it is an interesting story."

The site of Aksum today consists of towering obelisks, ruined palaces and castles as well as royal tombs. The largest standing obelisk rises to a height of over 23 metres, while the largest measures 33 metres and lies where it fell. It is unknown whether it collapsed during the process of erection and it may be the largest monolithic stele that ancient human beings ever attempted to erect.

The Aksum Archaeological Museum houses ancient artefacts uncovered around Aksum. The artefacts include inscriptions that are over 2 500 years old. Axum has several active archaeological sites.

3. Gondar

Gondar was the capital of Ethiopia from the 16th to the 19th century, when its 'fairy-tale' castles housed nobility. Founded in 1636 by Emperor Fasiladas, the castles in Gondar have been dubbed the Camelot of Africa. The city's

centrepiece is Fasil Ghebbi, which houses six fortified stone castles including the three-storey original built by Emperor Fasil.

Trish describes Gondar as the perfect setting for a medieval film. "I fell in love as it was a fairy-tale site."

4. Also not to be missed

The walled city of Harar houses more than 80 mosques and is the fourth most holy site in Islam. The hominoid skeleton 'Lucy' is on display at the National Museum in Addis Ababa. "You must



see Lucy!" says Trish. Lucy is the oldest hominid skeleton ever discovered. The Lower Valley of the Awash River and the Lower Valley of the Omo River are both important palaeontological sites, the former being the site where Lucy was discovered.

Tips for travellers

Tourvest Travel Services' **Trish Clayton**, offers some tips for travellers to Ethiopia:

1. You need a yellow fever certificate to return into South Africa;
2. Pack good walking shoes, a hiking stick and a torch if you

- are visiting the churches in Lalibela;
3. Wear long pants or skirts and scarves for church and mosque visits;
4. Pack bath and sink plugs;
5. Don't shop at the airport and do bargain at the markets.

For festival lovers

THERE are two religious festivals on Ethiopia's calendar: Timkat on January 19 and Meskel on September 27.

Timkat is the Ethiopian Orthodox equivalent to Epiphany and is celebrated at churches throughout the country, although Gondar is the best place to be during

this festival. Timkat commemorates the baptism of Jesus and is best known for its ritual re-enactment of baptism. Fasilida's Pool is the site of the celebration, with thousands of white-robed worshippers converging on the pool to be blessed and sprinkled with the water.

Meskel celebrates the discovery of the True Cross, on which Jesus is believed to have been crucified. The principal ceremony takes place in Addis Ababa's Meskel Square and is attended by thousands of colourfully dressed worshippers. The festival culminates in the burning of a pyre.



Timkat, one of two religious festivals on Ethiopia's calendar.

Add a stopover

ADDIS Ababa is a short five-hour flight from Johannesburg and Ethiopian Airlines has flights to 100 international destinations, including Bangkok, Beijing, Hong Kong, London, Paris and Frankfurt.

Ethiopian Airlines' **Abel Alemu**, points out that connecting to Europe via Ethiopia is quicker than via Dubai.

Ethiopian Holidays offers transit

tours of six hours, starting from US\$20 (R295) per person. The options include a traditional dinner and music show for evening arrivals and a spa service or visit to the national museum for daytime arrivals. All three tours also include a coffee ceremony, an English-speaking guide and transfers.

Travellers must have a minimum six-hour layover.



Transit passengers can take a tour that includes a coffee ceremony.

Did you know?

- Ethiopia has rolled out online visas. The e-visa is processed and issued online. Once the application is approved, applicants receive an email authorising them to travel to Ethiopia, where their passport is stamped on arrival.
- Ethiopian Holidays offers 10% commission to lata agents for packages booked through the operator and 7% commission to non-lata agents.
- Ethiopian Airlines operates a thrice-daily service between Johannesburg and Addis Ababa. ■

Births, deaths, marriages, promotions – we want to know! Please fax or e-mail TNW's Savannah Freemantle, at savannahf@nowmedia.co.za or (011) 214 7324.

Celebrating Charmaine

Charmaine Higgins, a Benoni-based Travel Counsellor, recently celebrated 11 years of running her travel business. During this period Charmaine has retained her Gold status and won Best Travel Counsellor in SA for five consecutive years. She told *TNW*: "I enjoy wonderful support from my husband of 43 years and my two beautiful children and six grandchildren – they are my inspiration! I base my success on hard work and dedication and always being there for my clients. I look forward to the next 11 years!"



Sales superstar

Sharon Dodgen, a reservations consultant at Thompsons Holidays, received the operator's sales award for the month of August. **Kirsty Knott**, Thompsons Holidays sales executive, told *TNW*: "As a sales team we celebrated Sharon as our reservation superstar for the month as many agents compliment her on her consistent service." Pictured (from left): Kirsty, Sharon and **Derek Ledward**, sales executive Thompsons Holidays.



