



The island resort of Song Saa, off Sihanoukville, is due to open late next year.

Song Saa tipped as hot new destination

THE hottest up-and-coming destinations tipped by travel experts at a conference this week include the lush rainforests of Cambodia's first island resort at Song Saa, as well as Finland, the Mongolian Steppes and Ethiopia for the adventure-driven.

Rory Hunter, who is building the Song Saa resort off the coast of Sihanoukville, said that he would use a cocktail of online and traditional media to attract customers ahead of its opening in late 2011.

"Online will be a key part of our strategy but to get the right volume, we will also be using tour operators and travel agents," he said.

The 25-villa resort uses elements of traditional Cambodian fishing villages to create a natural environment using local materials, driftwood and thatched roofs. Designed by Melita Hunter, the resort is being developed by Brocon Co Ltd, an Australian-run development company with much experience in building accommodation in Cambodia.

Facebook, Twitter and a host of invite-only travel websites are fast becoming a key pipeline for well-heeled travellers as well as the budget-conscious to find hot deals.

Bigwigs from the world's elite travel industry, who gathered in the Riviera resort of Cannes for the annual ILTM trade fair, had their eyes on social networks as a crucial tool for the future.

"Social networks, such as Facebook with its 600 million users, will have a dramatic impact on how affluent consumers make their [travel] decisions," said Klara Glowczewska, editor of *Conde Nast Traveler*.

American-born socialite and interior designer Baroness Monica von Neumann told *Luxury Travel Magazine* she uses travel websites for their customer reviews and hotel rankings.

"Testimonials really help in the decision-making process," Von Neumann said.

The trend is set to intensify when the first wave of United States baby boomers – veteran travellers who are web-savvy and engaged in social networking – turn 65 next year, predicted Preferred Hotel Group President Lindsey Ueberroth.

Matthew Upchurch, CEO of the elite network of travel agencies, Virtuoso, sees the internet as "opportunity more than threat" for its 6,000-plus advisors, spread across 22 countries.

"Social media are one of the best things that ever happened to true professional travel advisors," Upchurch said.

"I have up to 1,200 friends on Facebook, who are either close friends or colleagues and when I learn something really interesting about a destination that I have just come back from, I click 'share' and everybody benefits."

Social media is also starting to have a major impact on exclusive hotels and resorts, which are using them to boost their online presence, attract a new clientele and ensure customer ratings remain high.

Hotels are increasingly using Facebook and Twitter to publicise new activities and deals and keep up a dialogue with customers.

Most luxury hotels today employ social media managers to protect their image and reputation online, says Olivier Chavy, a senior luxury and lifestyle executive at the Conrad and Waldorf Astoria hotels and resorts. AFP