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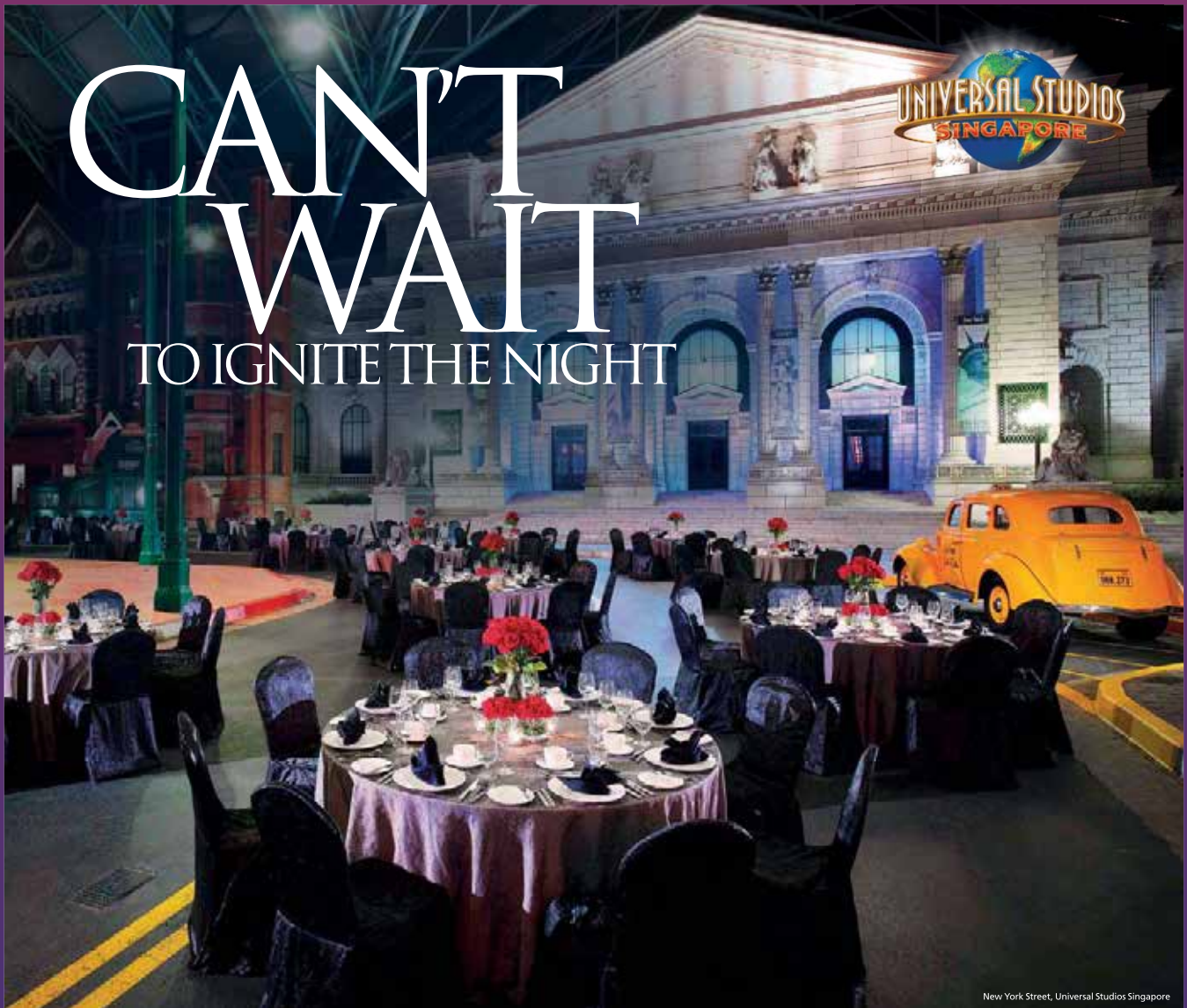
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LIFE OF THE PARTY

As F&B venues, theme parks and leisure attractions explode throughout Asia, is the life of the hotel ballroom theme party over? **TTGmice** has the answer – plus a look at what themes are hot, what are not



ALSO IN THIS ISSUE Singapore embraces nature • Chiang Mai blooms • Macau's old, new world



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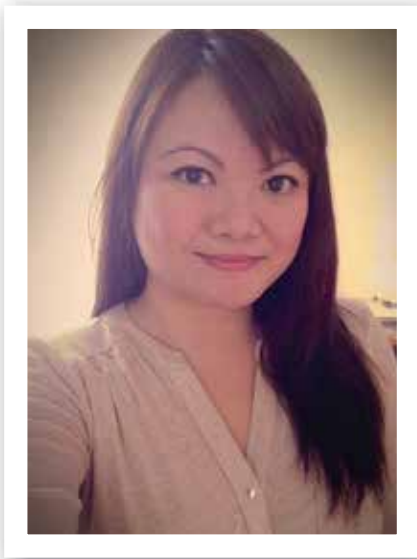
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To our readers

A passionate world of business events



Karen Yue
Group editor

“Business events are hardly bland cookies. There is such a delightful diversity to keep the corporate warriors engaged, from adrenalin-charged teambuilding races and insightful, unique destination tours offered to top achievers, to creative dining that marks the start or end of an important congress.”

Several months ago I was invited to share my understanding of business events with a group of tourism students from local schools.

While they were keen on pursuing a career in the events industry, the general desire was to go down the entertainment track. Concerts and parties were what they wanted to do because business events were too serious, cold and boring.

Oh! Whatever in the world gave them such an impression?

Business events are hardly bland cookies. There is such a delightful diversity to keep the corporate warriors engaged, from adrenalin-charged teambuilding races and insightful, unique destination tours offered to top achievers, to creative dining that marks the start or end of an important congress.

In fact, a single business event has the potential of featuring a mix of fun, creative activities and solemn meetings.

Take for instance the annual AIME in Melbourne Australia. This year, the event kicked off with a stylish breakfast presentation in a ground-level gallery within the National Gallery of Victoria, which was transformed into a dining venue.

The Welcome Reception in the evening was held at South Wharf Promenade, a new lifestyle precinct that fronts the Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre. The massive event, attended by more than 2,000 delegates from around the

world, took on a carnival beat, with food streaming out from various bars and restaurants in that area, and music pulsating through the night from live performances. There was even a fancy display of fireworks over the Yarra River.

Who would that thought that party was part of a very serious trade event?

Besides attending educational conferences and a trade exhibition, AIME participants also had a variety of cocktails, dinner functions and launch parties to fill their evenings.

The pages of *TTGmice* have always been filled with a profusion of ideas that aim to spice up business events, and it is no different this month.

In the cover story of this issue, we look at just one component of business events, the theme party. With offsite venues competing with spaces in hotels, the options available for business event planners to incorporate themes into their meetings, networking parties, product launches, etc, are just more tantalising today. I will be a bit of a tease and spill just one idea here to get your toes tingling: a hotel group in Thailand is pulling out all stops to theme meetings and dining events around the popular *Dancing with the Stars* TV show, and meeting delegates can even learn some sleek moves during breaks.

Business events cold and boring? Hardly, I say! ■

TTGmice
MAY 2013



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TTGmice

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Talk of the Trade

CHINA

Euro demand holds strong

By S Puvaneswary



Shanghai lures the French

European MICE demand for Asia is looking well for several long-haul trade buyers at the recent IT&CM China, despite the ongoing euro-zone economic quandary.

Rois Travels Italy general manager, Claudia Palombo, said she had seen a 15 per cent year-on-year rise in outbound to China so far this year, crediting the China National Tourism Administration's increased promotions and advertising efforts in Italy.

She said: "More incentive groups are looking at China as rates are reasonable. Thailand and Malaysia are our biggest Asian destinations, but China has the greatest growth of all."

Budapest-based Delta Travel Group's director, Gabor Lukacs, said incentives to China has soared 25 per cent year-on-year for his company. Regular airline promotions to China by Aeroflot, Qatar Airways and other Middle Eastern airlines have been fuelling demand for the destination.

This year, Lukacs has six confirmed groups to China – the second largest Asian destination for the company after Thailand – and predicted that 2013 would also prove fruitful in terms of incentives.

Although French companies have been hit the economic crisis and many have cut travel budgets, scaled down on accommodation from five- to four-star hotels, Paris-based Sport Incentive Conventions International's managing director, Mircea Anitas, has reported a 15 per cent year-on-year increase in incentives and leisure travel to Greater China, mainly to Hong Kong, Shanghai and Macau. This year, the company anticipates similar, strong growth in the incentives segment to China.

TALKING NUMBERS

787 The number, in millions, of passengers that travelled by air in Asia last year. According to a study by Amadeus, Asia ranks top internationally in terms of passenger volume.

57 The percentage of business travellers who used their mobile devices to search for travel information in 2012, according to Pelica Hotel Solutions.

8,500 The size, in square metres, of additional event space that will be available at the Sydney Showground by early 2014 through a new purpose-built pavilion.

MYANMAR

Phoenix to manage travel for Myanmar's first major summit

Myanmar will pass a significant milestone in June when it hosts its first major summit, the World Economic Forum on East Asia. But organising the event would not be without its challenges given the country's lack of MICE experience, said the official travel agent for the conference.

Phoenix Voyages has been appointed the official agent responsible for managing flights, accommodation and transportation for the forum – which

runs from June 5-7 and will be attended by 1,200 participants, including 10 heads of state, 12 ministers and 40 senior directors from around the world – and will be working in partnership with PublisLive, a Geneva-based media and events agency.

Jean Michel Romon, managing director of Phoenix Voyages, said the challenges of organising the first event of such magnitude in the country were amplified by the lack of

infrastructure in the capital, which was only relocated from Yangon to Naypyidaw in 2005.

Romon said: "The main challenge is manpower. We'll have more than 50 Burmese staff in Naypyidaw and more than 20 in Yangon, as well as 80 foreign staff who will come over to support the event."

"We've had to book more than 24 hotels and will have to send around 80 coaches and cars from Yangon and Mandalay (to transport delegates

around the city)... In Naypyidaw there are no restaurants so we must arrange everything at the convention centre and in the hotels. Besides the main forum there are more than 20 special events each night."

To date Phoenix Voyages has scheduled 13 charter flights from Bangkok and Yangon to Naypyidaw, and is organising a gala dinner for all participants and more than 40 side dinners during the first two evenings. – **Greg Lowe**

Government's austerity drive hurts Chinese MICE business

By Xinyi-Liang Pholsena



Liu: focus on global events softens pain

THE intense government crackdown against extravagant functions, lengthy meetings and unnec-

essary overseas travel in the public sector that began late last year has dampened MICE business, say the trade.

Dao Shuming, chairman of Shanghai Municipal Tourism Administration, said: "Austerity measures have brought new challenges and issues...Hence, there's a need for the industry to re-evaluate their business models in order to move forward."

Julia Zhu, global sales manager, Jin Jiang International Hotel Management Company, said the new rules had resulted in cancellations of several government events during the January-February peak period.

While Liu Ping, CEO of Beijing-based China Star, observed that many trade players were now strategising on how to deal with the measures, she pointed out that it was the hotels and suppliers on the government's procurement list that had been especially affected.

Michael Hong, deputy general manager, Shanghai Airlines Event Management, told *TTGmice* his company was "not so much affected" as it draws more corporate than

government business.

"In the near future, we plan to woo corporate business more aggressively, as well as pursue new opportunities in association meetings," Hong said.

Jean Qian, director of sales & marketing, Radisson Blu Plaza Xing Guo Hotel Shanghai, said her hotel's balanced mix of international and national-level meetings had helped to minimise any negative impact from the government's austerity drive.

On a positive note, Liu remarked: "As an industry player, I am certainly concerned about the economic fallout of this policy. However, I support the government's anti-corruption drive."

IN BRIEF

Sarawak mulls China rep

A marketing representative in China for the Sarawak Convention Bureau (SCB) and the Sarawak Tourism Board may be established towards the end of 2013 as part of the Malaysian state's move to focus on developing MICE business out of the massive market. According to SCB's managing director, Mike Cannon, the role of the marketing representative will be to educate Chinese outbound travel consultants, association buyers and incentive players on what Sarawak can offer for business events.

Tokyu Group holds firm

Tokyu Group, which manages 54 hotels in Japan under Tokyu Hotels, is maintaining its sales and marketing drive in China through its office in Shanghai, despite the plunge in travel between the two countries as a result of an ongoing diplomatic spat. It exhibited at IT&CM China last month to reach out to Chinese MICE buyers.

Shanghai to add luxe hotel

The 508-room Jing An Shangri-La will open in Shanghai's west this June. A cornerstone of the new Jing An Kerry Centre, a 450,000m² complex with retail, office and residential space in Puxi, the hotel boasts an Event Centre with 4,465m² of function space, several unique dining destinations and a Horizon Club Lounge on the 55th floor, among other facilities.

Ayana upgrades hardware

Ayana Resort and Spa in Bali, Indonesia has revamped its event facilities in response to greater demand for world-class venues and VIP events. The ballroom has been extended by 45 per cent to 846m², allowing it to host receptions for 900 people now instead of 500 previously. Six new breakout rooms, three meeting rooms, a 120m² VIP room with catering facilities and a 22-seat boardroom have also been added.

Get under Jurlique's skin

Australian skincare brand Jurlique has launched behind-the-scenes tours of its farm on the outskirts of Adelaide, which are perfect for incentive groups.

MACAU

Macau hoteliers brace for a challenging year

A HOTEL glut, an austerity drive led by the Chinese government and rising regional competition has impinged on Macau's room rates and inbound MICE traffic.

Penny Yiu, assistant director of sales, The Westin Resort Macau, said: "We had strong business from China in 2012, but since the government's budget cut, we have seen a drop of some 20 per cent in MICE enquiries. Furthermore, regional competition is intensifying, as Chinese MICE groups with bigger budgets now prefer other cities in

South-east Asia."

Fanny Ho, general manager, APlus PR & Advertising, which handles business and consumer shows, said the number of Chinese MICE groups with a few hundred to 1,000 pax had dwindled, and she had no groups so far this year.

Adding to the strain is the January opening of the 2,067-room Earth Tower at Sands Cotai Central.

Yiu said: "That has created a price war in Macau. Many hotels have seen room rates drop from four to three digits."

Best Western Hotel Taipa Macau has also seen rates going south. Director of sales,

Fang Lei, however, remains positive. She said: "Rates were too high previously and that scared many visitors away. The current or lower rates will be more sustainable in the long run."

But the strong competition among hotels is benefiting buyers. Johnny Choi, director of sales, Estoril Tours Travel Agency, said he now enjoys cheaper five-star rooms and more perks with hotel packages.

Still, Macanese hoteliers are not unduly worried, as the overall Chinese outbound segment is still booming. — Xinyi Liang-Pholsena

CHINA

Secondary cities gain from good air links

By S Puvaneswary

INTERNATIONAL incentive buyers are seeing a rising demand for programmes that twin key Chinese cities with second-tier ones as a result of affordable airfares and good air links.

Shanghai China International Travel Service deputy director, sales & marketing department inbound center, Andy Ou, said: "Asian companies tend to be more price sensitive, thus many are willing to combine key cities with secondary destinations and do not mind travelling on low-cost carriers (LCCs) to save on the air component."

"Quality of the land programme is more important



Ashwani: interest up for second-tier cities

to these clients, many of whom are small and medium-sized firms that are rewarding top staff."

Colombo-based Jetwing Events general manager, Nalin Ariyaratne, said he recorded a year-on-year increase of 10 per cent for dual destinations for meetings and incentive groups from Sri Lanka. The programme usually kicks off in Shanghai or Beijing as SriLankan Airlines flies direct to both cities, and then continues onward to secondary cities such as Xi'an, Kunming and

Hangzhou on domestic LCCs.

Even companies organising top-level incentives are embracing local LCCs for dual-city programmes, according to Ariyaratne, who added that second-tier cities are also very attractive due to a growing selection of new hotels that lure clients with "good deals and offers".

Shanghai CYTS Tours Corporation MICE Center assistant, Shiny Shi, observed a five per cent year-on-year growth in incentive groups from Singapore and South Korea that favoured dual-city programmes featuring Xiamen, Xi'an and Sanya.

Shi said LCCs such as Spring Airlines would attract companies on a budget but

most clients still preferred to fly full-fledged airlines for greater comfort.

"Clients can take advantage of attractive discounts that most airlines dish out to groups that make bookings at least 30 days in advance," she said.

Also witnessing stronger interest in secondary cities is Amritsar-based Dove Travels managing partner, Ashwani Gupta.

While China's first-tier cities were still most favoured by his clients due to direct air access, he noted that "low-fares and good connections from gateway cities" had pushed incentive bookings to Sanya and Chengdu up by 20-30 per cent year-on-year.

CHINA

Reforms to spark competition among associations in China

The recent liberalisation of the registration processes for Chinese associations by the government is likely to transform the outlook for the industry when a key measure kicks in year-end.

The reformation of registration is the first of various measures to be rolled out progressively in the coming years.

