

AIRLINK

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Airport MD Speaks

Dato' Iskandar Mizal Mahmood returns to Malaysia Airports after almost 20 years with his wealth of experience gleaned from many multinationals and government-linked companies to elevate and transform Malaysia Airports in the fast-changing aviation landscape with new travel norms and innovative technological advances.

This month, he reports improved earnings and revenue for the airport operator for the financial year ended December 31, 2022 (FY22) due to higher passenger traffic recovery and other contributing factors. Both Langkawi International Airport and KL International Airport (KLIA) were among the 29 airports from Asia Pacific (APAC) and the Middle East recognised at Airports Council International (ACI) World's 2022 Airport Service Quality (ASQ) Awards recently.

To elevate the experience at KLIA and provide more convenience and relaxing moments for our passengers, brand-new airport lounges were opened recently at Terminal 1 and Terminal 2 respectively.

Dato' Iskandar Mizal Mahmood
Managing Director
Malaysia Airports Holdings Berhad

Driven by robust passengers' growth, improved cost efficiency, reduction in utilisation fees from our Turkiye operations and better share of results from our associates and joint ventures, I am happy to announce that the Malaysia Airports Group has swung its RM766.4 net loss for FY21 to report RM187.2 million net profit for FY22 on higher 86.9% increase in revenue to RM3.13 billion.

The Group remains prudent in managing our costs as we strive to further strengthen our financial position and enhance our facilities and services. I am glad to note that the improvements in our customer service have been recognised by passengers worldwide in ACI World's 2022 ASQ Awards done in partnership with travel technology company Amadeus.

The Langkawi International Airport was awarded for the Best Airport in the category for two to five million passengers in APAC while our flagship KLIA won four accolades for the region. They are namely Airport with the Most Dedicated Staff, Easiest Airport Journey, Most Enjoyable Airport and Cleanest Airport in APAC.

The ASQ world leading airport customer experience measurement and benchmarking programme is based on live research via surveys, covering over 30 performance indicators, which are conducted at airports with the travellers giving their direct responses and satisfaction rating on the day of their travel.

We believe always in hosting joyful connections at our airports and are thus pleased to announce the addition of our newly launched Sky Suite Airport Lounge at KLIA Terminal 2. It is managed by our fully-owned subsidiary, KL Airport Hotel Sdn Bhd (KLAH), which also runs our award-winning Sama-Sama Hotels.

Meanwhile, the Plaza Premium Group has opened its Plaza Premium First and Plaza Premium Lounge at the contact pier of KLIA Terminal 1. Coupled with the existing airport lounges offered by our airline partners and other stakeholders, including KLAH, we hope the travelling experience of our passengers at both KLIA Terminal 1 and 2 will be made as comfortable, memorable and seamless as possible.



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Southeast Asia's Aviation Post-Recovery

This April marks 12 months since the reopening of the tourism sector by most countries in Southeast Asia for quarantine-free travel as more people started to venture abroad and domestically after the removal of many of the health protocols.

Southeast Asia's (SEA) airline capacity is now 20% lower compared to March 2019 pre-Covid-19 pandemic level. "That is a recovery of 80% or 34.8 million available seats across the region," remarks Gary Bowerman, director of Check-in Asia, a tourism intelligence and strategic marketing firm.

While domestic tourism figures are up in these countries with international seats on airlines still lagging behind due to capacity issues, Bowerman says the cities with the busiest airports in the region are Jakarta followed by Singapore, Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur.

Healthy intra-travel within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) could be seen since October last year with many of the governments from these countries encouraging their people to travel.

Meanwhile, Malaysia's Minister of Tourism, Arts and Culture Datuk Sei Tiong King Sing has asked for more funding from the government to support the industry's growth.

Under Budget 2023, Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim had announced a RM250 million allocation to enable it to reach its targeted 23.5 million international tourist arrivals and RM76.8 billion receipts under its planned Visit Malaysia Year campaign for 2025.

For 2022, the country has exceeded both its 9.2 million international tourist arrivals and RM26.2 billion tourism receipt targets by attracting 10.07 million foreign tourists and generating RM28.2 million revenue through its Tourism Recovery Framework 2.0 strategies.

