

WEEKLY BRIEFING

15 December 2023



ECONOMIC, POLITICAL AND SOCIAL UPDATE

Premier League's first female referee

Rebecca Welch, 40, is set to officiate Fulham's match against Burnley on 23 December, making her the first female referee for a Premier League fixture. Welch began refereeing in 2010 and became the first woman to referee a men's Championship game in January this year, whilst also taking charge of the Women's Super League and the Women's Champions League matches, as well as refereeing at the Women's World Cup in Australia and New Zealand this summer. Later this month, Sam Allison, 42, will become the first Black referee to take charge of a top-flight match in 15 years. Officiating the match between Sheffield United and Luton on Boxing Day, Allison will be the second ever Black referee in the Premier League. This news comes as the Football Association laid out plans in July to recruit 50% more referees from "historically under-represented" backgrounds by 2026. "These are pivotal moments for Rebecca and Sam, who are two officials of real quality... They deserve their opportunity" said referees' chief Howard Webb.

The hospitals struggling the most as winter bites

Overcrowding on hospital wards is leading to dangerous delays as patients face long waits in A&E with ever-growing numbers of patients arriving by ambulance being stuck in queues outside. It has been stated that it should only take 15 minutes for patients who have been brought in via ambulance to be handed over to A&E staff. However, NHS data for England shows that at some hospital trusts last week, more than 80% waited longer than 30 minutes. Leaders of ambulance services have said these delays put patients at risk of harm and also delay the ambulance teams from answering other emergency calls. Figures released on Thursday also showed that 30% of patients in November waited longer than the target time of four hours in A&E, a slight improvement on this time last year, which ended up being the worst winter since records began 20 years ago. NHS England has acknowledged that the system is under "considerable strain", but said that the health service is in a better position than this time last year with extra staff being recruited and beds being opened.

Energy bills could rise by £16 to cover customers' debts

Ofgem, the government regulator for the electricity and downstream natural gas markets, is proposing lifting the energy price cap - which limits the amount that companies can charge per unit of gas and electricity - by £16 between April 2024 and March 2025. This would see households paying extra on energy bills to cover customers' bad debts. The industry regulator estimates that debt levels for energy customers has risen to £2.9billion. Charities have warned that energy costs are a key concern for millions of people across the UK who are having to borrow money to pay essential bills at Christmas. Ofgem stated "We understand the distress that rising debt in energy has on people" however, adding: "Rising debt levels create costs for suppliers" and have warned in the past that if it did not implement an increase to cover bad debts, customers could end up paying more in the long run.

TRADE UPDATE

Advantage reports 44% surge in Christmas getaways

The Advantage Travel Partnership is optimistic about prospects for the new year's peak sales period following a surge in bookings for this forthcoming festive season. Julia Lo Bue-Said, chief executive at the consortium, said: "Collectively, across our UK-wide travel agency partnership, we are seeing bookings departing from December 18-28 up by 44% compared to the same period last year. This follows recently released data from Barclays which showed that the travel sector has continued to perform strongly, citing year-on-year spending, with travel agents having increased by 9.2% in November and that the travel sector as a whole has now recorded double-digit growth in 11 of the past 12 months."

TTNG agents report easing of recruitment challenges

The Travel Network Group agents say post-pandemic recruitment challenges have eased, thanks to training and word-of-mouth recommendations. Vim Vithaldas, chief commercial officer, told delegates at the consortium's conference in Munich: "Members faced real staffing challenges – enquiries were coming in but they didn't have enough staff. But, over the past 12 months, with the new [TTNG] Training Academy and people coming back into the industry, I hear about this less and less."

Over-50s travel desire 'unabated' with 56% holding bookings for 2024

More than half (56%) of over-50s already hold a travel booking for next year and 39% plan to travel more in 2024 than previous years, according to new Saga research. Saga and sister company Titan Travel reported a 20% rise in solo travellers booking holidays for next year versus 2023. Long-haul touring holidays are the most popular types of trips, with 42% of respondents. Cruises are also a popular option particularly with women and those aged over 70. The proportion expecting to be travelling more in 2024 rises to 43% for people between 50 and 69 years old. Popular destinations include the UK with two thirds (58%) planning a domestic break in 2024, and 32% looking to take an ocean cruise. European city breaks are also popular, in particular with 50-69-year-olds (22%).

Heathrow tops six million passengers in November

Passengers using Heathrow topped six million last month with a strong December projected. Thanksgiving and Diwali celebrations helped boost November's throughput by more than 10% year-on-year to 6.1 million. Total numbers for the year to November rose by 30% to 72.5 million. Traffic to North America peaked ahead of Thanksgiving with more than 50,000 passengers flying across the Atlantic from Heathrow on the Friday before the holiday.

AIRLINE UPDATE

British Airways - British Airways is to return to London Stansted airport with weekend flights to Florence, Ibiza and Nice. The summer-only flights, to be operated by London City Airport-based subsidiary BA Cityflyer, will launch on 18 May 2024. The new Stansted services will complement Cityflyer's weekday services from London City, plus recently added weekend services from Edinburgh to San Sebastian, Spain and Olbia, Sardinia. This will be the first time that British Airways has offered scheduled flights from Stansted since before the global pandemic, and it will become the fourth London airport to be served by the flag carrier.

Virgin Atlantic - Virgin Atlantic is increasing the frequency of its New York and Boston services as it boosts capacity to the US for summer 2024. The airline is launching a seventh daily flight to JFK airport and together with joint venture partner Delta will offer 10 daily flights to the city, an increase of 11% on summer 2023. Virgin Atlantic will also start operating a second daily flight to Boston, adding to Delta's single daily service. The announcement comes after Virgin Atlantic revealed in October it would increase its Miami services from 11 per week to twice daily year-round and launch a summer service from Manchester to Las Vegas.

