

WEEKLY BRIEFING

23 February 2024



ECONOMIC, POLITICAL AND SOCIAL UPDATE

Typical energy bill to fall £238 a year from April under new price cap

A new price cap set by the regulator will see the typical annual energy bill fall to £1,690 from April, the lowest for two years. Households using a typical amount of energy could be saving £238 a year, or around £20 a month, bringing some relief to bill payers as lower wholesale prices paid by suppliers have led to this cut in the price cap for April to June. However, campaigners have expressed that bills are still too high for many struggling to pay as bills remain well above pre-pandemic levels. Ofgem, the government regulator for the electricity and downstream natural gas markets in Great Britain, sets the maximum amount that suppliers can charge for each unit of gas and electricity but not the total bill, so if a household uses more, they will have to pay more. The regulator is also adding £28 to everyone's bill over a year to cover the cost of dealing with £3.1bn of debt that customers owe to suppliers. Dame Clare Moriarty, chief executive of Citizens Advice, said: "It's good news that the cost of energy is falling, but the impact of sky-high prices will be felt for years to come."

Fossil reveals 240 million year-old 'dragon'

Scientists have revealed a new, astonishingly complete fossil to be a 16ft long aquatic reptile from the Triassic period. Dating back 240 million years, the creature has been dubbed a "dragon" due to its extremely long neck. The species - *Dinocephalosaurus orientalis* - was originally identified back in 2003 and this new fossil has allowed scientists to see the full anatomy of this incredible prehistoric beast. This is the first time scientists have been able to see the "very strange animal" in full, said Dr Nick Fraser, from National Museums Scotland, a member of the international team that studied the fossil. "It has flipper-like limbs and its neck is longer than its body and tail combined" the researcher said, speculating that its "long, bendy and flexible neck" might have provided a hunting advantage to allow *Dinocephalosaurus orientalis* to search for food in crevices under the water. "This discovery just adds to the weirdness of the Triassic," Dr Fraser told BBC News. "And every time we look in these deposits, we find something new."

King Charles seen meeting PM Rishi Sunak after cancer diagnosis

For the first time since his cancer diagnosis was revealed to the public, King Charles met in person with prime minister Rishi Sunak on Wednesday. The meeting was also the first in person audience that the King and Sunak have had this year at Buckingham Palace, though they have been in regular contact whilst the King has been staying at Sandringham the past few weeks. The King confessed to the prime minister that the cards and messages of support and good wishes “reduced me to tears most of the time”. It is said that the pair discussed the benefits of the diagnosis raising awareness for the work of cancer charities.

TRADE UPDATE

Data confirms solid January travel sales as spend hits £428m

Consumer spending on holidays and airline tickets in January rose 50% over the previous month to reach more than £428 million, according to latest data. The total during the peak January booking period was up six per cent year-on-year as the cold weather spurred people to book breaks, the latest spending report by Nationwide showed. The number of transactions in the sector in January was calculated at almost 2.2 million, up seven per cent in December and by six per cent over the same month last year. The increased outlay on holidays and other non-essential items came despite rising costs elsewhere, such as rent and mortgage repayments. Overall non-essential spending was up by two percent over last January to £2.9 billion.

Heathrow reveals it hasn't given up on expansion as it returns to the profit

Heathrow has not given up on plans for a third runway, it has confirmed in its latest financial report. Airport chiefs said it was examining a new case for expansion following the pandemic. “We are conducting an internal review of the work we have carried out and the different circumstances we find the aviation industry in, and this will enable us to progress with appropriate recommendations and ways forward,” it said. It added it still had government support for plans for a third runway “and the related infrastructure required to support an expanded airport”. In the last calendar year, Heathrow recorded its first profit since 2019, making £38 million before tax. The airport did this after being made to cut fees to airlines by 20% in line with a CAA judgment. Passenger numbers reached 79.2 million, the third-highest in the airport's history and an increase of 17.6 million on 2023. Revenue increased by almost 27% to £3.7 billion. Aircraft were on average 79.6% full compared to 77% in the previous year due to the increase in the number of flights being slightly behind the increase in passengers. The percentage of business travellers rose one point to 27% but lags the 32% reached in 2019. Heathrow plans to cater for a record 81.4 million passengers this year.

American Queen Voyages attributes collapse to impact of pandemic

The collapse of American Queen Voyages came as a result of a failure to recover from the Covid-19 pandemic, the company disclosed. The US river cruise specialist updated its website overnight to confirm the “difficult decision” to shut down. A statement said: “Despite great efforts by our team, crew and partners, American Queen Voyages (AQV) unfortunately has been unable to rebound from the effects of the pandemic.

“The overnight cruise industry was especially affected by changes in travel preferences and, as a result, AQV has become financially unsustainable. “We are therefore shutting down the business, and all future AQV cruises have been cancelled.” The company has filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection “to conduct its business shutdown” with cruises insured by Argo Surety. Parent company Hornblower Group told Travel Weekly in the US that it will attempt to sell AQV but will wind down the business if that cannot be achieved.

AIRLINE UPDATE

Cathay Pacific - There has been a pick-up in long-haul business travel Cathay Pacific reports. Cathay Pacific and sister carrier HK Express carried more than two million passengers in January, averaging more than 70,000 a day. Last month’s figures show they carried a total of 1.7 million passengers, up by 66.4% compared to January 2023.