Chief Executive Officer - Airline Business of Malaysia Airlines Berhad, Ahmad Luqman Mohd Azmi, one of the panellists at the recent Malaysian Association of Tour & Travel Agents (MATTA) Symposium on Post Pandemic Tourism Landscape 2023 And Beyond, said the carrier's year-to-date figures for February showed 85% recovery rate with the exception of China when compared to pre-pandemic capacity.

When Malaysia first opened its borders in 2022, he said Malaysia Aviation Group (MAG), in which Malaysia Airlines is part of, was seeing a lot more passenger movements within ASEAN followed by travels into Australia and India, which is a key market for Malaysia Airlines.

Commenting on SEA's international flight capacity, Hannah Pearson, founder and director of Pear Anderson, said it is one third down versus 2019 and Northeast Asia's decline is about 56% while other regions such as North America and Europe have been back to pre-pandemic levels much earlier. Pear Anderson is a tourism strategy, sales representation and marketing intelligence specialist in Southeast Asia.

The flag carrier has since reinstated 52 weekly flights from India's six major cities, namely New Delhi, Bengaluru, Mumbai, Chennai, Hyderabad and Kochi. To further strengthen its network, Malaysia Airlines appointed Acumen Overseas Private Ltd of India as its general sales agent in March.

Ahmad Luqman, who also saw demand for Saudi Arabia coming from the umrah or pilgrimage packages, said, "We are seeing a lot more short-haul now of three to four-day travel."

Constrained Capacity Issues

With demand outstripping supply and coupled with inflation, rising cost of living and fuel prices, the price yield for airfares has remained a challenge. Expecting the yields for 2023 to be "retained" as a number of airlines in SEA are still not back to their full capacity, Ahmad Luqman said supply will continue to be constrained, citing that "this could be the new normal for this region".

However, he is confident by early 2024, "we should be at least equal to what they were in 2019". While reminding that the cost of pre-pandemic flights was much cheaper, Ahmad Luqman assured, "We will normalise (the airfares) but maybe not as high as what we saw in late 2022 and early 2023. We will come to a level which is acceptable to both sides."

Although international fares are high, Ajay Prakash, president of Travel Agents Federation of India (TAFI) expects the flights to remain full. As the situation normalises and capacity increases, more people will be able to afford to fly and would want to travel after being restricted the past few years.

He also noticed the Indian travellers have changed in terms of their choice of destination after its TAFI Convention held for the first time in Kuching, Sarawak which was attended by 500 delegates last year. The destinations used to be London, Paris, New York and Rome but emerging buying trends show that social media influencers to be one of the determining factors of the new destinations that travellers are heading to.

At the recent MATTA Fair 2023, destinations such as Kyrgyzstan, Maldives, Saudi Arabia, Uganda and Zimbabwe also made their presence felt alongside the more popular Asian destinations like Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. Saudi Arabia was designated the New Destination at the Fair.



Saeed Mubarak, Emirates Country Manager in Malaysia, said, "This is a pivotal moment for Emirates. We are thrilled to make a comeback at the MATTA Fair 2023 alongside our partner DET to help further elevate Dubai's position as one of the world's top three cities for travel and business."

In June, the airline will be increasing its connectivity to Dubai and beyond with three daily flights from KL operated by a mix of Airbus A380 and Boeing B777 aircraft. This will be followed by two A380 services and one Boeing B777 service by August.



Air Niugini Eyeing Long-Term Fleet Solution

As part of its narrow-body regional jet refueling exercise, Air Niugini is reviewing available options to ensure the airline secures a competitive and sustainable solution for its domestic and regional short-haul network.

Papua New Guinea's (PNG) national carrier currently flies to 24 domestic and 11 international destinations.

With the airline returning to normal operations after Covid-19 and mindful of the need to future-proof its operations, it is looking at options to replace its present Fokker fleet.

They comprised seven each of the Fokker 70 and Fokker 100 aircraft, which are more than 20 years old.

A team from Brazilian aerospace manufacturer Embraer recently flew in the latest E195 E2 regional jet into Port Moresby for a demonstration flight.

