

Eyes on the Prize

The Qantas Australian Tourism Awards recognise a diverse and vibrant industry that is forever looking to the future

THE LAST YEAR HAS BEEN A PRETTY good one for the local tourism industry. Visitor numbers are up 5 per cent year-on-year and those visitors are spending more while they are here. Then there was the Oprah effect. The divine Ms O landed on our shores for one of the world's more high-profile publicity junkets last year. Its success has yet to be fully gauged, but according to Tourism Australia the two programs filmed in Sydney put Australia's unique charms on display across 145 countries and to about 40 million people in the US alone.

It would seem Australia is back on everyone's bucket list: the spike in visitor numbers is particularly good news. This is despite the Australian dollar's continued high valuation against most of the world's currencies, unfortunately making us one of the more expensive global destinations.

Taking all this into account, the industry arrived at Perth's Burswood Entertainment Complex last night in a buoyant mood. They were in Perth to honour this year's Qantas Australian Tourism Award winners as well as to discuss the state of the industry and the way forward in the coming 12 months.

Tourism Australia managing director Andrew McEvoy says the awards demonstrate that Australian operators want to improve, to be known for their quality and to be benchmarked against others in the industry. "A great indication of how much great product Australia offers is that I don't intimately know every winner or finalist," McEvoy says. "There are so many new operators all over the nation."

McEvoy acknowledges the diversity of winners, such as Sydney's Taronga Zoo (major tourism attraction), "who really use their unique Australian perspective and bring that to all their new projects and devel-

opments". He also mentions Queensland's Jungle Surfing Canopy Tours, which picked up the award in the adventure category.

On the awards themselves, McEvoy says there has been a real focus on making them simpler, with a stronger consumer perspective. "This year we have seen more entries than ever because operators know they do lead to business and they are interested in challenging themselves.

"Seppeltsfield Vineyard Cottage, who picked up the award for hosted accommodation, is a microcosm of the whole awards in many ways," McEvoy adds. "They enter because they want to be seen as constantly improving and they want to be benchmarked by their industry peers."

Looking ahead, McEvoy suggests the challenge for the local tourism industry is to develop a more appealing product.

Updating and upgrading infrastructure is important, as is increasing airline capacity. The battle for talent in a fully employed economy is another challenge that needs to be confronted over the next few years.

Another big issue is ensuring we offer more reasons for people to visit regional Australia. McEvoy says it's an area which does have a few tough spots but we have proved we can offer luxurious, world-class regional destinations, such as South Australia's Southern Ocean Lodge, Qualia on Hamilton Island and Tasmania's Saffire. Other winners, including Temora's Aviation Museum in the festivals and events category and the indigenous winner, Mutawintji Eco-Tours, are examples of what can be achieved in regional areas.

Put simply: this year's winners (as demonstrated in the following selected profiles) demonstrate an industry that is constantly "lifting its game" in an effort to ensure that Australia remains one of the most desirable destinations on the planet.