Liu Youqian, CEO of Federation of China Trade

Associations & Chambers of Commerce, explained: "Associations can now register without pre-approval and each industry will be able to register more than one trade association."

Currently, associations must first be "ordained" by a government agency to be established in China, said Florence Chua, managing director of MCI China.

Chua predicted: "The process for registration will become much smoother and each industry will benefit with more associations under them."

There were over 460,000 associations in China across all industries as of end-2012, according to Liu, who expects the number to rise with the relaxation of association registration ruling.

He said: "We can look forward to more associations activities, especially in the meetings aspect. The livelihood of a person is dependent on his health and exercise. Likewise for an association, its life depends on holding meetings."

He added that each association usually holds at least five

to six meetings every year.

Liu also pointed out: "With more associations coming in, each of them will have to (raise their standards) and perform better than the rest."

Chua agrees, saying: "Competition would boost the quality of all associations and weed out those that may not be truly relevant."

More quality products and knowledge would be rolled out as associations try to generate revenue and one-up each other.

However, the road ahead would by no means be a smooth one. Liu said: "We need high-calibre (MICE) talent and while there may be some in Beijing and Shanghai, there aren't too many in other Chinese cities." – Lee Pei Qi



Liu Youqian
CEO

Federation of China Trade Associations & Chambers of Commerce

"With more associations coming in, each of them will have to (raise their standards) and perform better than the rest."

THE PHILIPPINES

Makati debuts entertainment district

By Marianne Carandang

Circuit, Ayala Land's latest mixed-use development project in Makati, is being marketed as the destination's new entertainment district.

Unveiled last January, facilities at the PHP20 billion (US\$484.4 million) development will open progressively. The Globe Circuit Entertainment Grounds opens this month, and two major events have been planned.

Wanderland Musicfest on May 18 is expected to draw 5,000 people, while Circuit Fest on May 25 targets an attendance of 15,000.

A sports park will open in October, and it will be followed by a 1,500-seat Circuit Theatre and spaces for smaller events.

Retail and alfresco dining spaces, along with a hotel and residential apartments are now in construction. Ayala Land

president Antonino Aquino projects a 90 per cent completion of the development by 2016.

Circuit is also being marketed as a business events destination. Its first clients are likely to be from within the Ayala group of companies, tenants in Makati City's business district and other multinational firms, said Mel Ignacio, assistant vice president and project development manager.

MICE WINS

Yangon to host water show

UBM Asia will debut the Asian Water Series – Myanmar Water 2013 in Yangon later this year. Some 5,000 trade visitors are expected to turn up for the event, which will be held at Tatmadaw Exhibition Hall from October 24 to 26.



Calendar

May 6-9

Arabian Travel Mart
Dubai, UAE

May 21-23

IMEX Frankfurt
Frankfurt, Germany

GLOBAL

CWT offers solution to tackle cost of travel stress

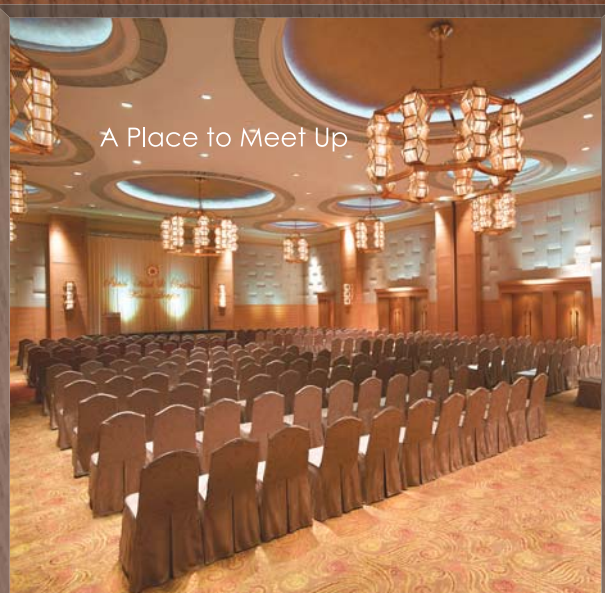
Recent research by CWT has found that traveller-focused policies, taking into account the impact of trip-related stress, can help companies improve traveller well-being and raise productivity levels by up to 32 per cent.

The global stress survey, which drew participation from 6,000 business travellers from nine companies across the world, discovered three main categories of stress: lost time, surprises (an unforeseen event such as lost or delayed baggage) and routine breakers (inability to maintain daily habits).

Following on from this study, CWT has developed an algorithm-based tool, called the CWT Travel Stress Index (TSI), which measures the financial impact of lost productivity incurred through trip-related stress.

Using the TSI, CWT Solutions Group can now assess a company's trip-related stress levels, benchmark it against industry norms and provide recommendations to help clients tackle the hidden costs of business travel while addressing their duty of care responsibilities. For example, the possible lost time for a company taking an average of 5,000 trips per year represents US\$3.3 million; of this, US\$1.1 million can be saved through improved traveller productivity.

Vincent Lebonetel, head of CWT Solutions Group, Europe, Middle East and Africa, said: "By identifying which stressors are causing the most pain for a particular segment of travellers, we can recommend specific solutions to enhance the traveller experience and improve productivity. It could be advising on connectivity solutions for each stage of a trip or recommending a specific carrier based on on-time or lost-luggage performances."



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COVER STORY



Life of the party

Who does not love a good theme party? But throwing one is not a piece of cake anymore for hotels. **Raini Hamdi** plays party pooper and asks, is the life of the ballroom theme party over?

Interviews by Raini Hamdi, Karen Yue, Xinyi Liang-Pholsena, S Puvaneswary and Rosa Ocampo

An explosion of F&B concepts in Asian cities from Singapore to Shanghai and resorts from Bali to Penang is giving planners more choices on where to take groups for a theme dinner.

The life of the ballroom theme party may be dimming – for who wants to be cooped up within four walls and a fake setting, when there are so many venues and leisure attractions outside hotels that are natural themes in themselves and bring guests closer to the destination?

A check with hotels however shows the party is not over yet for them, for there are good reasons still why the hotel venue is a practical choice for groups (see page 12, Hotels vs offsite venues). But it is not exactly rock-and-roll for hotels to secure and pull together memorable theme parties.

Old formulas do not work anymore when clients are changing faster than hotels can change props, so hotels have to think up new theme party ideas or rewire tried-and-tested ones. Hotels also have had to literally rewire ceilings for fibre-optic lighting which can create moods that impress today's younger, IT-savvy clients; tear down four walls to make way for concept meeting spaces (such as Grand Hyatt Erawan Bangkok's The Campus), or build new spaces (such as Ayana Resort & Spa, Bali, already with seven restaurants and a multitude of outdoor venues, yet, to cater for bigger productions and numbers of participant, opened a 20,000m² designer frangipani garden which has its own entrance).

If they do not have the grounds to build new spaces, hotels find themselves scouring for unique venues outside their property to secure a booking. Resorts World Genting, for example, uses the nearby Chin Swee Caves Temple and the Awana Longhouse, situated amid a million-year-old rainforest.

As well, the rise of third-party event organisers reduces the scope of and, consequently, revenue from theme parties for hotels. Clients increasingly prefer to use a third-party event organiser to handle the theme, decor, entertainment, light-and-sound, etc, according to Christine Divinagracia, assistant director of events, Dusit Thani Manila.

"Sometimes, we get leads from local and overseas organisers to bring events to the hotel. Some organisers come up with their own packages to sell to their clients," she said. "We work well with them in ensuring the event is successful."

Pullman Kuching's general manager,

Eric Tan, said most companies holding theme parties at the hotel engage their own event organiser but this makes it easier for the hotel, as it deals only with the organiser.

Who buys theme parties?

Overall, the theme parties market, far from tapering off, is becoming more alive than ever. Corporates may have smaller budgets, or even lesser time for them in an effort to show some restraint post-GFC, but "social" theme parties are on the rise.

It seems everybody wants to theme everything. Whereas the traditional theme



Traditional themes such as Filipiniana (above organised by Blue Horizons Travel & Tours); right, Grand Hyatt Erawan pulls out all stops to ensure the ballroom gala lives on



party as the industry knows it originates from the Western incentive, now even the birthday party for the husband or wife, weddings, prom balls, corporate Christmas parties and small meetings want to be themed, several hoteliers interviewed said.

Also contributing to the good health of the market is a blurring of theme parties and teambuilding.

Janine Watton, director of sales and marketing for Four Points Sukhumvit 15, Bangkok, said TV reality shows contribute to the popularity of "interactive" theme parties.

"Most parties now have games and interactive elements such as live cooking stations, so guests can see chefs in action," Watton said. In response, one of the hotel's first two theme party ideas, launched recently, is an ExecutiveChef dinner, inspired by the reality show *MasterChef*. Guests compete in a cooking challenge, creating their own dish to

impress judges, before sitting back to relax and enjoy the rest of the evening with free-flow of beer, wine and soft drinks.

Jenifer Dwyer-Slee, director of sales-business events, Accor, also noted that "clients today like to simulate TV (reality shows), so we are getting plenty of requests to do theme parties and team activities themed around *My Kitchen Rules* and *MasterChef*."

A rise in new Asian MICE markets such as China and India produces yet another stream of parties, with hotels tweaking the F&B selection and themes to cater to their needs.

Said Philippe Le Bourhis, general manager of Pullman Jakarta: "The growth of Indian and Chinese groups is impressive, even though the budgets can vary significantly based on the type of clients."

"New paradigms in food requirements are explored as some groups have their own cooks or need separate kitchens and culturally, Indian weddings require many specific details that surprise hotel teams. New language skills are also needed (when dealing with markets such as China), although most (of its) upscale clients would speak English."

Andre A Gomez, general manager, Hilton Phuket Arcadia Resort & Spa, agrees. "Chinese and Indian incentive groups have different budgets, depending on the group. We need to be aware of their cultural requirements and our culinary teams must develop greater skills in catering to their cuisines."

"With emerging markets such as India, where most of the disposable income is with the younger age group, events require style but also need to be relaxed and

COVER STORY



Offsite venues gain traction; dinner in Suan Pakkad organised by Asian Trails Thailand



Phya Thai Palace, another offsite venue

innovative in food, theming and service.”

Paul Yiu, director of sales & marketing of The Westin Denarau Island Resort & Spa, Fiji, said theme parties that are “old news” to the more mature markets are new to these customers.

“Because of the evolving customer base, we are not putting to bed any of our events/themes at this time. Clients from further abroad will find the Fijian Culture dinner as entertaining as our (more mature) Australian clients did the first time they experienced it. The change is in how we present the ideas to the markets based on our understanding of what works for their needs. We just need to keep the older ideas refreshed, not axed.”

Popular venues

But the advent of the smart and sophisticated traveller is reshaping how theme parties are booked, where they are held and how they are organised.

And yes, the ballroom theme party has seen a drop due to more experienced travellers, with offsite venues or more unique spaces on property grounds being preferred today, hoteliers admitted.

Rex Loh, director of sales & marketing, Ritz-Carlton Hotel Millenia Singapore, said: “We are seeing an increase in requests for offsite catering. This can be attributed to (the emergence of) more event venues such as Gardens by the Bay.

“But theme parties still tend to be popular with the society set for gala dinners, charities and even weddings, or for luxury

product launches. Although the number of theme parties (in hotels) have decreased, offsite catering has grown even more and this trend looks set to continue.”

Grand Hyatt Erawan Bangkok said its clients prefer to have parties at historical venues such as the 400-year-old Wat Chaiwatthanaram, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, by the Chao Phraya River in Ayutthaya, or in Suan Pakkad Palace, Phya Thai Palace and the National Museum. The hotel provides offsite services to these events. Its own event venues such as The Residence and The Campus are also preferred as they are unique themes in themselves.

DMCs such as Dave Chang, managing director of Asia MICE Planner in Phuket, said: “We have definitely seen more demand for offsite theme parties too. For corporate groups staying at a resort for meetings that last several days, an offsite party is a good way to break the monotony.”

Four Points’ Watton observed: “People definitely know what they want more now than ever. In the past, people would look to hotels and venues for ideas, now they come with examples of what they would like to do and a budget. Unique venues which offer flexibility are the most popular – people are moving away from ballrooms and traditional spaces as they want something different, something to wow their guests.”

One reason why MICE organisers and delegates have become more sophisticated

is because many of them have travelled extensively; thus, their expectations are higher, noted Andrew Leong, Resorts World Genting sales & marketing manager.

“Theme parties, as a result, have evolved to become more in-depth. The changes started taking place three to four years ago. It is no longer just about the décor or entertainment, but the total experience. Participants want to be more involved with activities, rather than just watch a show, then say goodbye. Off-the-rack theme parties don’t sell anymore,” said Leong.

Added Wendy Teo, director of sales-MICE, Fairmont Singapore and Swissotel The Stamford: “Participants are definitely more well-travelled and IT-savvy these days. By being well-travelled and IT-savvy, they get inspiration or ideas from places they have travelled to. They also have easy access to web tools for research and comparison. Their levels of expectations are naturally higher as a result.”

Teo said the accessibility and availability of different types of venues – i.e., beachside resorts, luxury hotels, etc – pose increased competition to city hotels which have limited land space.

“Hence, we need to be creative and multi-faceted in space utilisation to maximise the area we have. We also try to offer new and interesting packages to our guests who are also attending trainings/seminars at Raffles City Convention Centre. An example would be including Singapore Grand Prix race tickets as part

of the stay/meeting package during the race period.”

Bigger needs, not budget

The dilemma however is, while clients want more sophisticated theme parties, budgets are not growing in tandem with higher expectations. Moving a theme party outdoors to a unique venue means higher costs as it involves moving furniture, IT equipment, props and settings, Resorts World's Leong pointed out.

Organisers may want more than a single singer performance, but that well-choreographed entertainment for the whole evening, again, costs more.

Yet, post-GFC, the “no-expense spared” phrase is now “rarely heard”, said Amanda Thompson, executive assistant manager-sales & marketing, The Langham Melbourne.

“Event organisers are more careful with company funds and are no longer the final decision-makers when securing a

venue. They often need to seek approval from senior management and provide a strong case why a five-star hotel is the right fit for their event. They want value for money, good service and for the event to reflect the quality of their own business, but at the same time they do not want to be seen as spending unnecessarily.

“Clients are looking for more value when booking a gala dinner/themed event. Some of the value adds might include alternate serve menus, upgrade in beverage package or additional complimentary half-an-hour of beverage service, table centrepieces, gift vouchers for a door prize and partnering with suppliers to cost effectively provide elements of their event,” said Thompson.

Westin Denarau's Yui too saw “a huge focus from certain corporate markets to avoid conspicuous spending in case of public backlash”.

Yui said: “Budgets may be tighter, but clients still expect a wow factor. This means hotels have to get creative with

offerings that keep costs down but give more perceived value to the customer. Partnerships with our external suppliers are a good way to assist the customer with this. Selling the package rather than just the hotel and banquet is more the strategy now since the overall budget is the main concern for the client; the costs for the programme are not in a silo and therefore hotel sales needs to work harder to win the business.”

Farizal Jaafar, group director of marketing, Sunway Hotels & Resorts, Kuala Lumpur, said she noticed group sizes have become smaller over the last two to three years. “A typical size now is 100 to 300 people whereas the average theme party size was between 500 and 700 delegates before.

“It could be that companies have increased their qualifying criteria, thus fewer delegates qualify, or costs have escalated so companies reduce their numbers, or willing to spend more but with fewer people,” Farizal said.



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COVER STORY

But Ayana Bali's general manager, Edward Linsley, said the hotel's guests are not "so cost-conscious as they are value-conscious".

"We don't find that our clients have lower budgets or are trying to cut costs, in fact the opposite. Our group budgets rise every year as a result of bigger groups in terms of both production and number of participants. They do not want to cut costs so much as they want to get more value for their money, in terms of a memorable, world-class experience that will leave a lasting impression on participants. They want unique experiences and activities, such as a group spa session for 40-50 people in the Aquatonic Seawater Therapy Pool or a perfume-making class where everyone creates their own signature fragrance to take home," said Linsley.



"Although the number of theme parties (in hotels) have decreased, off-site catering has grown even more and this trend is sent to continue."

Rex Loh

Director of sales & marketing
Ritz-Carlton Hotel Millenia Singapore

Agreeing, Sunway's Farizal said: "Companies look for quality in terms of flawless execution and they do not mind paying for it."

Popular themes

As to what themes are selling well, Linsley said anything that is "different" sells. The hotel has even hosted a theme based on the *Survivor* TV reality show and dared participants to eat cockroaches and wash them down with *Bintang* beer.

"Pop culture inspires many events, with people wanting to remake a Hollywood movie or reality show into their own unique event. In the past, we have hosted themed events based on the movies *The Avengers* and *Pirates of the Caribbean*. Due to elaborate productions, a lot of the budget goes into decoration. *Pirates*, for example, involves creating a life-sized pirate ship as the backdrop for the gala dinner, and this requires close management to ensure such events do not exceed

the budget. We work closely with event organisers to ensure this.