The aircraft is a new technology solution, offering lower fuel burn and reduced maintenance costs along with good range, sound economics and increased passenger comfort.

Featuring an eye-catching Tech Lion livery and configured with 116 seats, the E195-E2 last made an appearance in Port Moresby in July 2019.

Since then, it has entered service with airlines such as KLM and Helvetic Airways in Europe and Porter Airlines based in Canada.

According to news report, the PNG government, via Kumul Consolidated Holdings, also met recently with the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to secure Australia's technical support for Air Niugini's fleet replacement programme.

William Duma, Minister of State-owned Enterprises for PNG said, "Refueling is a major commercial and structural exercise which will ensure the future of the national airline."

Air Niugini had its first flight direct to KL International Airport on October 29, 2008 but stopped the service later.

For more information, call 03-21424311 or visit www.airniugini.com.pg

Emirates Announces Interline Partnership



Emirates' recent interline agreement with Philippine Airlines (PAL) to boost connectivity for air passengers to new points on the two carriers' networks via Dubai and Manila using a single ticket and one baggage policy now brings to a total of 120 carriers the Middle Eastern airline now partners with.

This reciprocal interline partnership provides Emirates' passengers access to 19 Philippine domestic destinations operated by PAL and two Asian regional points via Manila. PAL's passengers, on the other hand, will be connected to 21 cities operated by Emirates beyond Dubai to Europe, Africa, India and the Middle East.

Travel itineraries can be booked on the two airlines' websites, mobile apps or via both online and offline travel agents.

Adnan Kazim, Chief Commercial Officer of Emirates said, "The Philippines is one of our strongest consumer markets. We are pleased to sign a new interline agreement with the country's flag carrier. The partnership with PAL will help open new links for trade and tourism that will drive more inbound traffic into the market and expand Emirates' footprint in East Asia.

Emirates, which first started its operations in Manila in 1990, now serves the Philippines with 25 weekly flights to three gateways that include Cebu and Clark. Rated the top 10 fleet of the Middle East, the airline operates its modern Boeing 777-300ER aircraft in a mix of three- and two-class configuration on flights to Manila, Cebu and Clark.

Its three-class configuration offers eight private suites in first class, 42 lie flat seats in business class and 310 economy class seats while its two-class configuration provides passengers with 42 lie flat seats in business class and 386 economy class seats.

Travellers to and from the Philippines will benefit from Emirates' award-winning service and industry-leading products in the air and on the ground across all classes.

They include its regionally-inspired dishes, complimentary beverages and ice inflight entertainment system which offers up to 5,000 channels of on-demand entertainment in over 40 languages.

For more information, visit www.emirates.com





Malaysia Airlines Launches EnrichMoney

Malaysia Airlines' award-winning travel and lifestyle loyalty programme, Enrich recently unveiled its EnrichMoney Visa prepaid card and app to provide more security and convenience to its members making cashless transactions locally or overseas.

Powered by Merchantrade Asia, this multi-currency e-wallet, which has Visa payment features, has been described as a gamechanger.

Philip See, Chief Executive Officer of Loyalty and Travel Solutions and Group Chief Sustainability Officer of Malaysia Aviation Group said Enrich's latest offering was part of its digitalisation milestone to provide the members with more convenience and flexibility while travelling.

"This shows our progression in transitioning Enrich from a conventional frequent flyer programme to providing holistic travel and lifestyle solutions. They can now buy and sell up to 20 foreign currencies in-app anytime, anywhere and enjoy the hassle-free travel experience that comes with our prepaid card while also reaping in rewards along the way."

Users can load up to RM20,000 onto their EnrichMoney, which can be used to make purchases or withdraw cash at ATMs worldwide that accept Visa, thus allowing them to lock in the exchange rate at the time of their purchase and eliminate the risk of fluctuating exchange rates.

The multi-currency foreign exchange enables them to spend like a local with the best rates and zero fees on overseas transactions. Its users can also engage the security feature to lock or limit spends on the card as all the settings can be controlled in-app.

Enrich members earn EnrichMoney points whenever they spend a minimum RM20 on retail and other transactions, which can be redeemed in the app for cashback. They also have the option to top up their e-wallet with either money or Enrich points for more opportunities to gain cashback.

