The elegant days of The Raj still slumber on in Bangalore, once a major British military base complete with Old Boy clubs, polo matches and vast parks, now one of India’s boom cities. Fortunately there is still time to enjoy the remnants of the leafy slice of England the pucker sahibs and memsahibs left behind.

All of us have great memories of visits to Thailand – and now is the time to repay the Land Of Smiles. It’s the junior staff, the guides, waitresses, that are suffering most right now. They need visitors back NOW.

THE FIVE WINNERS of our competition to win a copy of Fiona McIntosh’s new book Fields of Gold, published by Penguin, are:
- Mary Elgar, senior travel manager, Mondo Travel. Shop 20 The Mezz 148 Scarborough Bch Rd, Mt Hawthorn, WA 6016
- Sue Beckers, Flightworld American Express, 200 St George’s Tce Perth W.A. 6000
- Joanne Miller, manager Harvey World Travel Castle Hill, Shop 305, Castle Towers Castle Hill NSW 2154
- Jo-Anne Francis, proprietor GTS Global Travel Solutions, 5 Lichendale Street Floreat WA 6014
- Lisa Perry, senior consultant, Axis Travel Suite 2 16 Main Street Osborne Park WA 6017

PLUS: Tom King updates the Sydney scene and highlights new destinations in Eastern Europe, we highlight the top deals for you and your clients, review the brilliant new Acropolis Museum in Athens and feature an ideal hotel for clients wanting to explore Venice but avoid the main tourism areas. TAU is more than press releases – a lot more.
The tourism industry in Thailand is suffering and needs your help now to get the wheels moving again.

According to Pieter van der Hoeven, director of sales and marketing, Asia Outrigger Hotels and Resorts, the industry is wonderful for its resilience in times of challenge, and the past few months are amongst the most challenging Bangkok has faced.

“Now is the time for our overseas partners to assist in the rapid rebound of our industry and help the many who depend on it for their livelihood,” he adds. Bangkok, Phuket, Koh Samui are all ready and willing to welcome our new and old friends back to the land of smiles.

Willem Niemeijer, CEO & co-founder of Khiri Travel Group has made a special appeal to the many travel wholesalers who consider themselves friends of Thailand. This is the time to show it, he says. “They should resist the urge to ask for price reductions. Instead of price reductions, hotels and tour operators should get creative and add value to offers. “Thailand is already one of the most competitively priced destinations in Asia. Asking hotels and tour operators to reduce rates is kicking operators while they are down. It only hurts service standards. “That’s the last thing we need.

“It’s the junior staff, the guides, waitresses, those with direct contact with tourists, that are suffering most right now. They need visitors back, now. “Because Bangkok is such a giant aviation gateway, the negative publicity hurts not just the capital but upcountry areas — and demand for Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam.

“Clever travellers can see that the conflict was a Thai-Thai matter and that 99% of the country was unaffected. Today, the country is operating 100% as normal. It’s a great time to visit.”

SWITZERLAND TOURISM will host two agent visits this year, one in August and a mega visit for 50 agents in October. Register your interest at evelyn.lafone@switzerland.com

KUMUKA WORLDWIDE wants you to have your own iPad and there are a number of ways you can win between now and December 31. Produce gross sales of $50,000 or more to snare an Apple 16GB WiFi iPad and for those who produce more than $80,000 in gross sales a 32GB model.

All consultants who make a booking throughout the duration of the competition will be eligible for a
“spot prize” draw. Flight Centre Group consultants are not eligible to enter this promotion. A promotion similar to this will be launched to you shortly. More details, http://www.kumuka.com/appleipad.aspx

Renault Eurodrive is offering discounts on vehicles booked between now and end-June for collection in Europe anytime prior to December 31 this year. Our vehicles are brand-new ex-factory and we have adequate supply at our disposal,” said Renault Eurodrive Australia MD, Paul Hodges. More details, www.renaulteurodrive.com.au

Don’t forget you can access Italian trains live through a direct connection on the International Rail website www.agent.internationalrail.com.au

The Vanuatu Tourism Office advises agents experiencing difficulties registering for the Vanuatu Road Shows on www.antor.travel that registrations will also be accepted via email to australia@vanuatu.travel. Include your name, agency, address, phone number and indicate which city you will be attending. Dates are Melbourne, June 22, Sydney June 23 and Brisbane June 24. Sarah Anderson Australian director for the Vanuatu Tourism Office Australia says that this is an important opportunity for agents to learn more about new product. Looking for something extra special to impress a client?