"Theme party ideas that always work for incentive groups in general are Balinese cultural nights, such as our Langit Theater experience which consists of a Balinese buffet dinner and Kecak dance performance."

Resorts World's Leong agreed with views that local themes, far from being outdated, still sell to foreign visitors. "Certain theme party ideas, like the kampung (village) night or the rainforest theme party, may be old ideas for locals, but they still appeal to foreign markets. Local groups usually choose movie themes such as *Men in Black* and colour themes, like all black or all white.

"However, a trend we are seeing is organisers wanting to custom-make their theme parties. Most of the time the organiser will sit down with us and tell us the delegates' likes and dislikes, the objectives they wish to achieve, and we will tailor-make a theme party to their liking."

Westin Denarau's Yui also observed that guests want an experience and not just a pretty venue. So concepts that incorporate the local culture with a level of participation by the customers have become increasingly popular.

"As budgets decrease, we have to find other innovative ways to sell to the customer, such as leveraging on the stunning sunsets that can be seen from our property as well as our lush garden settings that can be used to create an 'otherworld' ambience for their events," he said.

"Fiji is fortunate enough to have beautiful landscapes that can be monopolised for events if the client has little in the way of budget to spend on lighting and décor."

Said Hilton Phuket's Gomez: "The common requests previously were all about table centrepieces. We have now added equipment in our newly-refurbished ballroom such as state-of-the-art audio-visual system and a ceiling fully-fitted with fibre-optic lighting to provide a venue that can create moods and feeling to suit any occasion and to better theme our events instead of the standard enhancements.

"Easy travel today sees people across all cultures and different time zones attend any given event. As a result, any single event needs to be tailored to suit as many people as possible with considerations of food, culture and religion."

Behind the scenes, the effort to put up a great theme party has become greater than ever.

But, as they say: the show must go on.

Hotels vs offsite venues

A theme party in a hotel instead of an offsite venue removes logistical headaches, offers better cost-control and often, better security and management, but the disadvantages include limited possibilities and less creativity, according to planners interviewed.

Bastiaan Brüning, director, dmASIA, said: "While it is a lot easier to organise a party at or in cooperation with a hotel, especially with logistics, often, hotel management and staff have limited imagination and think within their hotel policy's boundaries only.

"I rather organise parties with my own event, catering and entertainment team at a fully-privatised location, e.g. private island, part of the forest, hill tribe village, luxurious villa, rooftop of a skyscraper, super yacht, etc. This gives me the full opportunity to be creative."

Shan David, president, Corporate International Travel & Tours, Manila, said: "Outside venues offer bigger space and allow for more creative ideas – fireworks, lighting up the lanterns and different outdoor themes. But they can be more expensive due to logistics – preparing the stage, light and sound system, and hiring a caterer. Security is also a concern.

"We have difficulties finding hotel venues in Manila, except the Sofitel, which has huge open grounds and garden areas. Outside venues we have tried included the restaurants Ilustrado in historical Intramuros, Casa Roces in front of the Malacanang presidential palace and Antonio's Garden in Tagaytay, an hour's drive from Manila."

Carla Mariano, manager-groups, MICE and special projects, Blue Horizons Travel and Tours, Philippines, considers a hotel venue as a one-stop shop. "You only have to talk to one person – the hotel's event manager. All requirements can be sourced through him. Professional hotel staff are also apt in handling various types of people amiably. But hotels can be more pricey if not properly negotiated with," Mariano said.

And hotels are the better option when alcohol levels shoot up, according to Dave Chang, managing director of Phuket-based Asia MICE Planner. "Timing and safety are the two main concerns when clients decide between hotels and offsite venues. At a hotel party, getting a drunk guest back to his/her room is less of a hassle, and we do think of this when organising parties elsewhere.

"However, parties at hotels, whether in the ballroom or garden, are often required to end by a certain time. Parties at offsite venues can go on much longer, sometimes beyond midnight."

Hot and not



 **Hot**
 **Not hot**

Interactive theme parties tailored after reality TV shows

The Westin Denarau Island Resort and Spa, Fiji, for example, tailors a theme after the *Iron Chef* series, where competitors pitch their cooking skills against each other. The competition portion of the event does not take too much time and is a way to get the group interacting. Once completed, the group enjoys a gourmet lunch or dinner together.

"This event addresses clients' requirements in terms of tighter budgets, food focus and interaction. It is executed solely by the hotel associates and our resources on property. This keeps costs low," said general manager Paul Yui.

Edward Linsley, general manager of Ayana Resort & Spa, Bali, said to find out what's a hot theme party, just ask, what's on at the movies? "Perhaps we (the hotel) will see something along the lines of *Star Wars*, or maybe even *Ted*," he said.

Traditional themes, with a surprising or new twist

Said Mark Shrives, director of sales and marketing, Hansar Bangkok: "We organised a nostalgic Thai style party for a local publishing house, where guests come dressed up in bright, colourful costumes to enjoy a street-like atmosphere with carts offering *somtum* and accompanied by Isan singing. It was tacky but fun."

Christine Divinagracia, assistant director events of Dusit Thani Manila, also noted that Filipiniana is still in demand, including the Barrio Fiesta theme, "but clients appreciate a modern twist, stylish details and personal touch".

She said: "Last year, we hired style consultant Henry Pascual to help us conceptualise a Filipiniana theme but with modern elements; so not just using native baskets and local cloths for decoration, but combining them with other elements like glass, metal and candelabra.

"It also addresses the challenge of really transforming a function room or the ballroom into a glamorous venue to bring out that wow factor that everybody



Left, local themes still in fashion. Above, group spa party at Ayana Resort and Spa, Bali

is looking for."

Shangri-La's Mactan Resort &

Spa, Cebu, Philippines is

revamping its local theme party and coffee breaks to make them more contemporary and experiential, said Agnes Pacis, director of sales & marketing. "We plan to make the decorations more colourful and source more options for entertainment, not just do the regular cultural show. Local souvenirs are also to be sourced out."

Nostalgia theme parties

A theme that is no longer in trend today may become popular a couple of years from now. Wendy Teo, director of sales-MICE of Fairmont Singapore and Swissotel The Stamford, gave the example of Shanghai Tang, which she noted is becoming popular again.

"This theme has timeless appeal and unique quality, where classy old world charm of the East is perfectly intertwined with Western influence. Guests of such parties, local or international, can easily relate to the theme and have convenient access to the era's fashion and hairstyles, enabling them to soak in the essence of the event easily.

"The venue as well may be transformed completely with exotic backdrops of grand old Shanghai complemented with cheongsam-clad service staff, antique furnishings and enhanced by classical music of an era

gone by," she said.

Agreeing, The Langham Melbourne's executive assistant manager-sales & marketing, Amanda Thompson, said: "With nostalgia parties you will always see a revival of the good ones, perhaps presented in a different way."

Wine and celebrity chef parties

described as "so over and boring" by Hansar's Shrives. "Such events only repeat what has been done. Hence, we are looking at collaboration and partnerships with external suppliers to bring interesting concepts to Hansar Bangkok. For example, a focus on more international cuisine by importing beers from the US and barbeque parties on the Rooftop Sky Terrace.

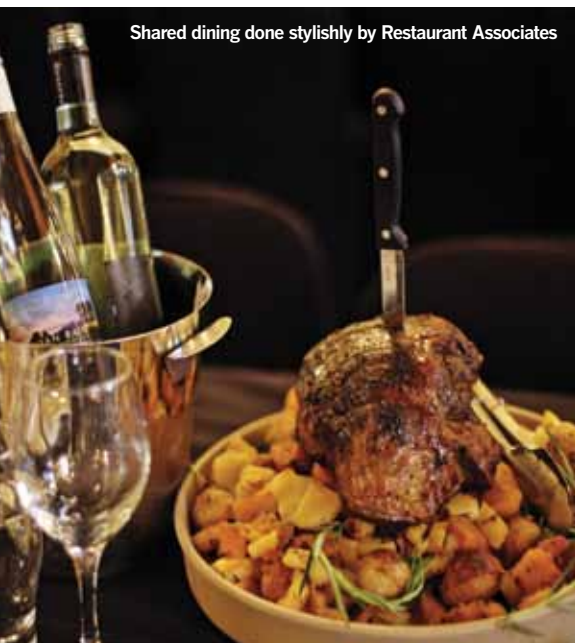
Pirates and Hawaiian.

Not popular anymore and have been done a lot of times in different locations, said a few sources.

Black & white and formal bow tie theme parties.

"Organisers want parties to be filled with fun, not the traditional dinner and dance where guests of multinational companies put on their formal suit like they do every day. With the current theme parties, all attendees have the opportunity to create their own costumes, thereby creating more excitement," said Eric Tan, general manager, Pullman Kuching.

COVER STORY



Shared dining done stylishly by Restaurant Associates



Amari ups the sizzle with *Dancing with the Stars* theme parties and conferences

What's new?

Digging in together

Restaurant Associates, exclusive caterers to some of Australia's most iconic venues including The Taronga Centre, The Australian Museum, Sydney Town Hall, Customs House and the Theatre Royal in Sydney and Queensland Museum in Brisbane, has seen a move towards shared dining during corporate events.

Adam Smogurzewski, manager-catering and events of Restaurant Associates, told *TTGmice*: "Over the last six to 12 months, we have noticed clients moving away from fine-dining and banquets, and going towards what we call shared options. That means, many dishes are presented on the table and guests will sit together and pick off these plates.

"Shared options bring people closer together and that is what many event organisers seek to achieve through their dinner parties. It also allows a larger variety of dishes to be offered to guests without actually costing substantially more, so that's value for money for the client."

Although dishes are shared, Smogurzewski insisted that the essence of high-end dining would not be lost.

"Shared dishes are still presented beautifully and top quality ingredients are used. For instance, a full wagyu roast."

Smogurzewski added that dining events

could feature a mix of shared options and live cooking stations.

He has also observed stronger interest in dishes that are made with local produce.

"We grow a lot of herbs at the back of our production kitchens, and we source produce from New South Wales. We also serve bio-dynamic wines. Most of such demand had come only from Australian clients, though. Where possible, we will use organic, local or sustainable products in all of our catering," he said.

– Karen Yue

Dancetastic!

As exclusive sponsor of the TV show, *Dancing with the Stars* Thailand, Amari properties in Bangkok and Pattaya are now staging "dancetastic" theme events.

Feathers and sequins are the theme from the moment guests arrive. They are greeted by professional salsa dancers and presented with branded room keys. Planners can opt for a theme conference and/or a gala dinner.

The conference has plenty of 'dancing' touch points including mirror ball pens, a judge's notepad and a judging panel desk for meeting presenters. All breaks and meals will follow the theme of a different style of dance with appropriate music and

performances to accompany.

Team bonding and a sense of achievement are guaranteed as conference participants can learn to dance during breakouts, or before the conference proper.

During the gala evening, teams can then showcase their new-found skills to their colleagues – and of course face the critique of the judging panel.

The dinner will include dance performances from professionals and the opportunity to bring the English-speaking Thai TV show hosts to act as emcees for the event. The dinner can be held in a variety of locations, including the TV studio where the TV show was filmed or the hotel's ballroom.

There are options of four day and three night packages, for 100 to 600pax. Conferences can be extended by additional days or shortened to a minimum of two nights.

David Barrett, executive director of events for Amari Watergate Bangkok and Amari Orchid Pattaya said: "Many corporate meeting planners and DMCs are asking for new and creative theme dinners.

"The launch of our *Dancing with the Stars* theme dinner is timely, meets a clear demand in the market and is guaranteed to engage delegates while injecting plenty of glitz, glamour and rhythm into a conference."



Sofitel Macau at Ponte 16, one of the first hotels to rise in Macau's Inner Harbour, is credited for bringing sparkle into the historical district

An old, new world

If it is charms of a yesteryear that you desire for your business events, then you will discover plenty in Macau Peninsula, writes **Prudence Lui**

The myriad new developments that have emerged in Cotai in recent times may have stolen the media limelight from Macau Peninsula, the oldest and most populous part of Macau, but business event planners have not forsaken this part of the Chinese destination.

Steeped in history, Macau Peninsula is home to a UNESCO World Heritage Centre, colonial attractions and relics. At the same time, this heritage appeal is balanced with a convenient cluster of modern

hotels, casinos, attractions that double up as unique venues for private events such as the Macau Tower Convention & Entertainment Centre.

Shun Tak Hospitality Division CEO, Rutger Verschuren, said: "The Macau Tower has long been the preferred choice for banquets and meetings, particularly for clients seeking small- to medium-size venues, although we can also cater to larger functions with around 1,000 guests.

"Over the years, the Macau Tower has developed a unique position in the MICE

market, renowned for its customer service and support, as well as neutrality due to its independence from a gaming environment and its central location in Macau."

Another popular venue option on the checklist of business event planners is Sofitel Macau at Ponte 16, a luxurious hotel overlooking the Inner Harbour and a short distance from Macau's UNESCO World Heritage Centre. Its opening in 2008 as part of the Macau Ponte 16 complex was soon followed by other premium hotels in the area including Wynn Macau,

Mandarin Oriental Macau and MGM Macau – all of which are equipped with meeting and banquet facilities.

Business event planners also have the option of taking their delegates to non-hotel venues such as the SKY21 Bar & Restaurant, which sits on the 21st floor of AIA Tower on Avenida Comercial de Macau. With its location up in the sky, the stylish establishment enchants with panoramic views of Macau.

SKY21 Bar & Restaurant caters to a varied clientele such as business meetings, networking cocktails, exclusive gatherings and large-scale parties that take up the entire venue.

Its marketing manager, Vonny Tjhin, said: “There are not many venues like ours and being in the heart of Macau gives us an advantage.”

DOC DMC managing director, Bruno Simões, said: “The greatest selling point of Macau Peninsula is its location. Visitors can walk around old Macau, which makes

the experience more interesting.”

The historical allure may be Macau Peninsula’s unique selling point, but hotels in this district recognise that competition from the shiny, new hotels elsewhere in Macau cannot be ignored. Many are resorting to renovations and facility expansion to keep up in the race for MICE business.

The 307-room Grand Emperor Hotel completed a full revamp of its guestrooms early this year, while Metropole Macau repositioned itself as a boutique property in February and upgraded its collection of 112 guestrooms.

Sofitel Macau At Ponte 16, general manager, Michel Molliet, said the property would embark on a development next door, which would comprise additional entertainment and retail facilities. Once completed in 2014, the integrated resort will feature approximately 34,374m² of entertainment, dining, retail and car park facilities.

Molliet said it was “normal to see business being diluted” now that there are more tourism and accommodation options in Cotai.

“We just need to be more creative and strategic when it comes to maintaining and increasing our market share, and we can do that by reinforcing our French DNA and the hotel’s unique location in the historical part of Macau,” added Molliet.

Hotel Royal’s deputy general manager, Kevin Chan, has a practical take on the competition in Macau too. He said, “The 6,000 new rooms and fresh attractions in Cotai (offered by the new Sands Cotai Central integrated resort) will certainly drive more people over there.

“However, Macau Peninsula is still the preferred choice of many visitors, evident by the healthy occupancy at hotels here. For this reason, room rates in Macau Peninsula will stay more or less the same in 1H2013 despite pressure from new room supply in Cotai.” ■

Ideas

Touch, taste, smell and see the best of old Macau

Morning

Begin your day with an invigorating tai chi experience in the open space surrounding the famous heritage Lou Kao Mansion, followed by a traditional Chinese tea ceremony in the lake house within the garden.

After breakfast, capture Macau’s old soul by partaking in either an interactive tour or team experience.

The journey begins at the historical village of Coloane where you will taste Macau’s traditional Portuguese Egg Tart from the world-renowned Lord Stow’s bakery.

Venturing on towards the old Taipa Village and into the Taipa Houses Museum by the lake, you can learn about Macau’s Portuguese heritage.



Start the day with a tea ceremony

Afternoon

Stop for a hearty traditional Portuguese meal at Restaurant Escada, a charming restaurant located in the heart of Macau. It offers a wide selection of traditional Portuguese dishes. The *bacalhau com natas* – or cod fish baked in cream – is a local favorite and a must-eat when in Macau.

After lunch, make your way to the city centre of Macau and walk along the cobblestone streets. Visit St Paul’s Ruins, the most photographed landmark of the destination, as well as the many heritage cathedrals and buildings.

Round off your afternoon with a soothing and relaxing spa treatment at Nirvana Spa, well-known for its treatments and essential oils.

For the lion-hearted, take a walk on the edge of Macau Tower, 233 meters above ground, or take a daring leap of faith off the world’s highest bungee jump platform.

Evening

Unwind with a refreshing glass of sparkling wine on the terrace at the charming and unique La Paloma Restaurant in Pousada de São Tiago before proceeding for dinner. The restaurant is recognised as



La Paloma Restaurant in Pousada de São Tiago

one of the best Portuguese restaurants in Macau, while Pousada de São Tiago was built in 1629 as a castle to defend Macau from the Dutch pirates.

Besides great food and a rich heritage, this venue is also famous for its wines – it houses more than 2,000 labels!