It is also easier for them to do instant and safe digital transfers of money to family and friends via the e-wallet app remit feature. Additionally, the members are offered 24/7 customer support.

Ng Kong Boon, Visa Country Manager for Malaysia, said, "Based on Visa's International Travel platform data, we are seeing total spend by Visa cardholders return to almost 70% levels for Malaysia compared to 2019 before the pandemic. They can now load money on this card to convert up to 20 foreign currencies for face-to-face and online purchases and earn rewards seamlessly and securely as they travel and spend using this card."

Ramasamy K Veeran, Managing Director of Merchantrade Asia Sdn Bhd remarked, "With products such as EnrichMoney, we are able to elevate the user experience, provide new levels of convenience that meet the evolving needs of consumers while remaining at the forefront of this digital wave."



To celebrate their partnership at MATTA Fair 2023, Enrich and Merchantrade Asia have a special campaign from March 17 until June 30 giving Enrich members extra rewards when they apply for the EnrichMoney Visa prepaid card and spend using EnrichMoney.

For more information, visit
www.enrich.malaysiaairlines.com/enrichmoney

Qatar Airways Reveals Massive Network Expansion



Qatar Airways has unveiled seven new destinations, 11 flight resumptions and 35 frequency increases at the opening of the recent ITB Berlin travel trade show to cities in Africa, Asia and Europe.

Its newly launched destinations planned for 2023-2024 will kickstart with Trabzon on June 16, Lyon (July 3) while Medan and Chittagong will be on January 15 and 11 March, 2024. The dates for Juba, Kinshasa and Toulouse are yet to be confirmed.

Chittagong will be its second destination in Bangladesh after the capital city of Dhaka while Medan will be third destination in Indonesia after Jakarta and Bali.

His Excellency Akbar Al Baker, Group Chief Executive of Qatar Airways Qatar also announced flights resumptions to Beijing, China scheduled from March 26 followed by Davao in the Philippines on April 1.

The airline's other flight resuming this year are Nice targeted on May 9, Tokyo Haneda (June 1), Birmingham (July 10), Phnom Penh (October 29), Ras Al Khaimah (November 1) and Buenos Aires (December 8).

Qatar Airways plans to resume its flights to Osaka only on January 1, 2024 while there are no specified dates yet for restarting its flights to Casablanca and Marrakesh as yet.

The world's best airline, which currently flies to over 150 destinations globally, has also scheduled 35 frequency increases with some stretching into the winter season of 2023/24 as part of its plans to be a global hub of connectivity.

The destinations include Cairo, which will see its 21 weekly flights raised to 28, Hong Kong's 11 weekly flights increased to 14 and London Gatwick's seven weekly flights increased to 10 but for the peak summer season, it will be 14 weekly flights.

Qatar Airways expect to see its four weekly Copenhagen flights raised to seven and eventually to 10 weekly flights for the winter season 2023/24 while its Düsseldorf's seven weekly flights will be increased to 11 and Phuket's 14 weekly flights will be upped to 21 for winter season 2023/24.

During the three-day ITB Berlin show, Qatar Airways, which was recently made global partner and official airline of Formula 1 (F1), celebrated its new sponsor partnership by offering a thrilling F1 sports car simulator experience at its booth. QVerse virtual reality experiences reflecting the airline's innovative technological adoptions were also showcased.

"Qatar will continue to be a global hub of connectivity and an ideal destination for tourism, long after the great success of the historic FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022," Al Baker said.

For more information, visit www.qatarairways.com

Sky Suite Airport Lounge Opens at KLIA Terminal 2

KL Airport Hotel Sdn Bhd (KLAH), which manages the award-winning Sama-Sama Hotels brand, has opened the Sky Suite Airport Lounge at level three, sector two of the KL International Airport (KLIA) Terminal 2 on March 21.

Open 24 hours, its facilities include massage chairs, complimentary light refreshments, a club-style bar, high-speed Wi-Fi, charging points for gadgets, satellite television channels, private washrooms, surau and three VIP rooms for private meetings. Here, travellers will be able to enjoy some quiet moments and relax before their flight.

