LURE OF THE MAGIC KINGDOM

Will Mickey give Hong Kong an edge over S’pore in the fight for visitors?

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THE word “magical” laced every few sentences, leaving her strangely breathless each time.

Having walked through the “happiest place on earth”, Singaporean Alicia Chia has returned cooing about how Disneyland in Hong Kong “sort of ignites the young” in her 42-year-old self.

“The Disneyland Hotel’s chandeliers had Cinderella’s glass shoes ... And the fireworks at night – it really ignited the magic that I can’t describe,” said Ms Chia, whose job as SA Tours’ general manager got her into the theme park’s trade preview one week before the official opening on Monday.

But as in all fairy tales, a shadow lurks in the background for Ms Chia. She worries that Walt Disney will make Hong Kong so alluring that visitors will soon bypass her own country, a fear that other travel agents and analysts believe is not unfounded as the Chinese territory has many other tourism goodies up its sleeve.

Disneyland is easily the crown jewel in the Hong Kong government’s new strategy to boost its travel industry. The theme park has cost the Special
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WELCOME TO MY WORLD: With the opening of Disneyland in Hong Kong, local children have been caught up in Disney mania and now recognise many of the animation studio’s characters.

SISTER CITIES: TO EACH THEIR OWN?

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Administrative Region (SAR) some US$4.27 billion for a 57-per cent stake and for developing a 126-hectare piece of reclaimed land on Lantau Island. As Asia’s second Disney theme park after Tokyo, it comprises two hotels, adventure lands set in animated classics, and live entertainment. It is expected to attract 5.6 million visitors in its first year. It will also create 18,000 jobs and generate economic benefits valued at US$19 billion.

All that could have been Singapore’s, but a deal with Disney did not materialise in the 1990s. The American company had insisted on getting a chunk of land at a low price while Singapore bore most of the cost burden. Instead the island has decided to build two Integrated Resorts (IR) cum casinos by 2009 — attractions that Singapore now really needs, Ms Chia is convinced.

Ms Joycelyn Su, senior manager for CTC Holidays’ Outbound Tours division, added: “In terms of the economy and attractions, people think we’re like Hong Kong, so the new Disneyland could pose a minor threat for Singapore in terms of attracting visitors within Asia.”

While Thomas Tan, a Singapore Management University associate professor of marketing, agreed that Singapore could see a slight dip during the first year of the theme park’s operations, he feels that the novelty will wear off in the long term. One need only recall Hong Kong’s Ocean Park, the once-popular aquarium with funfair rides, to catch his drift.

“Once you’ve visited it, there’s nothing new after that. It’s not like museums — and those are cheap,” Prof Tan said.

Hong Kong Disneyland’s admission tickets for peak days cost HK$395 (US$3.75) per adult and HK$250 for a child below 12, rather pricey for mainland Chinese, the group expected to account for one-third of the theme park’s visitors, said Ms James Wong, Famcos Holiday Tour’s sales and marketing manager. According to the US Central Intelligence Agency’s online “World Factbook”, China’s per capita income in 2004 averaged US$5,600, way below Singapore’s $1,780. But as the number of affluent Chinese is growing — as evidenced from reports about them invading luxury retailers — there is little reason to stop the SAR government from targeting the mainland Chinese family. They are today’s life-line for the territory which, like Singapore, is grappling with declining average staying times and tourist spending.

“There is a big potential in family travel in China, where the child is king. That one child usually brings in four or five adults with (him),” Ms Selina Chow, chairman of Hong Kong Tourism Board, told AFP.

Here in Singapore, families are already making a beeline for the theme park. About 2,800 persons have been booked on Hong Kong travel packages that throw in a day pass to Disneyland, said SA Tours’ Ms Chia.

To enhance its offerings for the families, Hong Kong is rejuvenating Ocean Park, adding an “arts hub” sprawling 40 hectares along Kowloon harbourside, and creating a 61-hectare nature preserve known as Wetland Park, among other things.

Because of this new strategy, shoppers — especially young working women — are no longer the prime target as Hong Kong now enjoys an influx of families with children below 10, said SA Tours’ Ms Chia.

This is timely for a city whose prices are now not as competitive as mainland China’s, said Ms Susan Field, president of Skal International, an organisation of tourism professionals worldwide.

“Commercially and socially, Hong Kong is finding its feet once again,” Ms Field told AFP.

Come December, the Chinese territory will throw open the doors of another highly anticipated attraction — the AsiaWorld-Expo boasting 70,000 sq m of convention space and an arena that can seat 13,500 visitors. Though smaller than Singapore’s existing 100,000 sq m Suntec Convention and Exhibition Centre as well as Singapore Expo, AsiaWorld-Expo’s presence could nibble away at Singapore’s share of this market.

But SMU’s Prof Tan believes that Singapore’s upcoming IFS will provide the island with the much-needed edge as Hong Kong has not flagged similar plans — yet. With gaming and entertainment facilities, the mega resorts have the advantage of being based in safe Singapore, a reputation that carries a premium.

Whether it will be enough to keep Singapore safe from the Mickey onslaught remains to be seen.