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Resounding success anticipated at the 4th IIICF in Macao

Organisers are expecting the 4th International Infrastructure Investment and Construction Forum (IIICF) to be an even bigger success following the growing momentum gathered in last year's forum in Macao.

Since moving the show from Beijing to Macao last year, IIICF has gained a wider international appeal and organisers are confident that the 4th IIICF will continue to have a more diversified group of attendees.

Macao's strategic location

Hosting the show in Macao is one of the reasons for the transformation of the event. "We chose to host IIICF in Macao due to its strategic location that bridges China and many overseas countries," remarked Zhang Xiang, Portfolio Director, China International Contractors

Association, Organisers of IIICF.

"Furthermore, Macao's status as a Special Administrative Region, has a conducive business environment to help promote relationships and ventures between China and the international community for the construction industry," adds Zhang.

The 4th IIICF will be held at the

Venetian Macao from June 6 – 7, 2013.

Over 1,300 delegates, 20% more than 2012, are due to come from all over the world, namely, China, Europe, Canada, Asia, Middle-East, Australia, South America and Africa. An exhibition will also be held concurrently to showcase a range of equipment and services for the construction industry.



Close proximity to rest of the world

With its proximity to the rest of the world, Macao also offers plenty of connections to Hong Kong, one of the busiest airports in the world.

Macao's rich heritage will also help to attract delegates to attend. "Macao's Portuguese heritage and history will also enable us to attract participants from Portuguese speaking countries," said Zhang.

Macao's strong MICE infrastructure

The organisers are pulling out all the stops to lure foreign visitors to the show and believe that Macao's heavy investments in MICE infrastructure and construction industry in recent years will be a key motivator.

"Macao's heavy investment in the MICE industry has led it to be recognized as a world leisure city. It is reputed for its recreational facilities, friendly population, exotic cuisine, and has hosted many world-class functions all these years," states Zhang.

Visitors will also be able to witness some of Macao's key ongoing infrastructure projects like the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge, the reclamation project of new urban areas, the city rail, the Hengqin Development New Area, the testaments to the bouyant construction industry in Macao.

Organisers have themed this year's forum as "Diversified Financing Energizes International Cooperation" and it has already attracted high profile speakers and players in China and foreign entities.

Senior government officials to attend 4th IIICF

Senior government officials in infrastructure and development, representing Macao, Pakistan, Laos, Philippines, Saudi Arabia, Angola, Congo, Kenya, Nigeria, Mozambique, South Africa, Togo, Belarus and Ecuador are expected to grace their presence at this prestigious summit.

Moreover, representatives from global key organisations such as The World



4th International Infrastructure Investment and Construction Forum
June 6 - 7, 2013, Venetian Macao www.iiicf.org

Bank Group's Global Energy Foundation of Basel, Switzerland, the International Federation of Contractors Association, United Nations Industrial Development Organization, European International Contractors Association, and construction and contractor associations from Canada, Russia, Romania, Australia, Indonesia, Korea, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Tanzania, Ghana, Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan are likely to participate in this strategic construction and investment forum.

Major China companies that form the pillar of the industry in China are also expected to be present at the conference. Some of the well-known companies include China State Construction Engineering Corporation Limited, China Railway Construction Corporation Limited, China Communications Construction Company Limited, China Energy Construction Group Co. and ZTE Corporation, etc.

Lastly, key players in the financial houses, such as Societe Generale, Credit Suisse Investment Bank, Citibank; investment houses like Caterpillar (China)

Investment Co., Russia financial center, as well as the Big 4 consulting firms, i.e. PwC, KPMG, Deloitte and Ernst & Young.

New features for 4th IIICF

To capitalize on its international theme, the 4th IIICF will have three new features. Firstly, 40 representatives from major domestic and overseas financial institutions will make their debut at this event. They will provide insights to popular foreign investments trends globally.

Secondly, IIICF will create a platform for professionals from investment and financing, design consulting, construction contract management, operations management, construction equipment, building materials, insurance, legal and businessmen to explore ideas and opportunities, on how to achieve growth in the construction industry globally.

Lastly, IIICF is positioned to raise brand profile for major construction companies, promote the industry and to facilitate business opportunities between mainland companies and foreign counterparts.

Incentivised incentives

By Prudence Lui

Macau government's Incentive Travel Stimulation Program has resulted in healthy growth in incentive traffic last year.

A total of 39 applications were realised in 2012 through the programme, and these events brought 28,242 incentive travellers into the destination. Although there were more successful applications in 2011 – 55 incentive events were granted support, attendee figures were far lower at 17,631 travellers.

To qualify for support under this scheme, the incentive group must have at least 50 non-local participants in attendance, staying a minimum of two consecutive nights in a Macau hotel. Up to MOP\$300 (US\$37.50) will be granted on

actual consumption per non-local participant for their incentive activity in Macau, in addition to complimentary tourist information kits, welcome gifts, promotional video on Macau, free admission to the Wine Museum and Grand Prix Museum and facilitation in liaising with relevant government entities.

While Air Cruise managing director, Eric Chang believes that the Incentive Travel Stimulation Program "may benefit groups with marginal budgets and enable them to spend more" in Macau, he said it would not be the key motivator, as "perks are not immense".

Hong Kong-based Momentous Asia Travel & Event's general manager, Doris Lam, have also found it difficult to qualify

for support. She explained: "The scheme requires at least two nights' stay, which is impossible for us to satisfy because Macau is small. We are only able to do a day tour instead of an overnight programme."

Lam added some incentive clients were also reluctant to carry their luggage back and forth over the Hong Kong-Macau border despite the close proximity of both destinations. "But once the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau Bridge is ready in 2015/2016, it will be convenient and feasible (to twin Hong Kong and Macau for incentives)," she said.

Meanwhile, Helena de Senna Fernandes, director of Macau Government Tourist Office, is hopeful that the new Guangzhou-Zhuhai Intercity Mass Rapid Transit will make Macau more accessible for Chinese incentive travellers, as well as enable multi-destination programmes that include Macau and various Chinese cities.

China was among Macau's top five source markets for incentive travel in 2012. ■

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NEED TO KNOW



Drumming for support

Macau Tower offers an energising twist to its skywalk: drumming on the skywalk platform!

Offered in partnership with Human Rhythms Macau, the solution engages groups to make music together, even at towering heights. Participants have to play the drums – harnessed to the sky walk too – as they make their way from one corner of the platform to the other. As tension and anticipation rise, the facilitator will direct the group to step up the drum tempo to ramp up support and excitement for the jumper who will leap off the building.

Guests watching the experience from within the building and the launch decks will be given drums to play in sync with their sky-walking colleagues.

The group will play until the jumper has landed and then share in their collective success.

Learn Portuguese cooking

The Westin Resort Macau has introduced a Portuguese cooking class led by experienced chef Olivier Foucke. Working in teams to prepare a three-course meal, participants will learn how to create authentic Portuguese delights like egg tarts, pork chop buns, curries and *bacalhau* – all family-style dishes with ingredients easily sourced back home.

Catering to a minimum of 20 pax and a maximum 120 pax, the three-hour class is priced at MOP\$500 (US\$63) per person, inclusive of all necessary equipment and ingredients.



Knead away those stress knots

MICE travellers can rest their weary muscles with rejuvenating treatments at Sofitel Macau at Ponte 16's So Spa. Blending contemporary Mediterranean and French Provence styles, the spa features L'Occitane brand products, with signature treatments as So Rejuvenating, So Exhilarating as well as the five element treatments.

Guests may also opt for traditional Asian therapies or wet and dry Hammam treatments from the Middle East, while the latest French cosmetology techniques are also part of the wellness experience.

New links from China, Taiwan

On January 12 this year, TransAsia Airways began daily flights between Taichung and Macau, becoming the third Taiwanese carrier to serve this route. Meanwhile, Air Macau has started four weekly Macau-Shenyang flights since January 9.

Brighter culinary stars

Macau welcomes even more Michelin-starred restaurants in 2013. In the latest *Michelin Guide to Hong Kong and Macau*, Macau now boasts 62 establishments (46 restaurants and 16 hotels), including 14 new restaurants and one new hotel. Also included in the guide are nine "simple shops", which are basic, local food stalls offering noodles, roast meats, dim sum and Cantonese cuisine.

In addition, eight non-star "bib gourmand" restaurants were chosen by the inspectors for their good value, i.e. a full three-course meal (excluding drinks) priced at MOP\$300 or less.



Singapore's latest attraction, the River Safari, offers business travellers a refreshing break from the concrete interiors of meeting rooms

Embracing more of nature

Singapore's concrete jungle of skyscrapers is giving way to a recent emergence of new nature-based attractions and event venues, discovers **Lee Pei Qi**

Recent tourism developments in Singapore have given the city-state a new destination marketing angle. Joining the Marine Life Park in Resorts World Sentosa, said to be the world's largest oceanarium, and the Gardens by the Bay – both of which opened only last year – is the River Safari.

The River Safari threw open its doors in April this year, bidding visitors to step in and feast their eyes on a valuable collection of endangered river giants and the world's largest freshwater aquarium. Although plans are yet to be finalised, Wildlife Reserves Singapore said corpo-

rate groups could look forward to special animal performances upon request.

The Giant Panda Forest is one of the highlights in the river-themed wildlife park, and an unobstructed view of the attraction can be savoured at the Mama Panda Kitchen which can be booked for private dining events. Here, food moulded into panda shapes are served with cutlery themed after pandas and bamboos.

DMCs told *TTGmice* that the increased variety of nature-based offerings would help enhance Singapore's allure as an incentive destination.

Dennis Law, managing director of

Singapore-based Star Holiday Mart, a travel company that specialises in both leisure tours and business events, pointed out that Singapore's "new nature-based spots will enhance (the country's) image as an eco-friendly place and not just a city destination".

"Singapore in itself is already attractive for both business and leisure travellers...and new options such as the River Safari will complement all our existing attractions," Law added.

Yvonne Low, executive director of The Traveller DMC, said: "Singapore is often highly regarded as a sophisticated business city but such new attractions



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will add to its appeal as a place for nature and wildlife.”

While the spotlight is now on the country's new nature-based attractions, Pacific World's regional director, Singapore and Malaysia, Selina Grocott, said the country's local culture was just as important.

She said: “Typical incentive options include good dining, shopping and city tours, but we always try to incorporate a local experience with ideas such as sampling local cuisine, buying fresh produce from the local wet markets, or shopping in the off-the-beaten-path districts of Arab Street and Haji Lane.”

Janet Tan-Collis, chief executive of East West Executive Planners Singapore, agrees that the local culture is one important element that Western groups are especially lured to.

Tan-Collis, whose clients are mostly from Europe and the US, cited an



“Singapore is now even better positioned as a sophisticated city that can offer authentic experiences, be it in a nature-based environment or in a cultural context.”

Yvonne Low

Executive director
The Traveller DMC Singapore

example of a self-designed programme called *Unlock Singapore*, which takes groups into cultural enclaves such as Arab Street, Little India and Chinatown to discover more about the local habits and lifestyles.

shophouses have been elegantly restored and converted into on chic boutiques, wine bars and eateries.

Night

Regroup at night at the Singapore Flyer giant observation wheel, and board one of the glass capsules for a ride up into the skies. Enjoy 360° unobstructed views for the city from every direction.

Later, adjourn to one of the many waterfront dining establishments at the Singapore Flyer for a memorable dinner party.

Options include the Royal Palm, a restaurant and bar that is dressed in old and new English decor, and the Flyer Lounge, a great spot for cocktails. Both establishments offer indoor and outdoor dining areas.



Savour waterfront views at the Singapore Flyer

She said: “This programme appeals because (clients) do not just see the typical attractions but also get to experience and interact with the real Singapore.”

Jeannie Lim, executive director, exhibitions & conferences and conventions & meetings, Singapore Tourism Board (STB) said: “The perception of Singapore as an incentive destination has evolved over the years. People often choose Singapore for meetings because it is a compact city and you can easily get around. Increasingly, they also see Singapore as a place for varied unique experiences.”

While Lim agrees that new tourism facilities such as have helped to draw incentive groups to the country, she also believes that historical and cultural attractions are not forgotten.

“Chinatown can offer what other places (in Singapore) cannot, which is a variety of local food from the different dialect groups. This is truly a flavour that incentive travellers can enjoy,” she said.



Nature-based attractions, such as Gardens by the Bay (above), are now new lures for incentives

According to STB's tourism data, 2.5 million international visitors came to the Lion City for meetings, events and conferences during the first three quarters of 2012. These travellers contributed approximately S\$4.3 billion (US\$3.5 billion) to the total tourism revenue.

Full-year figures for 2012 are not available at press time.

DMCs said that the growing variety of attractions would compel even more business event buyers to pick Singapore over other countries in the region.

“Singapore is very (attractive) as a business-centric destination and with the rising number of attractions, it will grow further in appeal as a high-work, high-play environment,” said Tan-Collis. ■

Ideas

Explore Chinatown in a day

Morning

Start your day at the Chinatown Heritage Centre on Pagoda Street, a museum that replicates the tight living quarters of early settlers.

Named after the pagoda-like structure of Sri Mariamman Temple, Singapore's oldest Hindu temple, Pagoda Street is also a good place to admire the architecture of restored shophouses that flank the street, all featuring characteristic five-foot ways.

Be sure to have a look at Sri Mariamman Temple too.

Stroll through Chinatown to find traditional wear, accessories, knick-knacks and cheap bargains.

Afternoon

Walk along South Bridge Road towards the junction of South Bridge and Maxwell roads and you will arrive at the Maxwell Road Food Centre just in time for lunch.

Once a wet market, it is now famous for a dizzying collection of local hawker fare, including the renowned Tian Tian Chicken Rice.

End the Chinatown trail with a spot of shopping at Ann Siang Hill, where

Escape to a natural playground



Pulau Ubin's natural landscape and preserved wetlands have won over the hearts of some corporate groups seeking CSR programmes and teambuilding activities

By Karen Yue

While Singapore invests hefty sums into recreating natural attractions on the mainland and Sentosa island, some corporate groups have long ago discovered their little piece of natural wonderland off the north-east of the city-state.

Pulau Ubin is a tiny speck, home to a handful of residents and abundant flora.

One of its most popular attractions is Chek Jawa, a natural wetlands that is said to comprise seven ecosystems. A boardwalk runs through the mangrove, allowing visitors to observe the plant and marine life at close range. During low tide, a limited number of people are allowed to walk on the tidal flats. Visitors who prefer a bird's eye view of Chek Jawa and its surroundings can get their fix from the top of a 20m viewing tower.

Pulau Ubin is easily accessible by ferry from Changi Point Ferry Terminal, and the ride takes no longer than 15 minutes.

Asian Detours, a Singapore-based company with divisions specialising in corporate events, school programmes and sea expeditions, has carved out a niche in offering outdoor teambuilding

experiences. And Pulau Ubin has been the company's destination of choice for such programmes in Singapore, which are offered in half- and full-day arrangements. Activities include kayaking through the mangroves, biking trails and island-wide races for groups of 10 to as many as 300 participants.

Asian Detours counts multinational firms such as DHL and Essilor among its corporate clientele, and one of its most recent event was a meeting and team-building programme for 50 people from a Russian pharmaceutical company late last year.

According to Nicole Chua, managing director of Asian Detours, the common misconception people have of outdoor teambuilding activities is that a high level of fitness is required.

"Our activities are inclusive. We have had corporate groups with some participants who wanted to kayak expedition-style, while others preferred to just bond. We can offer a whole range of intensity," Chua said.

Colin Koh, director of Asian Detours, a fan of outdoor adventures and an advocate of sustainable living, told

TTGmice that the company has had a "prominent presence" on the island since 2007.

Koh said: "We have a full-time operation there for many years, and we engage the locals in providing products and services that visiting groups may require, for instance, F&B. That allows the locals to earn some extra income. We also educate participants on the island's ecology, which not only gives them a new piece of knowledge to take home, but also ensures that they know how to live sustainably on the island."

Chua revealed: "We have gotten very good feedback from many corporate clients who found that they like the rustic ambience of the island. They like that our programmes marry environmental knowledge and a sense of adventure."

Corporate clients are also attracted to the "amazing accessibility to wildlife on the island". Koh said: "It is common to come within six metres of an otter or even closer to a family of wild boars. We've seen up to 40 dolphins swimming in Pulau Ubin's waters. Such sights are rare in the big cities and appeal to business travellers." ■

NEED TO KNOW

Dance in a field of tulips in Singapore

Love tulips? There's no need to book a flight to the Netherlands just to enjoy these blooms, for Gardens by the Bay has brought the Dutch springtime right into the heart of the Lion City.

Tulipmania, the largest tulip-themed floral show ever to be held in Singapore, features a mesmerising collection of 20,000 imported tulips of various shades in full bloom. Dutch windmills, customised wooden clogs and other Dutch props complete the experience.

Aside from tulips, Gardens by the Bay is also presenting additional flower species such as hyacinths, narcissuses and muscaris.