Tan Sri Zainun Ali, Chairman of Malaysia Airports said at its launch held a day earlier that the Sky Suite Airport Lounge represented another milestone for the airport operator, marking the recovery of the country's aviation and travel sectors amidst signs of healthy passenger growth returning.

Passengers who book the lounge facility and purchase the Airport FastTrack service can enjoy a seamless airport journey from home to the boarding gate as airport processes such as check-in, immigration and customs clearance are located in the lounge and can be facilitated conveniently.



Those who buy its premium package will get to ride the buggy and be escorted throughout the journey up to the boarding gate. The Airport Fast Track service is available at both KLIA Terminal 1 and 2.

KLAH also operates a Sky Suite Airport Lounge within Sama-Sama Express Hotel at KLIA Terminal 1, which is located next to Gate C5 at the satellite terminal building.

For more information, visit www.myairportfasttrack.com



Riyadh Air Orders 72 Dreamliners

Hot on the heels of His Royal Highness Crown Prince Mohammad Salman Abdulaziz, Prime Minister and Chairman of the Public Investment Fund's (PIF) confirmation of Riyadh Air's as wholly-owned by PIF, a multi-billion dollar deal to order up to 72 Boeing 787-9 Dreamliner airplanes from the United States-based Boeing manufacturer has been signed.

This unprecedented order for a new carrier for the purchase of 39 confirmed aircraft with an option to acquire 33 additional of the wide-body 787-9 Dreamliners sends a strong signal of Saudi Arabia's intentions to become a global aviation hub.

Leveraging on the country's strategic geographic location between Asia, Africa and Europe, Riyadh Air as the second national

carrier is based the Saudi capital, aiming to connect to over 100 destinations globally by 2030.

Chaired by His Excellency Yasir Al-Rumayyan, PIF Governor and helmed by Tony Douglas as its Chief Executive Officer, Riyadh Air will be adopting best sustainability and safety global standards across its advanced aircraft fleet.

Expected to add US\$20 billion to Saudi's non-oil gross domestic product growth and create more than 200,000 jobs, the world-class flag carrier will be a catalyst for Saudi National Transport and Logistics Strategy and its National Tourism Strategy.

Besides increasing air transport options, raising cargo capacity and growing international passenger traffic, Riyadh Air is also part of PIF's strategy to diversify the local economy.

With a more financially resilient aviation ecosystem in Saudi Arabia, it will help to support the industry's global competitiveness in line with its Vision 2030 plans.

For more information, visit www.riyadhair.com



Plaza Premium Group Creates a Sense of Place with Malaysian Influences

Plaza Premium Group's (PPG) brand-new lounge, unveiled at the contact pier of KL International Airport (KLIA) Terminal 1, represents its first major launch this year as a part of its 25th anniversary celebration. Housing both the Plaza Premium Lounge and Plaza Premium First under one roof, this makes KLIA the host of one of its largest Plaza Premium Lounges worldwide.

Transport Minister Anthony Loke, who had officiated PPG's airport terminal hotel Aerotel in KLIA2 (currently known as Terminal 2) in 2018 and now this new lounge, thanked the Group for its investment and confidence in KLIA while expressing his excitement over PPG's digitalisation efforts to elevate the airport experience for travellers.

Also present at the launch, Malaysia Airports Managing Director Dato' Iskandar Mizal, he looks forward to many years of fruitful partnership together. Song Hoi-See, PPG Chief Executive Officer, who founded his independent lounge concept in Malaysia 25 years ago, which has since spread to over 70 international airports, revealed that plans are afoot to expand this Malaysian brand regionally.

Committed to make travel better together, he said, "Our goal is to transform Plaza Premium Lounge into not just a pre-flight space but a destination in its own right from one country to another."

Emphasising a sense of place, PPG's new lounge at KLIA embraces Malaysian culture in its experience and interior design. Besides showcasing local food and architectural features, it also promotes the artworks of up-and-coming local artists.

Complemented by greenery and wellness concepts, the lounge provides dedicated spaces to meet the different travelling needs of both business and leisure travellers, be it for relaxation, dining, work or socialising. Private rooms for family or corporate use are also available alongside shower amenities and nursery rooms.