Out on the town

The Flight Centre Preller Square, Bloemfontein team and **Nikki Briant**, sales executive at Beachcomber Tours, enjoyed some well-deserved wine during Nikki's recent trip to Bloemfontein. From left: **Nikita Carroll**, **Nikki**, **Melinda Scholtz**, **Johan Van Rensburg**, **Amanda Snyman** and **Chirese Cohn**.

Appointments

Club Med has appointed **Lee-Ann Morgan** as its customer growth marketing manager. Lee-Ann will drive commercial strategy, awareness and customer growth.



Shaun Bertram Tregoning has been appointed director of operations at the Westin Hotel in Cape Town.

Leean Murugan has been appointed general manager for the Tsogo Sun Garden Court South Beach hotel in Durban.



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Unbeatable deals!

Air France and KLM are running promotional fares from September 6-27 for flights from Johannesburg to Europe and the US for travel before April 30, 2019. Called 'Dream Deals' at KLM and 'Oh la la deals' at Air France, fares start from R7 999 on the Johannesburg-Europe flights and R11 600 on Johannesburg-US flights, including taxes and surcharges. The minimum stay to qualify for the promotional rate is six days and the maximum stay is three months. Pictured: Ponia Nkomo, AF KLM call centre agent. Photo: Shannon Van Zyl

Ground partnerships vital following natural disasters

SARAH ROBERTSON

RECENT earthquakes and volcanic eruptions in Indonesia have highlighted the importance of using suppliers with strong support on the ground.

As travel insurance only covers cancelled flights or hotels made uninhabitable as a result of a natural disaster, clients often rely on the DMC or bed bank operators to negotiate cancellation or amendment waivers should they decide not to travel.

Operators say DMCs offer clients additional support in instances of emergency and bed banks claim to offer very similar support services.

Simmy Micheli, manager – sales and marketing for TIC, confirms that clients are covered for natural disasters. However, clients who opt not to travel when flights and hotels are operational are not covered.

Although Lombok airport and Denpasar airport in Bali are now operating as normal, the

UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office is still advising against all but essential travel to north Lombok and against travel within 4km of the Mont Agung crater in Bali. It states that aftershocks may continue in the coming days and weeks and buildings that appear unaffected could have been weakened and that landslides may still occur.

Zephnie Viljoen, director of Perfect Destinations, says while a few of its clients opted to leave Bali during the earthquakes, most elected to stay, with its DMC remaining present through the remainder of the clients' holidays.

Zephnie explains that the clients who did elect to leave Bali were charged full penalties by the airlines and that its DMC was still busy with penalty negotiations with the affected hotels.

John Ridler, PR and media manager of Thompsons Holidays, says Thompsons only books Indonesian packages through its appointed DMC. The operator vets suppliers to

ensure they have after-hours emergency lines and are available to assist 24/7.

Many of Thompsons' Lombok passengers were rebooked to Bali during the aftermath of the Lombok earthquakes. John confirmed that the DMC negotiated the move at no additional cost to clients.

Two Thompsons clients cancelled their trips outright and John says while the airlines stuck to their cancellation penalties, Thompsons' DMC negotiated full waivers of cancellation penalties with the hotels.

"This reinforces the value of having a partnership on the ground," says John.

Janine Mcloughlin, regional head of sales – Africa for WebBeds MEA – a bed bank, says WebBeds operates a 24/7 emergency contact centre and has dedicated teams in the various destinations that they operate in, who can be deployed to relocate passengers, amend dates or assist in negotiating cancellation waivers. ■

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FCTG caters for trend to mobile

From page 1

suited customers who were confident, knew what they were looking for and had simple flight arrangements. She added that the group would encourage travellers with a more complex flight booking to speak to one of its consultants.

Andrew told TNW the group's strategy still included its retail stores. He said while the group had closed 10% of its stores over the last few years, it currently had 110 stores countrywide and he did not see this changing in the foreseeable future.

FCTG is not first to market

an app. Travelstart rolled out its app, Flapp, in 2015. Although the app initially only offered the ability to book flights between Johannesburg and Cape Town, it now allows users to book international flights.

Travelstart ceo, **Stephan Ekbergh**, said downloads on the app were in the millions and the app accounted for roughly 12% of the group's revenue. However, he said on some days it could reach over 30% when the group ran campaigns. According to Stephan, the strategy with Travelstart's app is to tie its clients into the agency.

Arthur Goldstuck, founder and md at World Wide Worx, suggested that Flight Centre might have a tough time driving uptake of its app.

He pointed out that there were a number of large OTAs already offering the ability to make flight and accommodation bookings online and Flight Centre would be competing with these apps, which already had a widespread uptake among South Africans.

However, he said pricing within the app, together with heavily marketing the app, would persuade consumers to use it. ■



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