Tulipmania is on display in the Flower Dome from 09.00 to 21.00 daily. Tulip fever ends on May 20. Admission charges apply.

**Hai Tien Lo offers a gem of a new dining room**

Hai Tien Lo, one of Singapore's most prominent Chinese restaurant, has gained a new 20-seat private dining room following the recent renovation of Pan Pacific Singapore where it is located.

The Ruby Room comes with a private washroom, sofa and TV, and can be hired for corporate functions. A minimum spend of S\$2,000** (US\$1,609) for lunch and S\$3,000** for dinner is required.



Universal Studios Singapore

That way to Sesame Street

Incentive delegates who have never quite grown out of Sesame Street will find great cheer at Universal Studios Singapore. The theme park debuted the world's first immersive Sesame Street-themed indoor attraction on March 1.

Watch for the Sesame Street Spaghetti Space Chase, a ride that features a science-fiction inspired plot, coupled with signature Sesame Street comedic style and music. Also newly launched is a Sesame Street Character Breakfast at Loui's NY Pizza Parlor.

Egyptian mysteries in the city

Secrets of the Egyptian burial practices and mummification process are revealed in technologically-advanced detail in *Mummy: Secrets of the Tomb* exhibition at Marina Bay Sands' ArtScience Museum.

Debuted on April 27, the exhibition features a groundbreaking 3D film capturing the "virtual unwrapping" of the 3,000-year-old mummy of Egyptian temple priest Nesperennub.

Also on display are more than 100 artefacts including six exceptionally preserved mummies from the extensive and famed Egyptian collection of the British Museum.

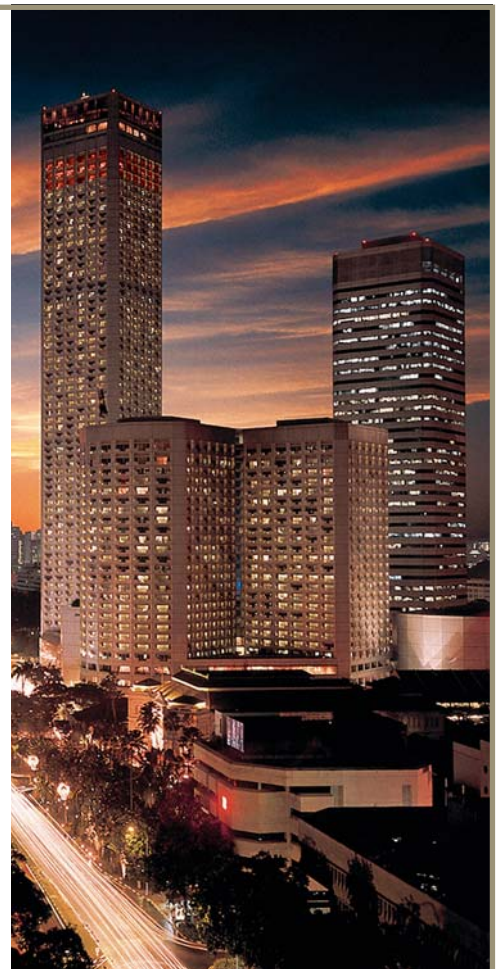
The ArtScience Museum is open from 10.00 to 22.00 daily.

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Event organisers looking to present their delegates with a valuable souvenir that is unique to Singapore can consider the Monetary Authority of Singapore's latest series of commemorative coin sets.

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Subterranean Penang International Convention and Exhibition is due to open in 2015 and give the city a boost in the MICE race

Penang spices up for MICE

A first-ever convention bureau and two dedicated convention and exhibition centres are within sight for the Malaysian state, writes **S Puvaneswary**

Penang, long loved by holiday-makers for its rich Peranakan culture, glorious food and historical sites, will now be positioned as a strong business event destination in South-east Asia.

Lending credence to this objective is the Penang State government's announcement in January that a state convention bureau will be established. To be named Penang International Convention & Exhibition Bureau (PICEB), this move will make Penang the second state in Malaysia, after Sarawak, to have a convention bureau.

Penang State's chief minister, Lim Guan Eng, said: "We want tourism and manufacturing to be the twin engines driving Penang's economy. By 2020, tourism should play an equal role as the manufacturing sector."

According to the government, Penang's MICE business currently accounts for four times the spending of its leisure tourists, and developing the sector will boost its overall tourism industry.

The island city took 32nd spot in ICCA's ranking of top meeting destinations in

Asia-Pacific for 2011.

Lim said: "We have lost 40 years compared to other secondary MICE destinations in this region. We have to get back on track with other cities in Malaysia which already have convention centres, such as Johor Bahru, Malacca and Kota Bharu. We want to position Penang as the top-of-mind secondary MICE destination in Malaysia."

Abdul Malik Kassim, state minister for Religious Affairs, Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs, and Danny Law Heng Kiang, Penang Tourism Development and Culture Committee chairman, are spearheading this drive to set up PICEB.

A pro tem committee with its own elected chairman and members would have to be established first, according to Abdul Malik, but no date was given on when PICEB would be operational.

He said: "PICEB would be run by the private sector, and we (the state government) will support it in whatever means we can, except financially."

This means that the PICEB committee will have to look at a sustainable way of

generating income to fund itself and its activities, such as marketing and promotions, helping associations to bid for international conferences and luring event organisers.

According to Abdul Malik, the establishment of PICEB is a natural progression following the construction of two major convention and exhibition centres in Penang – Subterranean Penang International Convention and Exhibition (sPICE) and Penang Waterfront Convention Centre (PWCC).

He added: "With two dedicated MICE spaces being developed, we need to set up a state convention bureau now to bid for international (conventions and exhibitions) to be held in Penang, as such events are planned years ahead. We want PICEB to self-regulate the MICE industry and to lead in training programmes to develop skilled human resource capital for the MICE industry."

sPICE in Bayan Lepas, a RM300 million (US\$97.2 million) project led by local developer, SP Setia, is currently 30 per cent complete and scheduled for comple-

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tion in late 2015. It will be Penang's first purpose-built convention and exhibition venue. When completed, it will be connected to Penang International Sports Arena, which is currently the city's leading MICE centre.

sPICE will comprise a green building and public park on the ground level. All design and construction of sPICE will incorporate green features and practices as propounded by the Green Building Index, an initiative for environmental responsibility in Malaysia.

The property's 4,500m² main convention/exhibition hall will be able to accommodate 9,000 pax in a theatre setting and can be partitioned into smaller halls. It will be accompanied by a 2,000m² pre-function area which can host large dinner events with up to 550 round tables and concerts.

sPICE will also house a business hotel, F&B and retail outlets, and a food court.

Construction of PWCC is scheduled to begin next year and to open in the early part of 2017. The RM4.3 billion project located at The Light's commercial precinct



"With two dedicated MICE spaces being developed, we need to set up a state convention bureau now to bid for international (conventions and exhibitions) to be held in Penang..."

Abdul Malik Kassim

State minister for Religious Affairs, Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs

in Jelutong, Gelugor, will be developed by IJM Land, but marketed and operated by Suntec Penang, a subsidiary of Suntec International.

PWCC's centrepiece will be a 10,000m² column-free multi-purpose hall that can be subdivided for various events or converted into a 9,000-seat arena for world-class concerts. It will also boast a performing arts centre, a green shopping mall and an IT hub to accommodate Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC)-status offices.

Lim said: "For Suntec to choose Penang as its first location outside of Singapore is a strong vote of confidence in Penang."

Healthy competition is expected to be spurred by these two mega venues, which

will hopefully propel Penang's presence into the international MICE arena.

Khoo Teck Chong, general manager, property division (North), SP Setia, said: "We expect competition from Suntec Penang. We are lucky as we have a head start and we are confident of being able to match their international service standards. We will start taking bookings for sPICE by the end of 2013."

Jonathan Kan, president of the Malaysian Association of Convention and Exhibition Organisers and Suppliers, said: "The competition between the two venues on pricing and services will benefit conference and exhibition organisers. Having two top-notch (MICE) venues will give Penang an advantage over other cities. ■

Ideas

Explore Penang in three days

Day one

Start your journey by visiting one of Penang's famous icons – the Kek Lok Si Temple. Here, Mahayana Buddhism and traditional Chinese rituals are harmonised. This is evident in the temple's architecture and artwork, as well as in the worshippers' daily rituals.

From here, proceed to George Town to sample the city's famous *nasi kandar* at a local Indian Muslim restaurant. Work off the hearty meal by walking down the quaint streets of Little India to the Street of Harmony. Stop by a joss stick maker's shop to see how he meticulously hand-makes his wares, before visiting the Kuan Ying Teng temple.

Come evening, eat your way through the variety of hawker stalls located along the famous Gurney Drive. Make sure to savour popular dishes such as *assam laksa* and fried *kway teow*.

Day two

Begin the morning with an invigorating

visit to the Tropical Spice Garden, home to more than 500 varieties of tropical flora from across the world. Later, relax over a steaming cup of herbal tea.

After the garden excursion, partake in a cooking class to learn how to make some delectable local dishes from scratch. Led by professional chefs, each specialising in Nyonya, Malay and Indian cuisines, participants will learn to whip up tantalising local favourites such as *nasi lemak*, *assam laksa*, tandoori chicken and even concoct refreshing spice-infused beverages.

Personalised guidance is guaranteed as classes are limited to 10 people per



Tropical Spice Garden

session. Participants will get to feast on their creations for lunch.

After lunch, proceed to ESCAPE Adventureplay, a theme park in Teluk Bahang that shows visitors how they can care for the environment. The theme park also offers plenty of fun attractions for action lovers, such as Atan's Leap, Gecko Tower and Tubby Racer.

After a long day of action, wind down over a sumptuous seafood dinner at Batu Ferringhi and stroll through its bustling night market afterwards.

Day three

End your trip by exploring Penang's capital George Town, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Soak up the sights and sounds of the rustic streets on either a bicycle or trishaw. Look out for historical landmarks such as City Hall and Queen Victoria Memorial Clock Tower, both of which tell the tale of the town's colonial past.

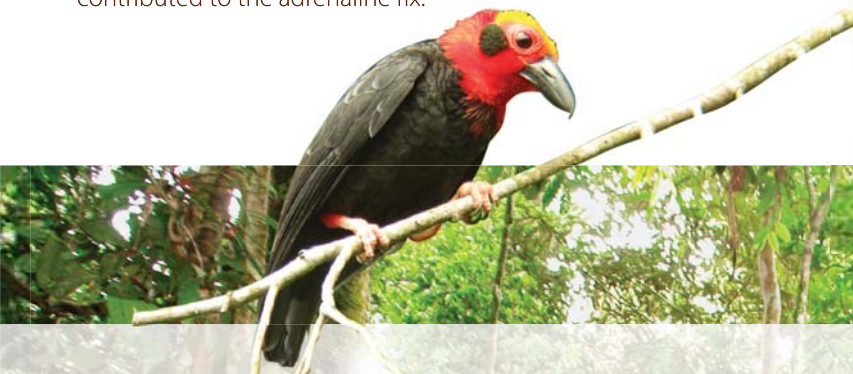
Don't forget to pick up some *tau sa piah* on the way back. These savoury, flakey pastries are unique to Penang.

Itinerary by Panorama Tours Malaysia

JOURNEYS ON THE SAME BOAT

A journalist checks out the wild in Sukau, Sandakan in Sabah and finds it to be a haven for MICE.

With a mixture of anticipation and trepidation, I hopped onto the speedboat that was to take me through a crocodile-infested river to the village of Sukau. The two-hour ride finally dropped me safely at the Sukau Rainforest Lodge, where I would spend the night in the midst of an alluring rainforest and embark on three cruise adventures along the Kinabatangan River. Much as I was excited to view the wildlife that live amid the forests lining both banks of this famous river of Borneo, images of crocodiles overturning my boat and monkeys pouncing on me from the trees raced through my mind. Yet imagination running wild only contributed to the adrenaline fix.



My first cruise set off at 4.30pm. Fortunately, I had the company of a friendly German couple and a very reassuring guide. We slowly traversed the calm river surface along a narrow stretch of swampy water. The guide stopped our boat at several points when he sighted Borneo's famous Proboscis monkeys up on the tree, distinguishable by a dominant male with a very large nose. We also saw two other monkey species and some birds. It was literally monkey business at this time of day, I guess, but no less a treat for my senses: the city-dweller me was blown away by the beautiful expanse of greenery, the melodious cacophony of sounds from the forest creatures, and the über-sweet smell of pure nature.

After dinner, I embarked on the next cruise at 8pm. It was, naturally, doubly intimidating considering the pitch darkness. I wondered how even the guide would be able to see anything. Yet being ever the sharp-eyed boatman, he soon shone his spotlight at a crocodile – thanks but no thanks – which pretty much left us alone as we did it, as well as many colourful birds of different species. I was very impressed by his ability to see what I couldn't, each time knowing exactly where, when and what nocturnal creature to shine his torch upon.

Sleep was restful due more to the lullaby the rainforest around the lodge sang me than exhaustion. The morning cruise at 6.00am saw more monkeys and birds. According to the guidebook, lucky tourists might even spot elephants and orang utans. Just as I was resigning to my lack of luck after two hours, my guide parked the boat near the bank and started to bark like a dog. I was impressed yet again when he explained that he had detected the smell of the elephants, which are sometimes responsive to dogs barking. Unfortunately, the creatures did not come forth but chose instead to trumpet twice in our direction. But it felt like they said "Hello".

I want to come back to Sabah's Sukau again. And it was a shame I came here alone. The sheer beauty of the Kinabatangan River, the rainforests and the inhabitants within deserves to be better appreciated with a group of friends or colleagues. Collectively the excitement could be heightened, and courage lent to one another braving the waters together, on the same boat. And perhaps barking in unison too, might stand a greater chance of the elephants making a welcome appearance. *By Kathy Neo.*



Meetings in the clouds

By S Puvaneswary

Winds of change are swirling at the foothills of Resorts World Genting recently. To be exact, these winds are blowing through Chin Swee Caves Temple, a statuesque architecture set 4,600 feet above sea level that used to solely draw Taoists and Buddhists who came to seek blessings from the Chin Swee Deity and Buddha.

The temple is beautiful, with an iconic nine-storey pagoda decorated with ten thousand Buddha figurines, a 60-foot-high stone carving of a giant Buddha resting on a lotus and a wall with paintings of nine different coloured dragons as a symbol of luck.

With its Sky Terrace, an outdoor space of about 3,251m² on the top-most



Adam Kamal

Managing director,
Tina Travel and Agencies

“New venues that can cater to large groups and serve alcoholic beverages are always welcome in Kuala Lumpur.”

floor, Chin Swee Caves Temple is now drawing corporate event planners keen on unique off-site venues.

The Sky Terrace offers magnificent views of Malaysia's 130-million-year-old tropical rainforest, along with breathtaking sunset vistas.

Thanks to the temple's elevated location, visitors and event attendees can enjoy cool temperatures of 21°C to 23°C all year round, a welcome contrast to the tropical temperatures in Kuala Lumpur and other MICE destinations in Malaysia.

The temple is also close to Kuala Lumpur, being just a 45-minute drive from the city.

These attributes have caught the attention of the Malaysia Convention & Exhibition Bureau (MyCEB), leading to the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between the bureau and the Chin Swee Caves Temple Building Society to promote the venue for off-site business events.

Resorts World Genting – a 10-minute drive from the temple – is also marketing the Sky Terrace as a venue option.

Resorts World Genting sales & marketing manager, Andrew Leong, said: “Besides boasting natural elements – breath-taking views of the rainforest, cool, crisp mountainous air and a quiet



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Resorts World Genting

also offers two meeting rooms on the sixth floor, which can be combined to accommodate 100 people in a semi-outdoor theatre setting.

Saini Vermeulen, senior inbound manager at Panorama Tours Malaysia, is promoting the venue to incentive groups.

He said: "The temple can be combined with Resorts World Genting, and is ideal for Chinese dinners."

"New venues that can cater to large groups and serve alcoholic beverages are always welcome in Kuala Lumpur," said Adam Kamal, managing director of Tina Travel and Agencies, based in the Malaysian capital. "Chin Swee Caves Temple makes for an interesting venue for incentives and teambuilding events as it has a unique charm and many inherent activities such as walking up the nine-storey pagoda, taking group photos against a backdrop of the jungle and sunset, holding stage performances, feeding turtles, watching fireworks and firecracker displays, and hanging lucky charms at the gazebo." ■

Thanks to its stunning Sky Terrace, Chin Swee Caves Temple is starting to attract business event planners

atmosphere, the Sky Terrace also offers comforts such as a large selection of vegetarian and non-vegetarian dishes, alcohol and (other) beverages.

"Fast bubble lifts transport guests from the lobby of Chin Swee Caves Temple to the Sky Terrace, or if delegates

prefer, coaches are also available (to take delegates from the base of the temple to the outdoor venue)."

According to Leong, the entire temple complex is built with facilities that are disable friendly.

