

Passenger numbers up in 2005

International tourist arrivals increased by 5.5 per cent in 2005, compared with the previous year, and exceeded the 800 million mark for the first time ever, according to a report by UN World Tourism Organisation (WTO).

The January issue of the World Tourism Barometer revealed that the boom in passenger traffic reported in 2004, when tourist arrivals increased by 10 per cent over the previous year, continued into 2005 despite a number of incidents having a detrimental effect on world travel. The Indian Ocean tsunami, various terrorist attacks and an extraordinary long and strong hurricane season were found to have caused dips in tourism figures for various countries but, overall, the number of people travelling overseas increased. In total, 808 million tourist arrivals were recorded worldwide.

WTO Secretary General, Francesco Frangiali, said, "The tourism sector has gained substantially in resilience over the past year. In spite of the turbulent environment we live in nowadays, destinations worldwide added some 100 million international arrivals between 2002 and 2005."

Differences in performance were found throughout the various regions of the world, with Africa experiencing the greatest growth (10 per cent) in numbers of arrivals, followed by Asia and the Mid-

dle East, which both posted increases of seven per cent. Europe and North America experienced less pronounced growth of four per cent and six per cent respectively.

The WTO has also predicted that China will become the world's biggest inbound tourism nation by 2019, due to growth in the national economy, as well as improvements to the country's information technology and infrastructure. "China's inbound visitors will grow by eight per cent in the next five years," said Shao Qiwei of the China National Tourism Administration. "Thus, China will receive some 137 million inbound travellers by 2019." ●

Compensation rules upheld in Europe

THE EUROPEAN Court of Justice has dismissed a challenge by the International Air Transport Association (Iata) and the European Low Fares Airline Association (Elfaa) to European Union rules requiring airlines to compensate air travellers whose flights are overbooked, cancelled or delayed.

The rules were introduced in February last year, requiring airlines to provide food and hotel accommodation to passengers whose flights were delayed, as well as compensation payments of up to €600 (US\$714) if passengers could not fly because of overbooking.

Iata argued that the rules penalised airlines for events such as bad weather and strikes by air traffic controllers, which were out of their control, and in the case of low-cost carriers, imposed sanctions that were disproportionate to the cost of the airline ticket.

Jan Skeels, Secretary General of Elfaa, said, "It is very disappointing that the court has failed to overturn what is clearly a bad piece of legislation that does nothing for consumers and seriously undermines the competitiveness of the European air traffic industry." ●

New website provides network for new arrivals

MAKING FRIENDS in a new city may soon become easier, if new website FriendsOnArrival.com succeeds in its aim of linking up fellow travellers in a foreign city. The website, which was officially launched in January, is free to join and uses a member profile to enable visitors to get in contact with other people who have similar interests and are in the same place at the same time.

Founder, Maurizio Marmotta, said that the idea for the website came from his own experiences of travelling to different countries. "I've found that the packing gets easier, while making new friends and settling in gets harder," he said. "I saw there was an opportunity for a community which wasn't just singles-based or focused on business networking."

The website aims to attract users from a wide range of different ages and backgrounds and currently, 78 per cent of its members are over the age of 26, while 11 per cent are over 46. Marmotta said that he found the diversity of people using the site surprising. "Members are looking for team-mates, travel companions, advice on how to get started in a new place, tips for upcoming holidays and gap year adventures," he explained. "Some want to meet other parents to socialise with, other retirees in their area or locals to connect with on a business trip. Others are looking for old friends, to meet that someone special or to expand their circle of friends." ●

Travel Update

- **Japan** is planning to photograph and fingerprint all visitors on arrival, if a revised immigration bill passes through parliament successfully. The new bill would also allow the deportation of any foreigner considered to pose a terrorist threat.

- **Vancouver in Canada** has been voted the best city in the world to live in for the fourth year running, in a survey in *Economist* magazine. Cities are assessed and awarded a "hardship rating" for factors such as infrastructure, health care, public safety and access to goods and services. Toronto and Calgary in Canada also made it into the top 10 (numbers nine and 10) while Australia had Melbourne in number-two position and Perth, Adelaide and Sydney in positions five, six and seven. Vienna, Austria was third in the poll.

- Sending your luggage ahead when travelling is reported to be a growing trend according to one "luggage airline" company, First Luggage. The company sends luggage one day ahead of clients and allows them to track it in real time and receive an SMS message confirming its arrival. "We are getting busier and busier," said Managing Director, Gideon Kasfiner. "Luggage airlines such as ours are really coming into their own as airlines begin to actively dissuade passengers from checking in luggage." **Ryanair** announced earlier this year that passengers will be charged for all checked-in luggage, although it also said fares would be decreasing by an average of nine per cent.

- **Emirates** launched a second daily service between Dubai and Perth on 2 March. Tim Clark, President of the airline, said, "This signals our commitment and confidence in the growth of the Australian, particularly the Western Australian, market." Meanwhile, **Royal Brunei Airlines** increased its service to Perth from Brunei from three times to five times a week on 26 March. A new service from Brunei to Ho Chi Minh City also launched on the same day.

- **Scandinavian Airlines** has expanded its UK network, with a new twice-daily service from London City Airport to Stockholm now in operation.

- **Austrian Airlines** has added Ostrava in the Czech Republic to its route network and announced that record passenger numbers have been reached since May 2005. A further new service to Pecs in Hungary will be launched this summer.

- The Bush administration has proposed to raise **security fees** on all US airline tickets for the 2007 fiscal year. It proposes a one-way fee of US\$5 as opposed to US\$2.50 to cover passenger screening. Last year, a similar proposal was quashed by congress. US airlines say it is anti-competitive.

- **China Eastern Airlines** has said it expects 2005 profits to be down more than 50 per cent on 2004, with high fuel costs chiefly to blame.