With a Radisson Edwardian gift voucher you can choose from stylish hotel breaks to spa, dining or afternoon tea experiences in 13 ideal London and Manchester locations. Flexible vouchers mean they can please themselves, with values from £20 - £1000.

The South African Tourism Australasia office has developed a blog at http://blog.southafricantourism.com.au/ which is being launched in conjunction with a Twitter page http://twitter.com/SouthAfricaANZ as well as two Facebook pages dedicated to the Australian and New Zealand traveller.

Apartment stays continue to grow in popularity in London. Clients who stay for six nights in August or September at Calico House along the cobbled street of Bow Lane or Phoenix House in Sloane Street, Knightsbridge, receive the seventh night free. More details, Katherine Heath katherine@thehotelconnection.com.au

Emirates’ winter early-bird fares are available for travel from October 1, 2010 to March 31, 2011. Ticketing must be completed by July 12, 2010. Terms and conditions apply. As well as the main gateways, the fares are available from 23 regional departure points through the codeshare with Virgin Blue. Emirates Sales Manager NSW & ACT, Tim Harrowell, said: “Our winter fares offer people preferring to visit Europe during the quieter winter season, access to the lowest possible year-round prices by booking early. “Travelling to Europe in winter holds many attractions, not least the exceptional skiing, and year-on-year we continue to see this market growing.”
DAYS OF THE RAJ SLUMBER ON IN BANGALORE

- A special feature by Fiona McIntosh
Winston Churchill used to stroll out of the elegant Holy Trinity Church on Sunday morning and admire the leafy view stretching out before him of the tree lined South Parade Grounds all the way to the imposing statue of Queen Victoria. The year was 1896.

His home, a palatial bungalow all pink and white with a heavily tiled roof and deep verandas was nearby and the exclusive club he preferred, opened in 1868, just a short horse ride away. So where was this glorious setting in the UK you are wondering? The answer is quite a surprise – young Churchill, a member of the 4th Hussars, was living in a British military and civil station called a cantonment in surprisingly temperate Bangalore, India. The station was an island in a sea of locals; it was as if a small corner of England has been transported to the southern Indian plateau. On the far west end of the parade ground was magnificent Cubbon Park – all 334 acres of it.

The Balgalore Club Churchill frequented is as exclusive today as ever with a membership waiting list that exceeds 25 years. Membership did not include ladies or Indians in Winston’s time with the exception of the Maharaja of Mysore. In fact, the only locals allowed into the British home from home in those days were servants.

One of the club’s most prized memories is a ledger of defaulters which on June 1, 1899, lists a Lt Churchill as owing 13 rupees. You can go in and have a look – a picture of the young soldier hangs above. While its bustling expansion has seen many fine old avenues uprooted and the creation of the worst traffic problems I can ever remember - it is still fun tracking down remnants of the old days in the Garden City as it is known - however be warned, they are being torn down at a frightening rate.

A centre of high tech development soon to be linked with a flyover metro system, Bangalore was not just the focus of colonial life during the heyday of the British Raj ... it was also the city where my parents were schooled at Bishop Cotton’s and where they worked in their early years. My father suggested we visit a coffee house he used to take mum to when they were first dating in the early 1940s. In their time it was called The 3 Aces. But dad said my grandfather used to go there too – it’s how dad knew about it. I had to hunt for it. How lucky that we did because we saw all the old posters still up and the waiters, still wearing 1930 style uniforms!
They looked very grand in their long white robes and deep ruby-coloured turbans and sashes. As fate would have it the next day we passed by South Parade again – MG Road as it is known – and the shop was gone! I believe it has reopened nearby – so all is not lost.

Another famous place where the future of Bangalore has been the topic of conversation for 60 years is Koshy’s, the pride of Bangalore on St Marks Road. This is more an institution than a restaurant – you almost feel like you are intruding on the locals as you stroll around the wood panelled walls looking at the old line drawings of the city.

We had to wait for a table – the large and noisy room, cooled by large fans, was packed with locals of all ages. This restaurant and hangout is as popular with the new generation as its long standing regulars. Our waiter discreetly pointed out retirees, professors, lawyers, government servants, old Anglo Indians, artists, writers, journalists and photographers. We know just how they like their drinks – and meals. Some of our clients have been coming here for 40 years, he added.