Besides the Sky Terrace, the temple

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NEED TO KNOW

Meet in a majestic temple

The Leong San Tong Khoo Kongsi temple complex in Penang's Cannon Square is a rich representation of Khoo Kongsi, one of the most distinctive Chinese clans in Malaysia to have existed since 650 years ago.

Built in the mid 19th century, the temple complex has a spacious courtyard and makes an ideal venue for cultural performances, gala dinners for up to 1,000 people and teambuilding activities.

Contact local DMCs for assistance with event arrangements.

**Head up to the hills**

Said to be the only garden restaurant in Penang and the only restaurant on Penang Hill, David Brown's Restaurant & Tea Terrace sits 800m above sea level, offering guests a panoramic view of George Town.

The colonial-style restaurant serves western and local cuisine and is ideal for company functions, seminars, product launches, training sessions, management meetings and annual dinners. The indoor and outdoor spaces can accommodate 200 people.

E-mail info@penanghillco.com.my for details.

Bond teams at ESCAPE

Opened in November last year, ESCAPE Adventureplay theme park at Teluk Bahang, Penang, is equipped with teambuilding challenges that put participants' physical and mental capabilities to the test.

The attraction also offers a conference room for up to 100 people in a theatre setting.

A water park and an outdoor amphitheatre for musical events are in the development pipeline, and a tree-house hotel is due for completion in 2016.

E-mail escape@simleisure.com for more information.



Penang Global Tourism

Iconic E&O Hotel expands

The Victory Annexe, the new wing of The Eastern & Oriental Hotel (E&O Hotel) in George Town, Penang, has completed in March, bringing the total room count in this property to 222.

The new wing houses 122 sea-view suites, a ballroom and five meeting rooms. Guests staying at the Victory Annexe enjoy exclusive privileges such as butler service, complimentary non-alcoholic beverages from the mini bar and Lavazza coffee machines in the rooms.

**Hotel and event venue to emerge in Penang's heritage hub**

The Rice Miller Hotel & Residences is scheduled to open this December in the banking district of George Town, Penang.

Located a stone's throw from Tanjung City Marina and 10 minutes from Swettenham Pier, the development will comprise 46 guest rooms and 21 residence suites. Facilities will include four dining outlets, two bars, a fitness centre, an infinity pool and a spa offering hammam treatments.

Event planners will be drawn to The Godown event centre, which will occupy a restored warehouse that was built in the 1920s. It is positioned as a place to gather and watch local theatre, and for hosting high society parties, business gatherings, photo exhibitions and destination weddings.

The event facility will house two meeting spaces which can accommodate up to 250 people in a conference setting, as well as two smaller rooms for meetings and art exhibitions. The latter can also function as lounges for VIP guests.

Diethelm offers scavenger hunt with an educational twist

Scavenger hunts are fun teambuilding activities, but they have become all too common.

Diethelm Events Malaysia offers a treasure hunt that comes with a twist. Participants are given a list of items to find and placed on a route that is designed to introduce different aspects of the destination.

Teams will race through the streets of Penang, hunt for 'treasures' at historical sites and explore the contrasting places on the island, while solving riddles and overcoming obstacles. Participants must carefully utilise limited resources and rely on teammates for expertise and support, and beat other teams to the finish line.

Each hunt can accommodate 50-100 participants. Prices start from RM350 (US\$115) per person.

E-mail jacqueline.h@diethelmevents.com.my for more details.



Chiang Mai International Convention and Exhibition Centre, which opens this month, is said to be the largest venue of its kind in Thailand and South-east Asia

The northern rose blooms

With an upcoming exhibition centre and a sharper CVB marketing strategy, Chiang Mai's MICE scene is now ripe for picking. By **Xinyi Liang-Pholsena**

Nestled in the rolling mountains of northern Thailand, Chiang Mai is known as the "Rose of the North", boasting scenic beauty and friendly, hospitable people.

Despite its diverse array of accommodation options and rich tourism offerings, when it comes to attracting MICE travellers, this northern city often plays second fiddle to Bangkok, Phuket and even Pattaya. All this is set to change, however, as the Thai authorities have announced a slew of initiatives poised to usher in a new era for the city's MICE development.

Come May, the Chiang Mai International Convention and Exhibition Centre (CMICE) will open its doors in the Chang Phuak sub-district. Built with a 2.5 billion baht (US\$85 million) budget and boasting a total area of 521,600m² and usable space

of 60,000m², the centre is reportedly the biggest convention and exhibition centre in Thailand and South-east Asia. Ping Nakorn Development Bureau – which manages Royal Flora Ratchaphruek and Chiang Mai Night Safari – has been appointed to oversee CMICE.

The long-awaited CMICE will kick off its debut with the 2nd Asia-Pacific Water Summit (APWS) from May 16-20, which will be attended by some 3,000 delegates including heads of state and governments from across Asia-Pacific and beyond.

"A lot of consumer exhibitions from the Greater Mekong region are usually held in open-space areas around the province. With the opening of CMICE, we now have a proper exhibition venue that can build Chiang Mai's profile," said Vichaya Soonthornsaratoon, director of meetings industry department, Thailand Convention

and Exhibition Bureau (TCEB).

She added: "Chiang Mai's cultural attractions, strong (hotel) room pipeline and inherent strengths have paved the way for MICE development."

According to TCEB, revenue for Chiang Mai's MICE industry reached close to 3.4 billion baht in 2011, with some 60,000 domestic and international participants attending 427 MICE events during the year.

Furthermore, TCEB has designated 2013 the *Chiang Mai Year of MICE* and recently devised a five-year *Chiang Mai MICE Destination* master plan to raise the city's profile.

To be implemented in three stages, the first phase this year will focus on the domestic MICE segment and infrastructure development, alongside MICE education campaigns. In the second phase from 2014 to 2015, TCEB will roll out destination promotions in regional blocs such as the Greater Mekong Subregion. And in the final phase from 2016 to 2017, efforts will be made to promote Chiang Mai as a global MICE city that is capable of hosting international events on a mega scale.

Trade sentiments for the northern city are generally rosy, as evidenced from Phuket-based Oriental Events' plan to set up a new office in Chiang Mai this May to cope with higher demand, according to founder and CEO, Kritidech Srabua.

He said: "Since late 2012 until now, we have been seeing strong demand for Chiang Mai from Chinese travellers, due to the popular Chinese movie, *Lost in Thailand*. The availability of direct flights by Dragonair, AirAsia and Silkair has drawn the corporate segments from East and South-east Asia."

Tanya Pirapokin, executive director, FCm Travel Solutions (Thailand), agreed: "We continue to propose Chiang Mai as a MICE destination because of its cultural diversity and various activities suitable for both small and large groups. We also see continued interest from groups with different budgets. The quality of hotels and the development of more eco-soft adventure activities have helped to attract MICE groups to Chiang Mai."

Attesting to the perennial popularity of the city, Exotissimo, Thailand MICE manager, Tim Upchurch, added: "Chiang Mai is still requested frequently, as a stand-alone destination or coupled with either the Golden Triangle or an island extension such as Phuket or Samui. Generally these northern itineraries are requested for slightly smaller groups of up to 100

pax and quite often from clients looking to adapt the programme to a special interest such as agriculture or medicine – with tailored visits and inclusions.”

He also shared that newer hotels such as 137 Pillars House and U Chiang Mai catered to smaller groups with varying budgets, while additions to the dining scene offered larger groups more quality dining options outside of the hotel. Rak Tha Nam and The River Market, for instance, seats up to 250 guests.

Chiang Mai hoteliers that *TTGmice* spoke to have also reported robust MICE demand and foresee a good year ahead.

Wirachart Waththaphanich, hotel manager of Furama Chiang Mai, projected at least a 15 per cent increase in MICE business for the property this year.

The 295-room Furama Chiang Mai has hosted several international conferences since early this year, including the Thai Physician Association of America meeting and the three-day Workshop on Tourism

Curriculum Management for ASEAN. The hotel will also host the 2nd APWS this month.

Smaller-scale hotels have not been left out of the MICE equation either.

Zulkifli Rahman, director of sales & marketing, 137 Pillars House shared: “The MICE market has contributed 10 per cent of total roomnights in 2012, and we expect the segment to grow another five to seven per cent this year.”

The 30-suite property also offers MICE groups a buy-out option, Zulkifli shared.

He added: “We hosted the 30-pax group from Servier, that bought out the hotel for three nights in November 2012 and had exclusive use of the entire hotel during the duration. Meetings are not only restricted to meeting rooms as various outlets and locations, such as The Lawn, Suites and The Dining Room, can be converted into meeting spaces.”

However, fluctuating demand still affects the hospitality sector in Chiang Mai,

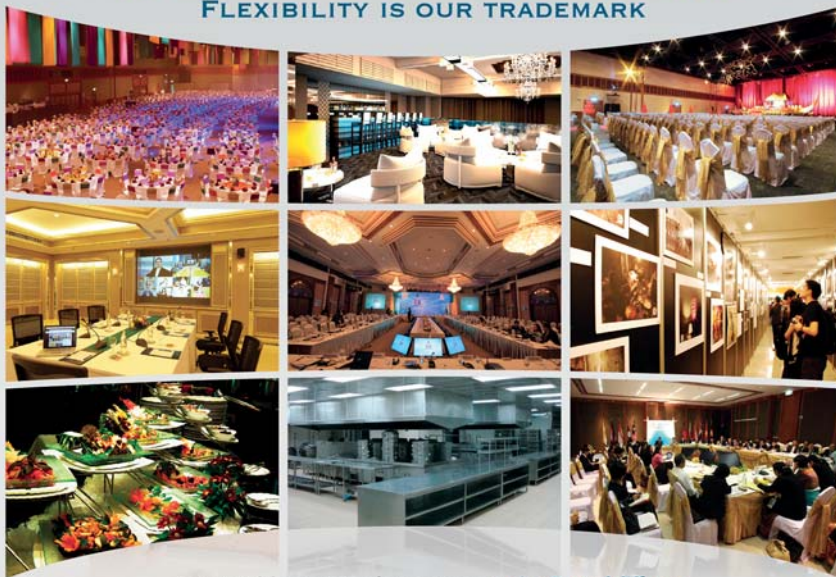
which receives an influx of visitors during the winter months but significantly lower figures in other months.

Said Wirachart: “MICE business is very competitive here in Chiang Mai, especially during the low season from March to September, as rooms in Chiang Mai are oversupplied. We need to try harder to capture more MICE business by offering MICE promotions and room upgrades for certain periods.”

Urging for more international links, Rahman said: “Additional direct flight connections between Chiang Mai and Asia’s major business hubs will be good for growing the MICE sector.”

There are still several hurdles that Chiang Mai has to overcome in order to become a full-fledged business hub. Vichaya said: “We are in talks with the provincial government to develop stronger MICE personnel. Thais are generally good at hospitality but the MICE industry needs special understanding and skills.” ■

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Scaling new heights

By Xinyi Liang-Pholsena



Sofitel So Bangkok's Park Society

In the concrete jungle of Bangkok, hotels old and new have jumped onto the rooftop bandwagon to roll out sky-high venues for corporate and leisure events, adding to the plethora of event spaces in the dynamic capital.

Since opening over a year ago, Sofitel So Bangkok's Park Society has earned its reputation among the city's event planners as a chic spot for corporate groups to unwind over drinks. Perched on the 26th floor, Park Society's indoor dining area can accommodate 60 pax for sit-down dinners while the outdoor area can hold up to 60 people for standing cocktails. The Hi-So rooftop can cater to 100-pax receptions.

Hotel Muse, which opened in 2010 on the tree-lined Langsuan Road, boasts intimate rooftop lounging with a touch of the glamorous 1920s Jazz-era vibe at The Speakeasy. Set amid the hotel's emblematic cupolas on the topmost 24th and 25th floors, the rooftop venue can seat 60 guests and accommodate up to 150 pax for cocktail receptions. Other facilities include a terrace bar, an executive boardroom, The Blind Pig for private lounging and The Lawn.

Situated just a street away, the 94-suite Hansar Bangkok launched the Rooftop Sky Terrace on the 19th floor as a venue for events in February. The Penthouse, an indoor area with double-storey ceiling, can accommodate up to 50 pax. It has a connecting kitchen that can be closed from view as required. Overlooking The Royal Bangkok Sports Club, the Penthouse Garden and Frangapani Bar are good for parties with no more than 200 pax.

The hotel's director of sales and

marketing, Mark Shrives, said: "Privacy and intimacy are the unique selling points of the Rooftop Sky Terrace. It's often hard and expensive to get other famed rooftop venues in Bangkok to close for a private event, but we are able to do that. Plus, our venue offers many opportunities for customisation."

On its eighth-floor rooftop, Four Points by Sheraton Bangkok Sukhumvit 15 recently unveiled Breeze, an indoor area, and Garden Terrace, an outdoor space with a retractable canopy. The two venues offer a combined function space of 472m² and can hold up to 360 guests.

"Many types of corporate and team-building events can be held here, from barbeque parties and movie nights to mini golf sessions and Masterchef-inspired cooking competitions. We are very flexible and open to working with event planners and guests to use these spaces exclusively," said Janine Watton, the hotel's director of sales and marketing.

Rooftop spaces continue to score among MICE groups, said Tim Upchurch, Thailand MICE manager, Exotissimo. "With some well-publicised newcomers joining the market, many (corporate) groups are even more interested to include one of these venues in their itineraries."

Firm favourites among MICE groups included the recently re-opened Zense Gourmet Deck and Lounge Panorama, Park Society at Sofitel So and Red Sky at Centara Grand, he revealed.

As new rooftop venues continue to sprout up across town, established locales are not resting on their laurels either.

Following a year-long refurbishment, the Zense Gourmet Deck and Lounge Panorama re-opened its doors last September to offer a mix of global cuisines from its five on-site kitchens. Perched on the 17th floor of CentralWorld, the industrial-chic restaurant overlooks the bustling downtown of Bangkok, with indoor seating for 177 pax, an al fresco deck for 225 pax, a VIP suite, a private party zone and a bar area, making it an ideal venue for larger groups seeking events in stylish settings.

Banyan Tree Bangkok has also embarked on a revamp of its 11-year-old Ver-tigo Grill and Moon Bar to add 40 seats, providing a more versatile event venue for corporate clients, according to director of sales and marketing, Tareq Bagaeen. ■

Ideas

Four-day charms of Lanna

Day one

Upon arrival in Chiang Mai, transfer to the hotel where a warm welcome reception awaits. Dinner will be served at Baan Celadon, a venue dedicated to the Thai art of celadon making.

Day two

After breakfast, depart for an elephant safari camp in the outskirts. Here, take in the views of Chiang Mai's mountains and flora and fauna while seated on an elephant's back. Delegates also get to visit a Lahu hill-tribe village, which offers a glimpse of the region's ethnic cultures and diversity. A set lunch will be provided.

Alternatively, the group can opt for a 4WD adventure rally and whitewater rafting to experience Chiang Mai's wilderness.

When night falls, enjoy a Thai set dinner at The Gallery. Set beside the Ping River, the restaurant and art gallery offers Thai classics in a charming wooden house. After dinner, delegates are free to explore the Chiang Mai Night Bazaar and discover the myriad souvenirs and handicrafts unique to the region.

Day three

The morning will be spent sightseeing around Chiang Mai's iconic locations, including Doi Suthep where a bird's eye view of the northern city can be enjoyed.

After lunch on their own, delegates will enjoy a spa treatment in the afternoon.

The farewell dinner will take place in a *kad mua* (a traditional Lanna-style market) set-up. To end the trip on a high note, *khom loi* (floating lanterns) will be provided for the delegates to launch into the night sky, a symbolic act of casting away one's troubles.

Day four

Enjoy the day at leisure before departing from Chiang Mai.

Itinerary from Oriental Events

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Tucked away in a soi about 100m from the buzzing Sukhumvit Road, Four Points by Sheraton Bangkok, Sukhumvit 15 is conveniently located just a five-minute walk from the Asok skytrain station and Sukhumvit subway station.

Shopping malls like Terminal 21 and Robinsons are located in the immediate neighbourhood, while just a five-minute walk away, are Bangkok's Korea town, Nana's (Sukhumvit Soi 11) myriad nightspots and bars, and ample cafes and restaurants.

The Queen Sirikit Park and National Convention Centre is situated less than 10 minutes away, while Suvarnabhumi airport is about 30km, or a 40-minute drive away.

Meeting facilities

Nestled on the eighth-floor rooftop of the Garden Wing, Breeze contains an air-conditioned, glass-enclosed indoor space with a retractable roof that opens to the Garden Terrace. The combined 472m² area can hold up to 400 people, and is suitable for product launches, cocktail receptions, teambuilding events and even BBQ parties.

The 470m² amBar, on the Pool Wing's rooftop can host poolside events.

Despite its whimsical name, Pinwheel on the ground floor is deemed the more traditional function room with ample natural lighting and a divisible 207m² space. All venues include wireless Internet access, projectors and electronically controlled roof-mount projection screens.