Royal Jordanian - Royal Jordanian Airlines has confirmed the start of new routes to Amman from Manchester and Stansted airports. Four flights a week are scheduled to operate from Stansted from March 3 and three a week from Manchester on March 6. The two UK airports will be the sixth and seventh additions to the carrier's growing European network after opening routes to Lyon, Milan, Stockholm, Dusseldorf and Brussels over the last 10 months. Chief commercial officer Karim Makhoul said: "Our new routes to Manchester and London Stansted will make it easier than ever for tourists from UK to discover Jordan's incredible wonders."

Jet2 - Jet2.com and Jet2holidays have expanded their Italian programme to Sardinia, Sicily and Verona with an extra 20,000 outbound seats now on sale. The airline and operator have added capacity from across eight UK airports to the three destinations, extending the season for summer 2024 and Easter 2025. In Sicily, flights from Manchester and London Stansted will run up until mid-November 2024, and for summer 2025 additional April flights have been put on sale from Birmingham, Edinburgh, Leeds Bradford and London Stansted. Extra November 2025 departures have also been added from Birmingham, Manchester and London Stansted.

Ryanair - Ryanair is to open a new Moroccan base and start 11 domestic routes in the country next year. Tangier will become the carrier's fourth base in Morocco, with two aircraft. It will join other bases at Marrakech, Fez and Agadir, meaning the airline will station 14 aircraft in the country, half of them in Marrakech. The additions mean Ryanair will operate 175 routes from Morocco next year, 35 of them new, including 11 domestic services. Ryanair claims to have invested \$1.4 billion in Morocco, which will be one of the countries staging the 2030 Fifa World Cup.

TOUR OPERATORS, TRAVEL AGENCIES, OTA UPDATE

Kuoni to roll out new eco-label for hotels

Kuoni is bringing out a new sustainability label to display alongside its hotels online and in brochures as it targets an increase in eco-accredited properties. The Engage – People and Planet logo will be used from early next year as the overarching green label attached to all properties accredited by The Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC), seen as the global standard for sustainability. Around 25% of the operator's property portfolio is currently accredited under the GSTC but Kuoni hopes to raise this to 35% by the end of April 2024.

Classic Collection reveals 'most inventive' peaks campaign

Classic Collection will offer agents increased rewards and a competition to win a holiday as part of the luxury operator's peaks campaign. The operator will also launch printed and digital brochures showcasing its holidays under five new categories: Multicentre Creations, Boutique, Inspirational Journeys, Villa Life and Select. Si Morris-Green, agency sales and marketing director, said the campaign will use the slogan 'Expect More' and will be its "most inventive" peaks campaign ever. "We'll be highlighting the full breadth and diversity of the Classic Collection product: the experience, expertise and service which underpin our product portfolio – more complex itineraries and enhanced customer service.

Latin Routes launches first brochure in four years

Latin America specialist Latin Routes has launched its first brochure for four years, called Truly Individual Holidays to Latin America. The 160-page editorial-led brochure showcases themes such as wildlife, festivals and self-drive holidays, as well as inspiration for itineraries to explore the cultures and landscapes of Latin America. New destinations have been added – Panama and Mexico – alongside favourites such as Machu Picchu in Peru and the beaches of Brazil.

Travel Counsellors to create first climate action plan with travel foundation

Travel Counsellors is to create its first climate action plan following a partnership with sustainable tourism charity the Travel Foundation. The company has also called on homeworkers to become sustainability champions by submitting their idea for a sustainable travel itinerary or by helping reduce their carbon footprint. According to data recently published by Travel Counsellors, 56% of people believe travel companies should offer more sustainable options while 41% of respondents say they are willing to spend more on a sustainable holiday.

SOCIAL UPDATE

Instagram launches new anti-spam updates

Instagram has brought in new measures to counteract spam and lower the impact of it on users. The platform has enhanced its automated detection of bot profiles and spam, allowing for more proactive filters which will reduce the burden of manual spam management on users. The new elements include an automatic filter on follow requests, where suspected spam profiles will appear in a separate “potential spam” list; a bulk tag review feature to allow users to remove spam tags faster; and hiding views on stories from spam accounts.

Exploration into enclosed group sharing continues

Social media users are increasingly using platforms to watch short form videos but sharing less of their own updates. With more users sharing content in private groups on social media, Instagram and Facebook have created segmented social profiles, allowing users to interact with different communities using alternate profiles. Instagram is also testing “Flipside” which is a profile space where only users and their chosen connections can interact.

MICE UPDATE

ExCeL adds final steelwork to its 25,000sqm expansion

ExCeL London has reached a significant milestone as the final piece of structural steelwork has been fitted for the 25,000 sqm expansion project. The £220m development, supported by ADNEC Group and built by McLaren Construction, will expand the venue’s existing facilities by a further 25% – totalling 125,000 sqm. Almost 5,000 tons of steel have now been installed, and once complete, in October 2024, the London venue will become the largest fully integrated conference and exhibition centre in Europe. Hosting around 400 events every year and welcoming four million visitors, one million of whom are from overseas, ExCeL London is currently experiencing its busiest ever year – tracking 10% higher than its previous record set before the pandemic in 2019.

LIGHTER NOTE

A ‘beyond rare’ alligator has been born at a wildlife park in Orlando, Florida. See the little white gator [here](#).