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**BULLETIN BOARD**

**Boom times for Singapore**

Bernice Han  
Tue, 22 Jan 2008

Singapore's hotel sector looks set to continue its spectacular rebound as room rates and visitor numbers hit record levels and the city-state unveils numerous sparkling attractions, experts say.

The inaugural Singapore Airshow, which bills itself as Asia's largest aerospace and defence event, starts the year off with thousands of foreign visitors expected in February.

About the same time the Singapore Flyer, the largest observation wheel in the world, is to open. Events will peak in September when Singapore's first Formula One Grand Prix races through the city's famously pristine streets.

Even before the new attractions Singapore's tourist arrivals hit fresh peaks, with record high visitor numbers every month last year, said Quek Swee Kuan, the Singapore Tourism Board's (STB's) deputy chief executive for international operations.

"Similarly, the hotel sector has had an exceptional year, with hotel occupancy and room rates at an all-time high," Quek said.

Latest STB figures showed 837 000 visitors in November, the largest number ever for that month, while average hotel room rates set a new milestone of S\$226 (US\$158) a night, up almost 30 percent over the previous year.

The average occupancy rate in November was 88 percent, meaning rooms were virtually filled every night, analysts said.

Some observers say the higher room rates should not deter visitors as accommodation at a local four- or five-star hotel is still cheaper than elsewhere in the region.

Visitors to Hong Kong or Tokyo can expect to pay on average \$70 more at an upmarket hotel, said Chee Hok Yean, executive vice-president of property consultancy Jones Lang LaSalle Hotels.

**"It's still relatively affordable"**

"Looking at the region, Singapore rates are not that high compared to Hong



Images courtesy Singapore Tourism Board

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Kong, Shanghai and Tokyo," said Chee.

"It's still relatively affordable compared to some of the other markets."

The experience of other Asian cities and even New York has shown that, as long as there are attractions to draw tourists, visitors will come even if room rates are high, she said.

But Jane Chang, a marketing communications executive with Chan Brothers Travel agency, said finding rooms at competitive rates for leisure travellers has become increasingly difficult.

"This is especially so as despite the increase in rates, booking volume remains high as demand from the corporate travel sector continues to grow," she said. The STB says arrivals will not be affected.

It says the government is working to address the need for more rooms with the release of 14 sites for hotel developments since August 2006. These new hotels are expected to add another 4800 rooms, the STB said.

The St. Regis luxury hotel chain opened its doors in December and general manager Yngvar Stray said there is demand for high-end accommodation as the city-state goes after big-spending tourists.

"I would actually say there is a substantial need for this in Singapore," said Stray, whose hotel boasts butlers on each floor and a fleet of hand-built Bentley luxury cars at the service of its guests.

A "basic" St. Regis room goes for \$600 to \$650 a night, Stray said.

Malaysian banker Elsie Chan, in Singapore to visit friends and do some shopping, did not have to spend that much. She paid \$200 dollars for a room at a four-star hotel and was not complaining.

"The room was great with an excellent view of the city skyline," said Chan.

Singapore's hotel sector was saddled with stagnant growth for years but started to slowly pick up in 2004 after the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) regional health crisis.

By 2006, the city-state had seen a then-record 9.7 million visitors, according to the STB.

**Stop-overs and shopping**

The turnaround came as Singapore strived to host more conventions and began redevelopment and beautification along the main Orchard Road shopping belt.

Lacking the natural attractions of its neighbours, Singapore has tried to position itself as a shopping and nightlife destination while aggressively marketing itself as a location for conventions and business meetings. It is also a major stopover for travellers heading elsewhere.

Singapore's 10 millionth visitor for 2007 arrived in December. By 2015 the country aims to draw 17 million visitors and earn 30 billion dollars in tourism income.

The lynchpins of that drive are two multi-billion-dollar casino resorts set to open by 2010. One facility is to include Asia's first Universal Studios theme park outside Japan, while the other is aimed at the international convention market.

The tourism sector accounts for about three percent of Singapore's gross domestic product (GDP) but the figure could eventually rise to 10 percent, said Standard Chartered Bank economist Alvin Liew.

"I think Singapore rates pretty well as it has built up various attractions and types of tourism activity over the years," Liew said.

AFP

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€ = R 10.32

Gold = \$ 890.80

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