Fact file

Maximum pax for meetings

120 pax, theatre-style, Pinwheel

Maximum pax for banquets

240 pax, Breeze and Garden Terrace

Maximum pax for receptions

360 pax, Breeze and Garden Terrace

Recent events handled

- A publishing company that took up 30 rooms per night in January 2013, with welcome cocktails at amBar and gala dinner at Breeze
- A golf group from the banking industry that took up 125 rooms per night in November 2012
- An incentive series for five groups of 25 pax each from an automation company between February and April 2012

Rooms

A soothing palette of beiges and brown tones greeted me when I entered my allocated Comfort Room, measuring an expansive 32m², which also came with a spacious bathroom. Framed black and white portraits of Bangkok's skyline and northern Thai hilltribes add local flavour to the contemporarily designed quarter. A 32-inch smart LCD TV featuring both Internet and cable TV stations allows road

warriors to alternate between entertainment and work. The spacious work station has a plush armchair that allows one to sit comfortably or even take a short nap.

I had a good night's sleep on the cosy bed with feather-down pillows.

Offering the same amenities with more space are the eight 48m² Junior Suites and four 74m² Executive Suites. The most luxurious of all are the six Terrace Suites, which, with their private outdoor terraces, can accommodate small parties.

F&B

The Eatery, the all-day dining restaurant on the ground floor, offers a cheery start to the day when one tucks into the breakfast buffet spread. The glass-clad, high-ceiling interior affords an airy feel while the open kitchen, where the cooking team bustles, serves up various aromas and a convivial vibe.

Meanwhile, the Wrapped deli-style café is an ideal spot to enjoy a mid-day coffee and light dishes like gourmet paninis and desserts.

Open from 15.00 to midnight, the BeerVault stocks over 100 international beer labels – 97 bottled beers, six beers on tap and several handcrafted beer cocktails – making it an ideal venue for post-dinner drinks or business discussion over drinks.

For cocktails, head to the amBar on the eighth floor; the laid-back atmosphere, specialty cocktails and 360-degree views more than make up for its lack of height in a city dotted with rooftop bars.

Other facilities

A business centre with Apple computers is located in the lobby, with complimentary Wi-Fi Internet available in the public areas. The 24-hour gym is located just beside Breeze on the eighth floor. The hotel's six-seater tuk tuk offers shuttles to the train stations (a lifesaver on rainy days) and corporate offices in the vicinity.



VERDICT

A hotel that triumphs for its affordability, location and versatility of space for events.

Xinyi Liang-Pholsena

NEED TO KNOW

On Bangkok's petal trails

Founded by Thai premier floral artist Sakul Intakul in 2012, the museum within a century-old teak mansion is surrounded by a flower-dotted garden in Bangkok's Dusit district. The two-storey museum houses objets d'art and artifacts showcasing the floral cultures from across Asia.

Cocktail receptions for up to 100 pax can be held in the garden. Exclusive tours by the floral master himself are available upon request, and private workshops (including museum visit and tea session) for groups of up to 15 pax can be conducted. Visit www.floralmuseum.com for details.



Thailand backs mega events with a difference

Thailand Convention & Exhibition Bureau (TCEB) has begun its *Mega Events... Sustainable Challenge* campaign (runs till September 30, 2013) to boost its MICE industry. Open to all business travellers, the scheme offers up to one million baht (US\$33,000) for groups bringing a minimum of 1,000 overseas delegates and staying for at least three consecutive nights.

Impactful expansion

Bangkok's IMPACT Muang Thong Thani recently invested US\$27 million to launch 30 new Sapphire meeting rooms. Two new Banquet Halls added another 5,710m² of function space to the existing 3,500m² Royal Jubilee Ballroom and 2,000m² Grand Diamond Ballroom.

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Over coffee with...

Robin Lokerman

Witness to the evolution of the American and European association management industry over the past 22 years, MCI Group CEO tells **Karen Yue** he is ready for changes in Asia

How did you begin your adventure in the association management industry?

It all started when I was a staff member with a not-for-profit organisation and had thought to myself that there must be a more efficient way to run these organisations. So I started GIC Management in Europe in 1991, managing associations on a professional basis.

In 2003, I merged GIC Management with MCI Group. I wanted to grow my business into Asia, and knew it would be difficult to do that on my own. At that time, I had 50 staff members in Brussels, and MCI Group had 200 in France, the UK and Switzerland.

In 2005, Roger Tondeur (president of MCI Group) and I opened an office in Singapore – MCI's first office outside of Europe. Two years later I moved to Asia to be based in Singapore, a decision I made to show that MCI Group is truly committed to being a global company.

Why were you keen on Asia?

During my career in Europe, I saw the professionalisation of European associations, which were becoming powerful, getting bigger budgets, holding larger conferences and starting to hire more staff and create new value propositions for their members. Associations were being managed like they were mini businesses.

That's the change that took place in the 70s-80s in the US, and 80s-90s in Europe.

I moved to Asia because I knew that trend would spread to this region. And it is slowly happening now – you see more associations establishing offices, hiring staff and forming more permanent relationships. Before that, a lot of associations were very loose federations, with conferences that rotated in the region but were managed locally rather than centrally. Today, more are centralising their conference management by working with a core PCO to organise (regular, rotating) events, as opposed to using a new local PCO each time.

This change is, however, taking place slower in Asia than in Europe because Asia is so diverse, with differences in culture, language and religion. But we believe that Asia-Pacific associations will grow in prominence because many international scientists want to publish their findings in Asia where there is increased funding for research and healthcare, for instance. So this is a market with many opportunities.

What are the most pressing issues facing Asia's association management industry today, seeing how it is still in its early stages of growth, and which are hardest to tackle?

Staff competency and employers' ability to find staff who are well trained and aligned to the needs of the company. In a rapidly evolving workplace, especially in Asia where the economy is growing and a lot of young people are coming into the market, continuing education is needed. Associations will grow in Asia because they are the providers of continuing education for their respective industry. In Singapore, the government leads a lot of that. But in other countries, it is the private associations that are the key providers of education and certification programmes for industry professionals.

Rising costs must be an issue too, I'm sure, as not all associations are hugely profitable.

Well, associations must have activities that are profitable. A well managed conference should bring profit, which will be reinvested in more activities. This is why we believe that centralising conference management is very important.

If conferences were managed locally, profits from the event would go into the pockets of the local association and sometimes (the money) could disappear because of corruption or vague financial structures. Or that profit could get reinvested in one-off events in that country that might have limited lasting impact. And every year, the (local association) would have to reinvent the wheel by finding a new database and sponsors.

When European associations started to professionalise, they centralised their conference management. It was no longer the national chapter, but the international board, that took ownership of the meeting. So the international board would work with both the local chapter and an international PCO year after year, and thus get more consistent relationships with the industry and delegates, making it easier for communications.

For instance, one of MCI Group's biggest clients is the European League Against Rheumatism. We have been working with it for 15 years. When it first came to us, it had a 3,500-pax conference. Today there are 16,000 people in attendance. Profits from the conference is huge, and that amount goes back into funding a more professional infrastructure, more research and new education programmes. The



conference is an important revenue source.

Unfortunately, you don't see enough of that in Asia. Associations here are still too splintered. Local chapters often have a bigger influence because of the diversity of countries in this region, but I think it is very important that associations start centralising some of their management.

How is MCI Group coping with the diversity in Asia?

MCI Group has 15 offices across Asia, which allows it to be local all over the world.

The local chapter has a key role to play in organising a conference. For instance, a conference in India will have a distinct Indian feel, with Indian professionals being more involved in the programme. You need to have a small team in India to work with these people, but at the same time have other teams in Singapore or Hong Kong to manage other aspects of the conference.

MCI Group has teams that are close to both the central and local offices, ensuring a mix of localised and centralised efforts. Delegate registration and project management can be managed centrally, while hotel reservations can be done locally. Sponsorship management is often a mix of both, depending on where the sponsors are located.

To be really effective in attracting new audience, you have to localise marketing efforts. So we have set up a delegate boosting team in China, India and the Middle East last year, and in Brazil, South Korea and South-east Asia this year. We have locals to take the marketing messages of our international association clients and localise that content and distribute them through popular and relevant local media channels.

One event that has benefitted from our delegate boosting effort is the World Congress of Cardiology, which we have worked with for the past three shows. It was held in Buenos Aires in 2008, Beijing in 2010 and Dubai in 2012. It will go to Melbourne next year. It is a big meeting with 13,000 to 14,000 cardiologists. We did delegate boosting in the Middle East, India and China by localising marketing messages and working with local partners such as hospitals. The target number of delegates from these three countries was 1,500 but we got more than 3,500.

I cannot emphasise enough how important it is to localise some aspects of conference management in Asia because the countries in this region are so diverse.

How else can associations grow profits from their events?

By milking the content of their events and using it before, during and after the conference to gain maximum reach. Associations can repackage and sell the content to people who were not able to travel all the way to the conference or who were unable to afford the registration fee.

Some clients are still afraid of repackaging content and selling it to people who were unable to attend the conference, thinking that once you do that, more would skip the live event.

Now, consider a soccer match played by Manchester United. Although the game can be caught on TV, many people want to experience the match being played live at the stadium. To some people, attending a congress is a premium experience. Associa-

tions just have to enhance that personal experience offered by their events, by bringing in greater content and making it sexy.

Let's talk about Asian MICE sellers that want to attract association events. What should they be mindful of?

Too many sellers tend to see association meetings as a tourist activity. Tourism appeal is becoming less important in this sector, as people chose to attend a conference for its content.

Not all Asian CVBs are mindful of this too. I've attended fam trips that put incentive buyers and association secretariats on the same programme, touring tourist attractions and fancy resorts. But I was impressed with Northern Territories' industry-specific fams – in July 2011 it brought buyers from the emergency response sector on a programme that included a health forum and visits to hospitals and a kidney dialysis centre.

Compared to some European cities like Barcelona and Vienna or Australian cities like Melbourne, the CVBs in Asia are still immature and sometimes too focused on leisure tourism. That may be due to the fact that many Asian CVBs are part of the national tourism authority, so their focus is naturally on destination promotion.

CVBs need more active ambassador programmes, more subvention and a bigger vision to build the association business, and to understand that the objectives of an incentive buyer are very different from that of association buyers. They need to pay attention to client needs, and that need is not to see yet another hotel, yet another bathroom. The client is more interested in the scientific development in the country, for instance, so the Northern Territories is very smart.

Differentiation of market by type of buyers still has room for refinement in Asia.

Which Asian destinations are doing it right and will be hot for association conferences this year?

Singapore, Kuala Lumpur and South Korea – the latter especially. The South Korean government has made the MICE industry in general one of the 12 or 14 economic priorities of the country. It realises that MICE, especially association congresses, is a fantastic way to generate economic wealth and stimulate local industries and professionals through learning from global thought leaders who come to the country to share their knowledge. The government is also building congress infrastructure across South Korea and providing subvention support for association congresses coming into the country.

Having said that, Singapore will still be the major centre (for association events), although it is becoming very expensive. Kuala Lumpur is promising too, due to good infrastructure that are priced a third of what's offered in Singapore. Hong Kong is also still popular, but very expensive and facing limited capacity.

Chinese cities, not just Beijing and Shanghai, but also the second- and third-tier ones are starting to attract the attention of associations. However, they (second- and third-tier cities) require more destination promotion and infrastructure improvement. ■

“Asia-Pacific associations will grow in prominence because many international scientists want to publish their findings in Asia where there is increased funding for research and healthcare, for instance.”

Case studies

Delegate promotion for the 15th IPC

The Malaysian Peat Society overcomes budget limitation and brings a showcase of Sarawak to Stockholm as part of its efforts to attract delegates to the 15th IPC in 2016, writes **S Puvaneswary**



Dressed in traditional costumes, members of MPS went to Stockholm to promote Sarawak's IPC in 2016

Work was not over for the Malaysian Peat Society (MPS) even it won the bid to host the 15th International Peat Congress (IPC) in 2016 in Kuching, Sarawak.

The triumphant announcement came in 2010 after the bidding presentations were made in Jyväskylä, Finland. Malaysia was competing for hosting rights against the Latvian Peat Producers Association.

According to Lulie Melling, congress general for the 15th IPC, the win was a meaningful one for MPS as it would be the first congress to be held in an Asian city. IPC has always rotated in Europe and North America.

The congress will be themed *Peatlands in Harmony – Agriculture, Industry and Nature*.

Melling said: "The congress will provide an excellent forum for researchers, academics and practitioners to congregate, share information and discuss their scientific results and experiences, with particular reference to peat and peatlands in the tropics."

With the win in the bag, MPS must work to generate interest among scholars and scientists. To achieve that, MPS decided to use the 14th IPC in Stockholm in June 2012 as a platform to present scientific papers and promote Malaysia as the next congress destination.

Melling said: "We wanted to create a huge and positive impact at the 14th IPC.

Event
Promotion of the 15th International Peat Congress

No of people in the group:
30

Venue
Stockholm, Sweden

Date
June 1 to 8, 2012

Objective
To promote the 15th International Peat Congress which will be held at Borneo Convention Centre Kuching in 2016

Challenges
Finding creative means to stretch a limited budget for delegate promotions

Most participants were from Europe and had not been to Sarawak. We wanted to show them what the country had to offer in terms of infrastructure, facilities and recreational enjoyment, such as nature, adventure and colourful cultures.

"We received a budget from the Sarawak Convention Bureau for the 15th IPC, and we apportioned a part for delegate promotion. We also raised funds through sponsorship to cover airfare, accommodation and registration fees for 30 members who would be presenting eight papers on tropical peat at the congress,

as well as promotional materials such as leaflets, brochures, Sarawak pepper, caps, T-shirts, stuffed toys such as the iconic Orang Utan which is synonymous with Sarawak's conservation efforts."

To keep expenses down, the committee decided to bring their own food to Stockholm instead of dining out.

She explained: "A simple meal (in Stockholm) would cost RM30 (US\$9.70), four times more than what it would be in Malaysia. Thus, we decided to bring a rice cooker, rice, *sambal ikan bilis* (anchovy sauce), canned food and instant noodles to make our own breakfasts and dinners at the backpackers inn we stayed at."

To avoid exceeding the airline's baggage allowance, each delegate was allowed only 10 kg of personal belongings in their checked luggage. The rest of the allocated space went to traditional costumes, promotional materials and food.

Before the mission in Stockholm, the group took lessons on traditional dance at the Ministry of Social Development and Urbanisation Sarawak, which also loaned the participants costumes and musical instruments.

"We also borrowed a gong from the Tun Jugah Foundation and learnt how to play it. Everyone had to turn up for practice or they would not be allowed to go on the trip. There were no exceptions, not even for my husband," she said.

At the congress in Stockholm, some members of the committee presented scientific papers while others manned the booth. Sarawakian music was played, and a gong was struck during lunchtime to draw congress attendees to the booth. Leaflets and brochures were handed out, and delegates were invited to Sarawak.

"It is important to promote the destination to get delegates excited and curious enough to want to come to the congress in Kuching. We are in the midst of planning a delegate promotion exercise during the 20th World Congress Soil Science from June 8-13, 2014 in Jeju, South Korea.

"MPS believes delegate promotion (must be done) continuously to (build) publicity and create awareness and interest for the 15th IPC," she declared. ■

TTG Great Cook Out

Staff of all ranks swopped their sales kits and laptops for mortars and pestles for an afternoon of team bonding in a fancy cooking studio. **Karen Yue** joins her mates for some fun



Food Playground, a new cooking studio in a beautiful conserved shophouse that sits in Tanjong Pagar, hosted 14 staff members of TTG Publishing Travel Trade business group on March 25 this year.

Although launched in 3Q2012, Food Playground has hosted 20 corporate teambuilding events prior to the *TTG Great Cook Out*. The cooking studio's managing director, Daniel Tan, expects to host another 25 to 30 corporate events between now and mid-2013.

The *TTG Great Cook Out*, which took place on a Monday afternoon, comprised two parts – a product marketing challenge and a cooking competition.

Tan said: “Our teambuilding programme is much more than the usual corporate cooking event. The kitchen represents a microcosm of the working world, with deadlines, decision-making and collaboration necessary to succeed, so we make it a point to incorporate fun team activities and challenges such as a product marketing contest to unleash creativity and improve communication and teamwork among participants.”

A mix of sales, marketing and editorial staff members was placed in two teams and tasked to create a tourism product that would appeal to visitors, using things such as raw broccoli, carrots and cherry tomatoes as well as coloured paper, toothpicks and paperclips. Teams must then make an enticing sales pitch to sell the product.

Event
TTG Great Cook Out

No. of pax
14

Venue
Food Playground, Singapore

Date
March 25, 2013

Objective
To take members of the editorial, sales and marketing team out of the office for a bonding opportunity

Challenges
Activities must engage staff of all ranks and dishes must satisfy the various dietary requirements of all participants

Explaining the choice of the activity, Tan said: “The contest has a tourism focus as it is a ‘product’ that every TTG team member is familiar with. This way, everyone can chip in regardless of their seniority and job title, so this activity is a great leveller!”

Part two of the programme saw the teams whipping up *roti jala*, curry chicken and *ondeh-ondeh* under the patient and animated guidance of culinary instructors Lena and Helen.