History is changing before their very eyes. My mother spent her youth living in a house on a grand boulevard called Sheshadri Road. All we could find was a long, hysterically busy channel, jammed with traffic thanks to massive roadworks. The magnificent English trees that had once graced this boulevard were being cut down in front of us. It was sad and certainly unrecognisable to mum’s description but that’s progress - these are hard working, forward thinking people rapidly creating a new demanding middle class that wants all the trappings of modern day living. Ask any young male student in Bangalore what he wants to be and he’ll most likely say ‘engineer’. It’s what they strive for. Ask the girls and they’ll likely say ‘doctor’. We met one bright youngster, just 14, who shared the tiniest of houses with nine adults and her brother. She had no computer – not even access to one at home. She had no room or private place...or even quiet space. She studied at one tiny corner of the main table of the house that everyone used for everything from eating to making clothes. And this beautiful young girl is aiming for medicine. Somehow I know she will make it. I can’t help but feel uplifted to see kids like Aisha who lived in a dusty satellite
town of Bangalore called Tumkur being so determined and disciplined.

Bangalore is known as Silicon City because of its hi-tech industry that has burgeoned over the last few decades and is arguably the nation’s fastest growing metropolis with a spanking new airport and fast highways springing up where once magnificent British steam trains were the only answer. It was, incidentally, the first city in India to be electrified and its desire to be cutting edge can be seen in the amazing new shopping developments. You can still see plenty of evidence of its former military importance with walled barracks and formal buildings now in various stages of decay.

But perhaps the most obvious nod to its former glory is Cubbon Park. It was originally laid out in the late 1800s by Major General Sankey. In my grandfathers’ time it was like a Kew Gardens, filled with beautiful flora, amazing trees and botanical specimens – including grevilleas from Australia - with wide pathways that snaked through the acreage providing magnificent walks that harked of Britain’s big parks. It included formal features of symmetrical avenues, and a superb cast iron octagonal bandstand and a pavilion. The public offices built in classical style and rendered in a deep red tone are now the high court. Here too is the state library, fronted by its rose garden. It was a favourite spot for the older members of my family who remember it in its heyday when the RAF band used to play fantastic music every weekend at the bandstand.

It is nowhere near as verdant or cared for as my parents recall, but it nonetheless remains a drawcard. We stayed at the *** Monarch Hotel in Brigade Road and I would not hesitate to recommend it with its competent, willing staff and scrupulously clean kitchen that I can attest to because the chef proudly invited us for a look. How the stainless steel shone!

We ate most of our meals in the dining room – favourites were for a start a huge pappadum with mint and yoghurt chutney and pickles – then from the tandoor - half tandoori chicken or chicken tikka with steamed rice and side plates of yellow dhal and kashmiri potatoes, roti bread and dry spicy vegetables. Breakfast was time for a masala dosa with potato and coconut chutney and a sambar. You need to be absolutely ritualistic about your hygiene in India.

We were diligent about regularly sterilising our hands, not eating outside of the hotel, carrying snacks with us that...
we’d brought from Australia, and only drinking bottled water that we knew was genuine.

The room itself was sparse and a bit tired (bit like the Travelodge of old) but the bathroom was modern enough and very clean and the room was serviced with an eye for detail daily. And location-wise, it is right by the shopping action. Each night we found ourselves walking off our evening feast strolling down to Commercial Street, which is not one street but a warren of alleyways and small paths that teem with tiny shops and vendors selling everything from toothpaste to luggage to earrings.

There days it is Bangalore’s bazaar where the locals shop with tourists but it was the premium shopping precinct in my grandfathers’ day. Here my forbears would have the latest fashion coming out of Britain and America tailored by men who sat cross-legged on the floor and rarely needed to take measurements. They could size their client up by sight and have a suit ready in a day. Mum had all her dresses and dance gowns made in these streets by a tailor called Bali er Rau.

The tailors are still busy in Bangalore’s bazaar.

The tailors are still there but now they make their money doing incredibly fiddly hand sewing, lace work and beadwork. It was magical to watch their people beading fabric in grimy back alleys. This is where you find the most exquisite pashminas and the really good stuff is not cheap – but it is a whole lot less expensive than buying it at home. Expect to part with about AUD60-70 depending on your bargaining skills for a beautiful plain two tone genuine pashmina. And it goes with me everywhere; come summer or winter it is a boon in any season and wraps up into the tiniest bundle to slip in any bag, goes with everything. Wish I’d bought two! I bought loads of lovely, inexpensive shawls as gifts, as well as the inevitable sari. There is nothing so eye-popping as a beautiful young Indian woman in a magnificent sari. And it’s the saris I think I remember most about my visit. Look down any street in Bangalore and while the overall colour is a vague mix of greys and browns, this is punctuated loudly by unbelievably bright pockets of fantastic colour – from violet to sunshine yellow and every hue you can imagine in between. One of the surprises was a visit to the Holy Trinity Church built for the British military. Here we spent a long time just reading the poignant plaques hung on the walls that spoke of men who died during skirmishes, of disease, while sailing to or from India or in one case,
following an attack by a tiger.
In Churchill’s day the church had a completely clear view through to the grand park but now it’s all built up and that marvellous sense of space and symmetry is lost.
Memorable too was a visit to the Bangalore Club which does offer accommodation if you are a member of an affiliated club. The Royal Overseas League is one. I could say a lot more — but you can see for yourself how elegant it is at www.bangaloreclub.com. The property prides itself on blending 19th century notions of the British Empire and grandeur with 21st century efficiency.