Frequent users of its Plaza Premium Lounge can opt to upgrade to the Plaza Premium First experience. Offering different dining experiences, Plaza Premium First, provides a more curated experience with an a la carte dishes cooked a la minute while Plaza Premium Lounge serves a buffet menu, promoting sustainability and wellness as part of its brand promise.

Thus, you can find refreshed menu featuring plant-based and vegetarian options created by its celebrity chef Andri Hadi, who has also come out with a menu inspired by Malaysian flavours and ingredients. His signature dishes include nasi lemak with Australia beef rendang for Plaza Premium First and Malaysia's curry laksa for Plaza Premium Lounge.

For more information, visit www.plazapremiumlounge.com





Kuwait Airways Presents Plans for 2023 and Beyond

Also known as the Blue Bird, Kuwait Airways is in for exciting times this year with its network expansion and many new programmes. Currently flying three times weekly to Kuala Lumpur since November 2022 after restarting its twice weekly flights last October, the airline's Chief Executive Officer Maen Mahmoud Razouqi is open to its general sales agent, ATS Global Travel and Charter Sdn Bhd's suggestion to fly daily.

in Kuwait Airways and some of them are very senior within the organisation. We want to continue to do more (here) as we grow."

Open to partnerships, he also announced the interline agreement with Malaysia Airlines, which will mutually benefit both parties and the bilateral relationship between Kuwait and Malaysia. Its customers would be taken beyond the airline's main hub in Kuwait connecting the Indian sub-continent, Europe, North America, the



His reply to ATS Global Travel and Charter Chairman Datuk A Aziz Ahmad is, "If you want us to fly daily, sell the seats and we will fly daily." Razouqi had flown in to Kuala Lumpur on March 16 for the airline's gala dinner, which was graced by Deputy Minister of Tourism, Arts and Culture, Khairul Firdaus Akbar Khan.

He presented to the travel trade partners Kuwait Airways' journey of growth, especially in 2022, and its plans for this year and beyond. With a fleet of 32 aircraft, the airline's network currently extends to 64 destinations worldwide.

Proud of its staff strength totalling over 6,000, whom he referred to as "talents", Razouqi said, "We have over 100 Malaysians working

Middle East and North African region as well as the Gulf Cooperation Council countries to other key markets flown by Malaysia's national carrier.

They include Australia, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, Southeast Asia and the domestic destinations in Malaysia. "What the Covid-19 pandemic has taught us is you cannot grow alone. Partnership is going to be the essence of any healthy growth and it is going to be part of our strategy moving forward," he added.

For more information, visit www.kuwaitairways.com or call 03-6419 9886

Turkish Airlines to Increase Weekly KL Flights by Mid-August



Turkish Airlines plans to increase its Istanbul-Kuala Lumpur flight frequency from 10 times weekly to double daily flights or 14 times a week by mid-August due to good load factor.

Its Chairman Prof Dr Ahmet Bolat said at the recent Connect with Turkiye event in Kuala Lumpur that the national flag carrier put emphasis on Southeast Asia, particularly Malaysia, which is celebrating its 10th anniversary of operations in Kuala Lumpur this year.

Also present at the event were the airline's chief marketing officer Ahmet Olmustur and Turkiye's Ambassador to Malaysia, Emir Salim Yuksel, who commented that "the sky is the limit" where the bilateral relationship between the two countries is concerned.

Besides being the gateway for Malaysian travellers to Europe, Africa and the United States, Dr Bolat added that Turkish Airlines is also the only airline that flies to South America.

Given the airlines' strong connections and modern technology aircraft, Dr Bolat quipped, "Last year, about 51 million people visited Turkiye. Of this, one million were Americans and about 80,000 were Malaysians. This year, our target is two million Americans and 200,000 Malaysians."



Thanks to strong recovery on demand and the airline's operational agility, it posted a net profit of US\$2.7 billion with record high revenue of US\$18.4 billion last year.

Proud of Turkish Airline's customer service and extensive network of 342 destinations in 129 countries across five continents, Dr Bolat remarked, "We look forward to further serving the Malaysian market," pointing out that special Ramadan packages to Istanbul that included accommodation has been created.