Qantas - Qantas reported travel demand remaining strong across all sectors, with leisure continuing to lead and business travel now approaching pre-Covid levels. Intent to spend on travel among frequent flyers over the next six months remains “significantly higher” than most other major spending categories. The projection came despite Qantas Group first half profits dropping 13% to A\$1.25 billion (£649 million) following continued investment in customers and new aircraft. All pre-Covid international routes have now restarted and new ones were announced, including Perth-Paris.

United Airlines - United Airlines plans to resume a daily service from New York/Newark to Tel Aviv next month. The initial flights on March 2 and 4 will stop in Munich “to ensure all service providers are ready to support non-stop service to and from Newark”. No Newark departures to Tel Aviv are planned for March 3 and 5. “Our goal is to resume daily nonstop service to Tel Aviv beginning March 6,” the carrier said.

Emirates - Emirates has entered into a multi-year partnership with Wimbledon. Centre Court and Court One will feature Emirates branding while the airline will promote the partnership on social media and in its marketing strategy. As official partner of the annual tournament, Emirates said it has committed to a multimillion pound ‘Force for Good’ investment, which aims to “support and promote purpose-driven social impact initiatives across the UK”.

TOUR OPERATORS, TRAVEL AGENCIES, OTA UPDATE

Tui - Tui has signed a deal with Ryanair to sell more than one million packages using the no-frills carrier's flights. The operator will make the Ryanair inventory available in agencies and online. "With this cooperation, Tui is significantly expanding the variety and frequency of its flight offerings, particularly in the UK," said Tui. "Travellers will benefit from even more destinations and greater flexibility, with millions of new combination options." They added that Tui customers could take advantage of Ryanair's extensive network of city and short break destinations. The deal is Ryanair's latest package tie-up, following deals with OTAs including loveholidays. Tui's agreement with Ryanair is part of an effort to increase dynamic packaging sales, which comprise 2.5 million of its total 19 million passengers.

First Class Holidays - First Class Holidays has added 27 new tours to its latest New Zealand brochure, including rail itineraries and self-drive options. The 180-page brochure also features 115 new properties including five luxury lodges. The Manchester-based operator has again used a front cover image created by local artist Joe Galindo, who is known for his "quirky" and colourful wildlife paintings. To mark the launch of this brochure, along with the recent release of brochures for Australia and Canada, the operator is running a Golden Ticket competition for agents. Hundreds of prizes are up for grabs, including vouchers and canvas prints of the brochure covers. To enter, agents need to request a physical brochure or download a copy. Daniel Gathercole, managing director, said: "We are thrilled to launch our New Zealand brochure, our third destination brochure this year, with more to come."

P&O Cruises - The boss of P&O Cruises has hinted the line will soon announce a new airline partner after customers complained about one of the current carriers operating Caribbean flights for the line. Last year P&O Cruises agreed a deal with the Maltese air carrier Maleth Aero to fly passengers from Gatwick and Manchester to Barbados and Antigua this winter. However, Maleth Aero does not offer premium seating or inflight entertainment, which led to some customers raising complaints with travel agents. Agents have told TTG that passengers have held off booking P&O Cruises' Caribbean cruises to avoid flying with Maleth Aero. In a video posted on 20 February, Paul Ludlow, president of Carnival UK and P&O Cruises, confirmed that Tui Airways would operate some Caribbean flights going forward – but stopped short of naming a second airline partner.

Ludlow said: "I know that we've had some flight issues this season and for anyone who has been impacted by those, we are so sorry. We are delighted to be partnering again with Tui next season and we are also confirming our airline partner and will update you as soon as possible."

SOCIAL UPDATE

Meta begins testing cross-posting between Facebook and Threads

Selected Facebook users are being encouraged to share their updates to Threads. Those in the test pool now see a new option to turn on Threads cross-posting, immediately sharing the status to both platforms. Meta has confirmed that this new option is still in testing and will apply to text and link posts, not video updates. It is currently not being tested in the EU at this stage. Threads updates can already be easily re-shared onto Instagram and Meta is now looking to bring this cross-posting to Facebook as well.

WhatsApp introduces new text formatting options

The latest version of WhatsApp has introduced more advanced text formatting options in order to improve communications. Numbered lists, block quotes, bold and italics are amongst the new formatting shortcuts available to users. The update allows users to add more context to their message and prevent misinterpretation. The latest update will also allow users to create their own stickers from photos or edit existing stickers with decorating tools. This feature can be found in the sticker tab on WhatsApp and allows for something more fun to be added in chats.

MICE UPDATE

New ESG-focused event sustainability measurement tool launches

Event sustainability consultancy, event:decision, has launched Impact, a new tool to help planners achieve their sustainability goals. The new tool will allow event planners to assess, benchmark and certify events in a wide range of environmental, social and governance factors. Impact allows planners to submit responses relating to environmental, social and governance (ESG) elements of specific events. This data is then assessed and benchmarked, with certification issued to confirm assessment. Planners can then understand how successfully they are addressing each element of ESG against the rest of the industry, on an event-by-event basis. Impact is already in use with multiple clients and events in the UK, Europe, and the US. Sitting alongside event:decision's Track service, Impact now gives planners the opportunity to look at sustainability with a wider lens.

LIGHTER NOTE

A cheeky fox runs off with animal rescuer's phone while he was still recording his response to a RSPCA report. The injured fox was taken to a local wildlife rescue and is still recovering, said the RSPCA. Watch the video [here](#).