More history can be found at the The Bowring Institute, 19 St Mark’s Road, founded in 1868 by a local publisher. The institute has 60 guest rooms — from suites to family cottages. It was set up to provide a forum for the moral and intellectual improvement of the locals. Strolling about the vast reading room and library you can’t help but imagine nothing much has changed. As well there is a magnificent bar, card room, theatre, tennis courts and pool. Having a beer in the garden is a real treat. This property was once frequented mainly by anglo Indians. Details www.Bowringinstitute.com

Getting around Bangalore is so frantic thanks to the traffic that every now and then you need to hit the ‘stop’ button. A favourite refuge for us just to have a cool drink and be somewhere away from the madding crowd was the outdoor restaurants on the top floor of the six star shopping mall at UB City, corner Vittal Mallya and Kasturba Roads. This massive skyline defining development of four sleek towers was pioneered by the billionaire businessman Vijay Mallya of United Breweries and Kingfisher Airlines' fame.

The main shopping areas are Commercial Street, Brigade Road, MG Road and Residency Road — great for fun jewellery, pashminas, or having some clothes made. Other places to visit include the Bangalore Fort, built in medieval times and expanded by Tipu Sultan who distinguished himself by defeating the British in an important battle. Bangalore Summer Palace was inspired by Windsor Castle and was built in Victorian times.

Worth a look also is St Mary’s Basilica, the oldest church in Bangalore and the magnificent St Mark’s Cathedral where my uncle was a lay preacher.

Ulsoor Lake, close to MG Road, is a favourite picnic spot with several shaded...
islands and popular for boating or swimming.

Vidhana Soudha, a huge wedding cake of a structure that stretches almost the length of the northern rim of Cubbon Park, is the home of the State Legislature and secretariat. The story goes that the Russians paid a visit and laughed at the local government officials for still working out of a building that the British built.

We didn’t have time, but any visitor to Bangalore should take an organised tour to Mysore. I might add, organised tours with reliable operators are strongly advised. We were with the Indian Tourist Office guide and driver and while I know we were in good hands there were so many occasions when I thought my life was about to end in a tangle of traffic, particularly when we visited Tumkur and Kolar Goldfields where my parents were born. Here, clustered around the deepest gold mine in the world in those days, another slice of British life was created. Picket fences, pretty bungalows and gardens filled with roses greeted visitors. For recreation, gentlemen headed to the club for a round of golf and a few beers before dinner. The club is still there – along with plenty of other memories of times gone by.

India is not an easy holiday destination but it does leave its mark; it is an experience you never forget and the sights, sounds, colours, tastes...they just seem to live with you from thereon.

The billiard tables at the Kolar Goldfields Club are covered in dust.
Travel Indochina began in 1993 with an idea and an office in the corner of a friend’s store room; mops and all, says director Paul Hole. Recently more than 170 staff around the world joined in the company’s 17th birthday celebrations. Paul believes that it is the philosophy of providing “real” experiences in small groups that has led to their success.

**IF YOU GET A BUZZ** out of the feeling of acceleration as a passenger jet thunders down the runway you will just love Shanghai’s Maglev train. Without going into too much detail, the fastest commercially available ride in the world somehow harnesses the magical power of magnets. We took the train from the Longyang Station that is about 30km from the new Pudong Airport. Everything seems rather conventional as you board and sit down – the train looks much like the new generation of high speed trains belting around Europe.

One difference you notice is the large speedo at the end of the carriage, indicating progress in big red numbers. Numbers that change at an astonishing rate.
In no time it flashed past 100km/h – then 150 which is not unusual in Europe. Then 200. Now that’s fast. However the red numbers just kept rolling – 250, 300, 350. Everything outside was suddenly looking like a scene from a science fiction movie – almost as though we were being transported. Now the clock was showing 400 – and we were still accelerating – 410, 420. We hit 431 before the needle finally started to move back. A few minutes later we were at the airport – the 30 km trip taking eight minutes. It really is an experience out of this world.