He also recommended those going for Umrah during the Ramadan month to stopover at Istanbul before returning to Malaysia.

Turkish Airlines has been actively promoting complimentary stopover and TourIstanbul programmes over the last few years besides offering accommodations for up to two nights for passengers before embarking on their connecting flights.

Kudos to Turkiye's location and ever-growing investments in infrastructure, he said the airline has grown three times above the world's rate and recently added the 400th aircraft to its fleet, with plans to add the 500th aircraft by 2025.

For more information, visit www.turkishairlines.com

UPCLOSE WITH JOHN BURKE

General Manager (GM) of Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre



Taking over the reins of Malaysia's world-class and award-winning venue as its new GM since March 1, John Burke is no newcomer as he has been its deputy GM since April 2017. Now in his 50s, he has behind him over 30 years of experience across all areas of operations having worked with two other convention centres in the United Kingdom and the Middle East. Do not be amazed when he tells you that due to his love for the outdoors, he has been a skydiver, Jiu-Jitsu instructor and even taught kayaking.

Having been integral in pushing Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre's digital transformation forward when you first joined as deputy GM in 2017, how do you hope to lead it now in your current new appointment as Malaysia's tourism and business events pick up?

I am focused on continuing what it has been successful for over the past 18 years. We have a building in the heart of the city, an experienced team and a range of offerings that are great and, they work.

Moving forward, and as per our practice over the years, we will continue to refresh our facilities. As event formats change from large auditorium presentations to smaller breakouts and discussion sessions, we see the importance in addressing these needs in order to enhance our clients' and delegates' experience at our venue.

With rising costs around utilities, food, and staff, I am also working on managing and enhancing our cost containment methods. We will be looking at pushing our digital transformation further across different levels of operations to improve efficiencies in offsetting these increasing costs.

You were previously responsible for overseeing the upgrade of the venue's security infrastructure. What has changed since the Covid-19 pandemic?

We have increased the use of smart technologies, reviewed and strengthened all areas of our security management and will continue to invest in it to ensure the venue is a safe environment to do business and hold events. While the pandemic has not driven these changes, the lockdown has allowed us time to identify areas of improvement.

Besides technology, we also emphasize on staff training and development in risk management and the handling of emergency situations. Our team undergoes regular comprehensive training with the national security forces and maintains a good collaborative relationship with our group's security teams not just to ensure the venue's safety but also the integrated precinct that we are part of.

What are the challenges besetting Malaysia's business events industry?

One of the challenges we face is the perception that Malaysia is not geared up for large events. Contrary to this, its venues and event supply chains are well positioned to cater to events of all sizes and profiles. Malaysia has demonstrated this over the years by successfully delivering some of the world's biggest events. At our venue, we are very proud of having hosted a number of prestigious international events, including the United Nation's ninth World Urban Forum that attracted over 25,000 people to Kuala Lumpur.

There are many venues in Malaysia ready and willing to host international events. Our 33,000 sq m purpose-built venue itself comes with layers of supporting facilities that can seamlessly accommodate multiple large and small events. With the surrounding hotels offering over 25,000 rooms, the reality is far from the market perception. This is where my team and I will continue to work on changing this perception and showcase Malaysia's true ability in hosting large-scale events.

To what extent have business events in the city centre and at your venue help the hotels in the surrounding areas survive after the pandemic?

The Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre was built as the premier venue for staging large international conventions and exhibitions that were previously beyond the country's scope. This helps to bring in more foreign exchange and people to occupy the hotel besides encouraging business opportunities for trade, facilitating imports or exports and knowledge transfer. These goals are reflected in the post-pandemic scenario. With the global borders reopening and our success in providing a safe environment, we restarted strongly with 1,200 events in 2022 where our on-site and surrounding hotels benefitted from the higher occupancy levels.

We worked closely with our hotel partners under the Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre Business Events Alliance (KLCCBEA) in accommodating the surge in the return of international as well as regional delegates to the capital city. Comprising international legacy-brand hotels, the national airline and nearby lifestyle establishments, the KLCCBEA represents a one-stop-solution where clients and organisers have a single-point-of-contact to everything they need for their events.

