

Trends **Luxury outbound**

Make travel, not trade war

Hong Kong's high-end outbound travel market is expected to remain resilient in the face of Sino-US tensions. **Prudence Lui** reports



Natural Selection



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Charlotte Harris

Director of sales and marketing, Charlotte Travel

Few believe that external uncertainties like the Sino-US trade war, which was escalating at press time in late September, will derail the appetite for outbound travel among Hong Kongers.

Total billings for air ticket sales grew 7.2 per cent to HK\$19.5 billion (US\$2.5 billion) in the first eight months of the year, compared with the same period in 2017, indicating that the market overall is healthy.

A survey released by Kayak also shows that Hong Kong travellers are spending big bucks on travel, which reflects that travel is now an integral part of their lifestyle. About 34 per cent opt to stay in luxury five-star hotels, the highest percentage compared with other Asian countries.

But they also expect a big bang for their big bucks.

According to Charlotte Harris, director of sales and marketing of Charlotte Travel, Hong Kong travellers are demanding more experience-driven travel with high expectations of personalisation – something that is difficult to get right without the help of a personal travel advisor.

Harris believes that travel is personal. “When it comes to planning a trip, we all want something different. Travellers are demanding more of their travel. They look to enrich their lives through their trips and want even more personalisation. For example, a client may be looking for cultural immersion in a daring adventure but still expect privacy, authenticity and customisation in the trip.”

Adventure travel is rising, said Harris, who sees more of her clients wanting to go off-the-beaten track to see or do something new or authentic. For example, Iceland has been

hot on its list for a few years now, however many of her clients love their trip so much that they want to go again and also cover Greenland.

Croatia has also put itself back on the map with its recent World Cup success.

Said Harris: “This is where we come in. The relationships Charlotte Travel has with our clients and our partners are of utmost importance when planning trips. By maintaining the human touch and exemplary service, the loyalty increases. The more we know about our clients, the easier it is to plan their trips and to surprise them with special experiences during their trips.

“We want to create non-Googleable experiences – unique, tailor-made trips which are different from pre-packaged tours. I am recruiting new talent (relationship & experience-orientated) into the travel industry. We are also reshaping our corporate culture internally to match the personalities of our clients.”

At A2A Safaris, sustainable tourism is at the core of its business and it always encourages clients to participate in various conservation activities with the wildlife and local communities that they interact with. Since the company started in 2002, business has grown exponentially and, over the past year, has turned in a double-digit growth in the number of clients, according to general manager Faith Coetzee.

She remains cautiously optimistic about business prospects in future and expects the experiential travel trend to gain momentum, with more people exploring far-flung destinations like Latin America or Africa.

Coetzee said: “At the macro level, the developed countries in Asia are growing in affluence and many

Above: Affluent Hong Kongers are seeking experiential travel in far-flung destinations
Below: Croatia's now on the radar of Hong Kong travellers, due to its recent World Cup success

Asians are now willing to spend more for vacations. What drives growth is a combination of economic growth, political stability, wealth creation and confidence in their future. Moreover, luxury travel will continue to be the antithesis of overtourism, where destinations are overcrowded by an overwhelming number of visitors, which negatively affects the quality of experiences and life in the area.

“In 2019, we expect the experiential travel trend to deepen as guests become more adventurous in seeking out unique experiences. We have organised many once-in-a-lifetime activities such as running with the

locals from the Masai tribe in Kenya, horse-back safari in Botswana, quad biking in Makgadikgadi, biking through the reserves in Tanzania, urban food foraging tours, photographic trips (with photo hides and digital dark rooms included) and yoga retreats.

“At the same time, we find that travellers are also looking for opportunities to make a difference at their destinations as they become more aware of the sustainability issues that the world faces. They are increasingly looking for ways to be involved in conservation projects during their trips,” Coetzee noted.