**WHAT HAPPENS IF YOU CANCEL** a non-refundable airline ticket and ask the airline to refund the tax you have paid? In the UK this issue continues to cause controversy, with carriers over there accused of profiteering.

It seems that in the UK the airlines get round the problem of refunding tax by coming up with an administration charge of around 20 pounds.
The Daily Mail in the UK reported “a flood of complaints about airlines that charge huge admin fees if pax reclaim airline tax because they did not use their tickets.”
The taxes, in the UK at least, are charged up front but are collected by the airline only after a pax has travelled. “As a result if you don’t travel, the airline has no tax to pay,” the Daily Mail adds. I will check here with Consumer Affairs but as we are discussing ridiculous admin charges, here is a doozie. I had to change an Adelaide-Sydney flight with Virgin the other day for self and Fiona. I did all the work on the web site – and was slugged a whopping $90 for my trouble.

**PERHAPS IT IS JUST ME** – but I am tired of pulling out my Amex card these days – overseas and here - only to be told it’s less popular than Kevin Rudd’s proposed 40 per cent tax on the mining industry.
There really was a time when you would not leave home without it.
Amex has to survive in a much more competitive plastic market these days. Debit cards for instance are on the rise as consumers become more cautious. True, it is still fun to pull a gold card out at a big international hotel – but increasingly I find smaller or more
cost conscious retailers will only accept Visa or MasterCard. Those who do take Amex often demand steep merchant fees – adding as much as five per cent to the bill, which is not supposed to happen. As for the David Jones Amex card – I used to always shop there – but not anymore. How many times do you have to say no thanks to the inevitable question of “can we sign you up” before you head elsewhere? At times you would think the sales consultant’s very life depended on a yes.

YOU PAY A LITTLE BIT MORE for a Grand Suite on Royal Caribbean but the extra space is worth it alone, particularly when you travel like us as a family. Extra room though is just the beginning of the goodies. For a start our two boys cost under $500 each when they come with us. RC’s Suite Service includes your own concierge and the use of a special private lounge accessed by a special key.

We travelled on Splendour of the Seas in November cruising from Venice to Lisbon and enjoyed every minute of our 10 nights onboard. These older, smaller members of the fleet (around 2,000 passengers) are, according to the waiters who know all, on the market which is a real shame if true. Concierge Fatima Scudiere met us when we arrived at suite 8514 and outlined a long list of treats including the lounge where you can enjoy everything from pre dinner drinks and snacks from 5.30 – 8.30pm to a continental breakfast. Each day you get a special lunch and dinner in-room service menu, there are reserved seats for shows, business services including faxing and copies, port and shopping advice – the list goes on. The only down side was the old style TV and lack of a decent video player (or videos for that matter.)

ROYAL CARIBBEAN has every right to be very proud of the quality of both food and service in the main dining room. Voted tops at our table was The Harvest Feast, the chef’s signature menu – cream of roasted butternut squash and apples, Thanksgiving turkey with apple and sage stuffing, gravy, candied sweep potatoes, mashed potatoes, carrots, brussel sprouts and cranberry sauce.

If you still had room – to follow was warm pumpkin and pecan pudding with Grand Marnier-butterscotch sauce. And that was just one of seven other main courses.

The millions of visitors to Istanbul’s beautiful mosques now have the opportunity to understand more about one of the world’s great religions. The office of Religious Affairs in Istanbul has produced a free 32 page brochure entitled What Is Islam? As the introduction explains: This small book will hopefully answer questions you might have about the religion, how it began, how it is practised, the significance of prayer and the role of the mosque. “Hopefully it will also assist you in feeling a sense of peace under the dome of the mosque that has traditionally provided a space for communal prayer.”

CHINA, THE POWERHOUSE that has kept Australia away from the jaws of disaster during the financial collapse is a destination of amazing contrasts. I was sitting in a hotel in Beijing recently looking through a copy of the China Daily at a section called China Scene/Nation. Here are a few of the items that made news on the day. “After failing to advise her young husband to stop gambling, a wife threatened to divorce him unless he cut off one of his hands and kicked the habit. Enraged, her husband smashed his right hand with a brick he found in his street.”

AND FINALLY – A couple who separated on the day of their wedding banquet because the husband’s speech offended her relatives were granted a divorce.
The opening of the new Switzerland Tourism office in Sydney also celebrated the country’s year of walking and hiking. We know Australians are so fond of these healthy pursuits, said Federico Sommaruga, manager market development, Switzerland Tourism.