Where do you see the development of hybrid and virtual events going?

The digitisation of events or hybrid as well as virtual events and spaces have been around for some time but they grew at an accelerated pace during the pandemic due to quick developments around easier and more collaborative solutions. I believe virtual and especially hybrid events will always be with us. However, it is encouraging to see how fast people returned to face-to-face meetings and events. I believe the future focus of our industry will still be in these face-to-face meetings as the most popular and beneficial event format.

Having driven multiple sustainability projects at KLCC, which one is closest to your heart and why?

I have to say it would be our rooftop hydroponic farm. Although our roof is not large, it showed us what we can do in a relatively limited amount of space in the heart of an urban city.

We are able to grow some of our own produce to provide fresh and pesticide free salad for

our guests, albeit not all that we need but it shows what we can do when we put our minds and hearts into it. I look forward to expanding this project to provide more produce.

It is an inspiring journey for us. Since setting up the farm about six months ago, we have been sharing our best practices with other businesses and entities in the city and exposing students to the benefits of urban farming and sustainable practices as we develop our educational programme around initiative. The project has also enabled us to work with a local small medium enterprise driven by single-mothers, whose vision is aligned with us, thus supporting our goal to give back to the community.

What is the venue's latest sustainability initiative?

We are working together with the Kuala Lumpur City Centre precinct and our KLCCBEA partners to create a sustainable meeting destination for our guests to meet, dine, stay and play responsibly. Facilitated by URBANICE Malaysia, a KLCCBEA Symposium was held late last year, to define, chart and develop a long-term plan to help create a sustainable KLCC precinct aligned to Malaysia Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Cities and the country's Shared Prosperity Vision 2030.

Driven by us, the KLCCBEA Sustainability Sub-Committee played a lead role in designing, setting up and implementing the circular or regenerative sustainable system, which included sustainable sourcing, waste reduction and recycling methods and practices as well as community-wide SDGs advocacy and awareness campaigns.

How do you aim to carve new revenue streams for the venue with your team?

The opportunities for the growth of business events are great in Malaysia with the scope to develop new exhibitions and bring in more inbound entertainment. We will continue to identify gaps and new opportunities in the market where we can leverage, tapping on our expertise and long-standing reputation as a market leader in the industry. At the same time, we remain focused on ensuring revenue retention amidst the current challenges surrounding rising costs in utilities, food, staff, the possibility of recession and continued inflation in some markets.

What are your plans to expand the convention centre's product offerings?

We are expanding our technical services to be a one-stop-hub to ease event planning processes for our clients and have a dedicated team working closely with them to cater to their technical needs with tailored solutions.

Being equipped with the largest food production kitchen in Malaysia that comes with an award-winning culinary team, we are growing our food and beverage offerings and services. We have been requested to do outside catering at large sporting events and are exploring how to include different types of private events as well.

With events formats evolving from large to small collaborative style with higher priority for networking, we are looking at reconfiguring parts of the venue where organisers can leverage on our unique, customisable spaces to provide enhanced and differentiated event experience to their delegates.

Your previous job experiences were in the Middle East. Having been in Malaysia for six years now, how do you find it here? Any differences in the work culture?

Malaysia is great, I enjoy being here so much that I hope I may not have to leave. I love its work-culture. It is easy to work with Malaysians as everyone is supportive and takes a collaborative approach. Since English is widely-spoken, communications with team members, industry colleagues and our clients are smooth. I have started to learn Bahasa Malaysia and enjoy promoting Malaysia to those who have not been here.

How would you describe your leadership style?

I place strong emphasis on collaborative approach and working as a team. I have high standards and expectations in how we deliver our offerings and services to our clients and strive to balance that by providing as much support as I can to the rest of my team.

Work apart, how do you unwind?

Being an outdoor person, I take advantage of Malaysia's beautiful terrains and like to spend my weekends amidst nature by hiking or trekking. I am about to take my examination to be a rescue diver soon and will be trying for the master diver certification later this year. Malaysia is one of the world's best diving destinations with many fantastic dive sites.



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