Speaking at a media lunch he added that Australians registered 250,000 overnight stays in the alpine country during 2009. This places Australia in the list of top 10 markets. Switzerland Tourism’s focus in Australia and New Zealand will be to promote the country’s summer and winter seasons and its major cities.

In addition to advancing the country’s 60,000 km of scenic hiking trails, special events will also be in the marketing spotlight. Evelyn Lafone, director Australia & New Zealand, heads up the new office. As well as joint promotions with key operators and trade and media familiarisations, the organisation intends to launch an online training academy for agents which should be operational by the end of July. More details, trade/partners link at www.myswitzerland.com

Take part and you will receive certification and have access to discounts for Swiss travel products and opportunities to participate in familiarisation visits. The RTO will host two agent visits this year, one in August and a mega visit for 50 agents in October. Register your interest at evelyn.lafone@switzerland.com

While Australia and Switzerland are not directly air linked Thai Airways has good connections through Bangkok and Swiss has flights from Hong Kong to Switzerland.

Nepal Tourism Year, 2011

He was speaking at a Together for Tourism – Nepal Tourism Year 2011 presentation in Sydney. “While nature, culture and adventure are certainly prime visitors lures, we are also promoting niche markets like golf and wedding tourism, he said. Susil Pant, MD, Gorkha International Travels, Kathmandu, who travelled to Sydney for the promotion, also stressed the diversity found in one compact destination. Spanning nearly 147,000 sq. km, Nepal has 27 million people from 90 ethnic groups who speak 100 languages and celebrate more than 365 festivals a year. Speaking on Nepal Tourism Year 2011, Mr Subash said that a series of mega events is being planned. The goal for 2011 is one million visitors and many of these will be repeat visitors because “once is not enough”. “We want to open up and develop new destinations”, he added.

The board is also encouraging more homestays to help spread the economic benefits of tourism to the rural sector and alleviate poverty. More details, www.welcomenepal.com
A destination as brilliant as Venice deserves the best hotel your budget can afford.

I well recall my first visit on a Cosmos tour – we stayed in the industrial area and bussed to the old city each day. I vowed it would never happen again. I guess I have been back five or six times since then – and I never tire of getting lost wondering about this glorious living history museum. I say living but there was a lot of criticism when we were there in December of the fact that locals were being ousted out and apartment buildings sold to international hotel groups. Heaven forbid that Venice ever suffers the same death as Dubrovnik. According to Fabio Baldan, an engraver and artist who has a booth on the esplanade, the mayor was to blame – and with elections coming up there was a big campaign in place to remove him. But I digress. I would have loved to spend a night or two at the Hotel Danieli which is just a moment away from St Mark’s Square and the Bridge of Sighs, with its astounding interior. Murano glass chandeliers sparkle over gilded staircases, pink marble columns carry soaring loggias and lofty ceilings and stained glass windows add more colour to the 14th century palace of Doge Dandolo. We were looking for a quality, authentic 4 star property with a family feel in old Venice without a prohibitive price tag. I spent a lot of time searching and talking to contacts before selecting the Hotel La Fenice Et Des Artistes, next to the Theatre La Fenice and Campo S Angelo, about 300 metres from St Mark’s Square. We had a five minute walk from where the water taxi dropped us off – well that’s what the driver said – but we quickly got lost in the ever twisting bowels of this extraordinary city.

No problem though – there were plenty of helpful locals about taking the dog for a walk. The property is in a wonderful location in the heart of the city but not on a thoroughfare and offers a genuine opportunity for visitors to experience real Venetian life in a pleasant and relaxed atmosphere. Our rooms were on the second floor overlooking a canal busy every afternoon with gondola loads of visitors taking the obligatory ride, their arrival heralded by the unmistakable squawks of a piano accordion accompanying yet another poor man’s Mario Lanze.

The elegant and ancient iron shutters on our window opened to a tiny balcony overlooking the classic scene of the canal, fringed each end by elegant bridges. Our room was recently renovated – the bathroom looked new. The second room was also fully renovated with lovely window views again of the canal. It was so peaceful here at night you could hear footsteps as late night workers strolled home over the bridge near our balcony. Breakfast was a real treat – in particular we enjoyed the unlimited cups of real coffee and some of the sweeter fare including Danish pastry stuffed with thick custard and delicious home made biscuits. This property has a surprising number of little nooks with comfy armchairs – there is one right next to the breakfast room where you can relax and read the morning newspaper. The girls at the front desk were always ready to point us in the right direction each morning – and internet was fast and free. There are numerous local coffee shops and restaurants in the tiny squares near the hotel – or you can choose to eat at the well known and historic Taverna la Fenice which is connected to the hotel – but operates under different management.

Conclusion: You can recommend this property to clients with confidence. It is clean, well run, close to major attractions yet lacks a real touristy feel. Rather than throngs of tourists in main thoroughfares you mix more with the locals chatting in their squares, enjoying a coffee or wine in their trattoria - which is probably why it is so popular with businessmen. We will certainly book there on our next visit.

More details, www.fenicehotels.com
I was watching a documentary recently on TV about the Parthenon in Athens which is still being repaired.

We watched as massive modern machinery cut a huge piece of marble from the original quarry to form the base of a column. More modern technology was used to grind the base to fit. Then a monster crane slowly lowered it into place. It didn’t fit. They got it right the next time round and everyone stood and pondered just how the ancients ever managed to build something as perfect as this huge building in just 15 years, perched as it is on top of a steep outcrop of rock. Achievement and the creation of marvels was all part of a day’s work for the fathers of democracy, architects of civilisation, medicine, philosophy – the list goes on.

The contribution of modern day Greeks to this astonishing legacy is rather more difficult to define. True they certainly have had an impact on the Euro, their skills at tossing plates around a restaurant are legendary – and we all love a yiros every now and then. Nothing much though to overwhelm the founding fathers – until now. The Acropolis Museum, a masterpiece in modern architecture, is set to become as big an attraction at the site itself. Money was not the prime motivating factor here – and it shows. As the president of the museum, Dimitrios Pandermalis, points out: “It provides a safe haven for the masterpieces of the Acropolis and ensures they are given the prominence they deserve.” He neglected to add that the dazzling combination of this wondrous building and exhibits creates an attraction like no other in the world.

A walk through its galleries is a walk through history – between the examples of the Archaic and Classical periods, but also in the ancient neighbourhoods of Athens. Excavations carried out at the site of the new museum unearthed an important part of the ancient city which can be viewed through glass floors on the ground floor. The crowning glory of the museum is the opportunity to look at the entire sculpted decoration of the Parthenon as it was on the ancient building.

This has been achieved through combining original sculptures with copies of those in the British Museum. Don’t miss the video presentation about the Parthenon and its decoration on the third floor.
Take a look at www.theacropolismuseum.gr
Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia luring more Australians

Do you have well travelled clients who have ‘been there, done that’ even when it comes to Eastern Europe? Having already probed Prague, waltzed through Warsaw and blitzed Budapest they want to experience even more of the atmosphere and culture of this value-for-money region. What suggestions can you make for their next holiday? The independent Baltic nations of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia are new destinations unknown to most Australians that you can confidently recommend.

Access used to be a hurdle but that’s been overcome with daily Thai International Airways flights from Bangkok to Stockholm. With an early morning arrival clients can transfer to their hotels for R & R in the Swedish capital or take convenient connecting flights to Baltic capitals.

There’s another relaxing option worth suggesting: the daily (in-season) Viking Line overnight cruise between Stockholm and Helsinki. Sydney-based MyPlanet is a sales agent for this cruise where comfortable cabins and a gargantuan buffet of Scandinavian specialities sets the pace for a night of casino action or cosy dancing.

You can value add holidays with extra days in Helsinki or book your clients on the hour flight from Helsinki to Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania. The latter is the option selected earlier this year when I embarked on a three week odyssey through the Baltics.

Summer days are gone and Vilnius’ place in the spotlight as the European Capital of Culture for 2009 will also soon be over. The 560,000 residents of Vilnius benefited from this event with restorations renewing their magnificent Old Town. While Vilnius is a modern city in every sense of the word it’s the baroque beauty of the Old Town that beguiles every visitor. There are some 1500 buildings of note in the capital’s approximately 1 sq. km medieval centre. Their historical and architectural significance are of such global worth that UNESCO bestowed World Heritage status in 1994. Dotting the precinct are restaurants dishing out zeppelins (potato dough filled with cheese) and kolduanai (ravioli stuffed with meat or mushrooms). Wines imported from throughout Europe are good value. Between cafes and pubs are boutiques, souvenir shops and street vendors selling everything from amber jewellery to contemporary paintings.

Latvia is at the crossroads of East and West and long haul visitors usually want to combine the country with other destinations in the region such as St Petersburg in Russia or Stockholm which can be accessed by ferry. Latvia offers many niche products and holiday packages can be organised that include spas, manor houses, adventure, nature and golf.

Most foreign visitors are lured to Riga,
often called the “Paris of the North”, because of its architecture and history. Riga’s Old Town abounds in quirky hotels – some housed in 600 year old buildings – open-to-6-AM night spots, trendy shops where English speaking staff accept Australian Dollars and a plethora of restaurants. North of Riga the ‘table’ is set in the medieval heart of Tallinn, the capital of Estonia.

Nearly 1.2 million visitors walked the cobble stone streets and admired the lovely Gothic buildings of our historic Old Town in 2008, said Maret Põldveer, Marketing Coordinator, Tallinn City Tourist Office & Convention Bureau.

In 2010 the city hosts the European Figure Skating Championships in mid January (www.euroskate2010.eu) and the Jazzkaar International Jazz Festival in April (www.jazzkaar.ee). The city’s colourful past will be highlighted during Old Town Days from June 5 – 12 (www.vanalinnapaevad.ee) and Medieval Days in mid July (www.folkart.ee).

Tallinn will offer even more to Australians and the world the following year when the elegant Estonian city becomes the European Capital of Culture (www.tallinn2011.ee).

The Association of National Tourism Office Representatives (ANTOR) has elected a new executive committee. Sarah Anderson, managing director of GTI Tourism, has been appointed chair with Ainsley Ericksen of Tourism British Columbia appointed as deputy and Geoffrey Hutton of Visit USA remaining as treasurer. Other ANTOR committee members include Hong Kong Tourism’s Andrew Clark, California Tourism’s Tristan Freedman, GTI Tourism’s Vera Huntink, Finnesse Communications’ Satu Raunola, Oman Tourism’s Mona Tannous, and Mike Lillie will continue as secretary. ANTOR will offer new opportunities this year including advertising packages for its redesigned website, coordination of RSVPs for industry events plus training and networking events.

**AIRLINES**
Air Canada has been ranked ‘Best Airline North America’ in a Skytrax worldwide survey of more than 17 million air travellers. “Air Canada is not just the best airline to travel to Canada but a great way to get to any of our 58 destinations in the United States or 59 destinations in Canada. “For travellers from Australia, Vancouver is a really convenient gateway to North America. You can avoid the long queues at LA Airport, quickly clear US Customs in Vancouver and continue your journey to the US.” Lufthansa was awarded Best Airline in Europe, taking over the prize from family member SWISS, which won the title last year. SWISS in return ranked number one in the category Staff Service Excellence, followed by Austrian Airlines, another member of the Lufthansa Group. Thai Airways won Best Airport Services and Best Airline Lounge – First Class.

**CRUISING**
North Star Cruises has announced a new opportunity for adventure with the Solomon Sojourn itinerary on board True North. The inaugural eight-day cruise will depart Brisbane in November 2010, with a second cruise running back-to-back. GM Peter Trembath said the stunning Pacific Island Solomon Island region was virtually untouched by tourism. More details, http://www.northstarcruises.com.au/solomonsojourn.asp

**ACCOMMODATION**
Swissôtel The Howard, London has created an afternoon tea to celebrate the upcoming Wimbledon tennis championships. On offer is flavoured shortbread biscuits shaped as tennis rackets, tennis balls, centre net and strawberries; all resting on top of an edible green lawn court. Traditional finger sandwiches and home-baked scones with strawberry preserve are included on the tier of treats. Chocolate
mint cups, pink champagne jelly, strawberry cream tarts and macaroons round off the set.

**Radisson Edwardian Hotels** London Explorer package includes a 2-day pass worth £54. Clients choose a hotel from 12 great locations and take their pick from over 50 of the capital’s top attractions, without the inevitable queues – or admission charges. The package includes full English breakfast every day of the stay plus two dine for the price of one in the hotel restaurant. Conditions apply.

**Emirates guarantees** clients on the new domestic-international combined ticket a seat on the next available Virgin flight should there be a delay. The ticket also allows them to check in 30kg of luggage at the domestic departure point. Skywards members can earn miles on both domestic and international flights and redeem them for Virgin Blue domestic or Emirates international flights.

**There’s still time** for clients to enjoy free nights with SPG’s Free Weekends promotion. For every three stays at SPG properties until 31 July 2010, clients will earn one free weekend night award redeemable through 19 December 2010.

**Maarten Mulder**, business development manager Sydney and Brisbane sales executive Kim Svenningsson are new faces on the Philippine Airlines sales team.

PAL is operating a new Boeing 777 aircraft on its Sydney and Melbourne routes and has launched new flights from Brisbane.
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