Explaining the choice of dishes for the cooking challenge, Tan said Food Play-

ground's specialisation in local, Asian-fusion, Thai and North Asian cuisines allowed participants, be they leisure tourists or business event delegates, to learn more about Singapore's diverse food culture.

“We give our clients a lot of flexibility in deciding what they like to learn because they will enjoy the fruits of their labour at the end of the event. That said, we will recommend dishes based on participants' dietary preferences, group size, duration of the programme and fun factor. Dishes on our menu are all tried and tested to be fun to make and tasty, yet challenging enough to keep everyone engaged,” Tan said.

According to Tan, teambuilding programmes are all customised to achieve clients' desired results. Suggested activities will be pitched to the client and adjustments will be made to ensure suitability.

Tan noted that the menu and use of ingredients had to be tweaked for the *TTG Great Cook Out*, as several participants had food allergies and dietary restrictions.

As activities are held in a kitchen, Food Playground is committed to safety and has an accident-free record.

The winning team was eventually declared based on the uniqueness of the product sales pitch, and the taste and presentation of the cooked dishes. Victors were presented with a framed group photo as a keepsake.

In the days that followed, Food Playground provided all participants a link to an online photo gallery where memories of the day could be downloaded. ■

Start your hotel sourcing right

Advito's **Sean Curley** offers a checklist that all travel managers should consult in order to make the most out of their hotel sourcing process

Each year, organisations around the world seek to re-establish pricing with their hotel suppliers, and look to enhance their hotel programmes for their travellers. With the wide range of travel programme needs, there is no easily-defined perfect solution. However, there are definitely ways to set a hotel programme up for the greatest success. Like so many things in life, it starts with a little bit of self-reflection.

✓ What are your goals for your hotel programme? As hotel rates have risen, buyers are forced to re-evaluate their strategies. For some, the optimal plan is to reduce the number of hotels in the programme and drive travellers to selected properties. For others, the best avenue is to expand the number of preferred hotels if their top markets are frequently compressed and/or sold out.

Each hotel programme is unique, and the strategies that work best are customised to buyers' organisational objectives, while managing the sourcing process to meet those goals.

✓ Where do you have some leverage? For some buyers, the greatest leverage is in markets where their offices are; for others, it's where their customers reside. Either way, know the landscape in the market so you're best prepared to use your leverage in negotiations.

As an example, have you been able to shift share from one hotel to another? If you can do that, then you may see hotels paying more attention to your negotiation requests.

✓ Do you have solid data to help make sound buying decisions? One of the biggest challenges in the travel category is accurate hotel data. Frequently, there's a wide disparity between the agency's hotel booking data and the client's spend data. Add supplier data into the mix, and the buyer can easily get frustrated with conflicting information.

The best programmes follow a consistent methodology for measuring volume,



whether by using a few months' sample size that gets annualised, or by using a full year's data.

If you're trying to manage a hotel programme (or any travel category) with less than the best data, it will be a stretch to maximise your leverage.

✓ What kind of market conditions will influence the results? In the past few years, we've seen a dramatic swing from a seller's market to a buyer's market, and back again. Understanding the overall market temperature is critical. Even more important is knowing what the market dynamics are in your key cities. There may be areas where the conditions don't follow the macro-level trends and you have to address those cities (and properties) from a different angle.

✓ Does your travel booking policy help drive compliance to your programme? How is your preferred hotel programme communicated to your travellers? Do you rely on agency partners to publish the list of preferred hotels, or do you utilise other platforms, such as the Intranet, online booking tools, internal communications or other media, to promote the programme?

In addition to publishing the list of preferred suppliers, it is also crucial to move your travellers to these properties. Your travel policy should drive the traveller to your preferred booking tools, and in turn to your preferred suppliers.

Expenditure and savings tracking, duty of care/traveller safety and broader supplier opportunities are just a few of the reasons why a strong hotel policy should form the foundation of the hotel programme. ■



Sean Curley is director of consulting at Advito, an independent operating unit of BCD Travel, the world's third-largest travel management company. Headquartered in Atlanta, the US

and operating in key business markets around the world, Advito provides travel management consulting services that guide clients through today's complex travel environment.

Advito's focus on consulting delivers proven value, unbiased counsel and a customised approach for every engagement. Visit www.advito.com.

Appointments



Sue Stepatschuck



Calvin Chee Hong Khoong



Patrick Pahlke



Hugo Gerritsen



Marcus Bauder



Simon Schenk



Alfred Paulsen



Dominic Sherry



Tareq Bagaeen



Watchara Gamhanghanpanich

AUSTRALIA

Sue Stepatschuck has succeeded Anne Last as director of marketing with **Perth Convention Bureau**. She has more than 22 years of marketing and sales experience in a range of industries.

CHINA

Jessica Chang is now regional sales director – North Asia with **Melbourne Convention Bureau**, based in Shanghai. She was director, MICE Project Office at the Bureau of Foreign Trade in Taiwan.

Kempinski Hotel Chengdu has appointed **Simon Schenk** executive assistant manager/ic rooms and **Calvin Chee Hong Khoong** executive assistant manager/ic F&B. Schenk has 15 years of hospitality experience, while Chee possesses 21 years of industry experience.

Patrick Pahlke is now

hotel manager of **Grand Hyatt Guangzhou**. He first joined Hyatt Hotels and Resorts in October 2002 as a sales executive at Grand Hyatt Hong Kong.

MALAYSIA

Dorsett Hospitality International has named **Hugo Gerritsen** area general manager of **Dorsett Grand Subang** and **Dorsett Grand Labuan**, and **Alfred Paulsen** as general manager of Dorsett Grand Labuan. Both properties are in Malaysia. Gerritsen was last COO at Katara Hospitality in Qatar, while Paulsen rose from his last position as deputy general manager at Dorsett Grand Subang.

SINGAPORE

Dominic Sherry is now head of sales for Asia-Pacific with **Hilton Worldwide**. Sherry joins Hilton from Marriott International, where he has served in

key leadership positions since 1992 including regional vice president, sales & marketing for Asia-Pacific.

Melbourne Convention Bureau has appointed **Edward Kwek** regional sales director – South Asia, based in Singapore. Kwek joins the bureau from the Institute of Technical Education where he was section head, leisure & travel operations, and brings with him a wealth of experience in the hospitality and tourism industries.

Pan Pacific Singapore has appointed **Jessie Khoo** director of sales. She will lead the hotel's sales, catering and event services teams, and was last MICE director of sales at Pan Pacific Hotels Group's Singapore National Sales Organisation.

SOUTH KOREA

Bo Kyung Byun has

succeeded **Sung Won Hong** as president and CEO of Coex Convention and Exhibition Center in Seoul, South Korea. Byun has extensive experience heading several of South Korea's top information and technology corporations, including LG-IBM PC and KOLON Global, and was also CEO and president of Seoul Business Agency, an organisation that supports small and mid-sized domestic businesses.

THAILAND

Banyan Tree Hotels and Resorts has appointed **Tareq Bagaeen** area director of sales and marketing for Bangkok and Laos, based in the Thai capital. Bagaeen has been with Banyan Tree Hotels and Resorts since January 2011, when he joined as director of sales and marketing at Banyan Tree Bangkok.

Indigo Pearl in Phuket

has appointed **Shaun Dühnen** hotel manager. He brings over 10 years of experience in operations and management at luxury boutique hotels and resorts such as Per Aquum Resort & Spa in the Maldives, The Fortress in Galle, Sri Lanka and The Manor in New Delhi.

Marcus Bauder has joined **Mandarin Oriental, Bangkok** as hotel manager. He was last hotel manager at China World Hotel, Beijing.

Watchara Gamhanghanpanich has joined **Muthi Maya Forest Pool Villa Resort** in Thailand's Khao Yai as executive chef. He has 22 years of culinary experience in five-star hotels such as Four Seasons Bangkok and Grand Millennium Sukhumvit Bangkok, as well as private restaurants.

Hotel updates



Centara Ras Fushi
Resort & Spa Maldives

The Alana Vasanti – Seminyak, Indonesia

The Alana Vasanti – Seminyak has opened in South Bali, surrounded by the destination's most popular restaurants and clubs.

There are four Presidential and 24 Deluxe Suites with separate lounge space, and a mix of 93 oversized guestrooms with private balconies, spacious bathrooms with rain showers, 42" LED televisions and iPod compatible sound systems.

Armed with 200m² of facilities, the resort also caters to corporate events. Other facilities include a restaurant, a pool bar and a wellness centre.

[www.aston-international.com/
ourhotels_overview.php?id=MTE5](http://www.aston-international.com/ourhotels_overview.php?id=MTE5)

Aloft Kuala Lumpur Sentral, Malaysia

The 482-room Aloft Kuala Lumpur Sentral is the first Aloft brand in Malaysia, and the largest aloft property in the world. It boasts a ballroom that can accommodate up to 1,000 people in a theatre setting, as well as seven other function spaces. Dining outlets in the hotel include MAI Bar, Nook international restaurant and w xyz bar.

www.starwoodhotels.com/

[aloft-hotels](http://aloft-hotels.com)

Centara Ras Fushi Resort & Spa Maldives

Located on an island 15 minutes by speedboat from Male International Airport, the Centara Ras Fushi Resort & Spa Maldives has 140 suites and villas that are designed to blend into the green interior of the island. The premium four-star resort offers a Half Board Plus concept which includes breakfast and dinner, with an open bar for three hours during evening mealtimes, while the All-Inclusive package includes all meals and a full open bar from 11.00 to 23.00 daily.

www.centarahotelsresorts.com

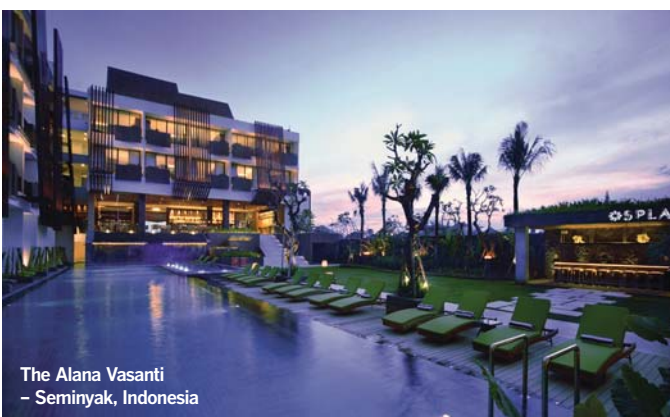
Citadines Rasuna Jakarta, Indonesia

The 153-unit Citadines Rasuna Jakarta is located in the city's central business district, putting guests within walking distance to embassies and office towers, and in close proximity to retail and entertainment centres.

It offers studio, one- and two-bedroom apartments that come with fully-equipped kitchens, separate dining and living areas as well as modern amenities such as complimentary Internet access and home entertainment systems.



Mandarin Oriental, Guangzhou,
China



The Alana Vasanti
– Seminyak, Indonesia

www.citadines.com

Citadines Uplands Kuching, Malaysia

The 215-unit Citadines Uplands Kuching enjoys a prime location in Jalan Simpang Tiga, a hub for education and local federal government administration, and is a 15-minute drive from the Kuching International Airport, Borneo Convention Centre and Samajaya Free Industrial Zone.

It offers a range of studios to two-bedroom units. Facilities include a full-equipped gym, an outdoor pool, and a meeting room.

www.citadines.com

Dorsett Singapore

Positioned as a mid-scale hotel targeting both leisure and business travellers, the 285-room Dorsett Singapore sits above Outram Park MRT interchange station, offering guests easy access to the city's business district and tourist attractions.

Facilities include a business centre, F&B outlets, a gym, an outdoor pool and a roof garden.

www.dorsetthotels.com/singapore

Mandarin Oriental, Guangzhou, China

Located within Tianhe District, the new 263-key Mandarin Oriental, Guangzhou is equipped with a 750m² Grand Ballroom, a 200m² The Tian He Room and other function spaces.

There are a number of dining outlets, including a Cantonese restaurant and a cocktail and cigar bar called The Loft. For relaxation, there is a spa and fitness centre.

Getting around the city is easy for guests, as the hotel sits above Shipaiqiao Station and within TaiKoo Hui, a mixed-use development with retail, entertainment and offices under one roof.

[www.mandarinoriental.com/
guangzhou](http://www.mandarinoriental.com/guangzhou)

Mercure Bangkok Siam and ibis Bangkok Siam

Accor has opened two hotels – Mercure Bangkok Siam and ibis Bangkok Siam – under one roof in the Thai capital.

The 189-key Mercure Bangkok Siam has three meeting rooms for up to 126 delegates, a pool, a fitness centre, a sky bar and a signature all-day dining restaurant.

Also armed with 189 rooms, the ibis Bangkok Siam offers a Quick Bite Cafe that serves light meals all day.

www.mercure.com / www.ibis.com

Packages



AUSTRALIA

Gold Coast Convention and Exhibition Centre is offering free trips to Hawaii in an effort to attract new conferences to the Gold Coast in Queensland, Australia.

Conference organisers only need to book a conference over the value of A\$200,000 (US\$208,591) to be held between now and June 30, 2014 in order to receive a trip for two adults to Hawaii, inclusive of return economy airfares and three nights' accommodation in Honolulu.

This promotion is only available to new business contracted and booked by June 30 this year.

Terms and conditions apply.

Visit www.gccec.com.au

SINGAPORE

Marina Bay Sands has rolled out its *Sands ECO360° Meetings Programme* to provide greener options for meeting planners and clients.

The programme focuses on three main areas: green meeting options, high-performance facilities and standard sustainable practices. Services offered with this package include a Green Meetings Concierge who is assigned to work with clients throughout the process, helping to align the property's various green offerings with clients' sustainability goals. The concierge will present a Sands ECO360° Event Impact Statement to the client post-event, detailing information about the event's impact on the environment.

Marina Bay Sands is also offering event organisers up to 40 per cent in savings when they book a meeting package from US\$85++ per pax, as well as exclusive room rates from US\$229++ in 2013 and US\$245++ in 2014 on over 100 selected dates. The meeting package includes use of a meeting venue for a full day, coffee breaks with three snack items in the morning and afternoon, an organised working lunch, use of one rostrum, microphone, projector and screen, and one complimentary Internet line for the organiser, among others.

Visit www.marinabaysands.com

THAILAND

Four Points by Sheraton Bangkok, Sukhumvit 15

has created two new customised events that organisers can weave into their overall meeting programmes at the hotel.

The *ExecutiveChef* is a dinner party where guests compete in a cooking challenge under the guidance of the hotel's own executive chef. Inspired by the popular reality show, *MasterChef*, guests will have to create a dish that will impress the judges. After the event, guests can sit back and enjoy their choice of soup and appetisers, and free flow of beer, wine and soft drinks.

The package, suitable for a group of up to 30 people, is priced from 3,500 baht (US\$119.60) per person or 5,000 baht per team of two pax.

Event planners can also pick *Movies Under The Stars* for a post-meeting gathering. The movie party will be held on the hotel's rooftop Garden Terrace, and is perfect for groups of 15 to 30 people. Priced from 2,000 baht per pax, the package includes selected cocktails, prosecco, beer and wine, as well as a menu of savoury and sweet nibbles.

Contact sarut.maneerat@fourpoints.com

HONG KONG

Hyatt Regency Hong Kong, Tsim Sha Tsui is offering a Summer Executive Meeting Plan, which will be available from April to August this year.

Priced at HK\$750 (US\$96.60) per person, the package includes the use of meeting venues and technology and communications equipment, wireless broadband Internet access, one business lunch and two themed coffee breaks with a selection of refreshments.

Terms apply and prices are subject to a 10 per cent service charge.

Contact hongkong.tsimshatsui@hyatt.com



“Tittle tattle”

Happy birthday Mr President

Veteran hotelier Mohd K Rafin, chief corporate officer of Singapore-based Park Hotel Group, threw a party to celebrate his birthday recently and it was a production worthy of a case study for event planners.

His loving wife Karen Tan, regional director of sales & marketing, Swissotel Hotels & Resorts, conceptualised the theme, Hollywood Glamour, and serendipitously, use the upcoming movie “Still Sexy After Fifty” as tagline (though we think Rafin’s 60). She chose the theme because it had always been Rafin’s dream to be a Hollywood actor or rock star, not hotelier. Now we know.

Held at Swissotel The Stamford, it was Hollywood all the way as guests, who included many industry friends in their Hollywood best, sashayed through a Walk of Fame with cut-out stars and movie posters along the red carpet, complete with the paparazzi behind a red rope stand taking shots of guests with the stars. Rafin looked a million bucks while Tan looked like Marilyn Monroe.

Inside, the setting befitted the theme: black and white with red flowers, candelabras, a star studded menu, star shaped name place cards, no detail was spared. But the best is yet to come.

The opening act, Grease Lightning, was performed by the couple together with the team who worked with them at Hilton Singapore, where they first met. Rafin enacted John Travolta and Karen did Olivia Newton John. The Grease Lightning dancers entered the Ballroom astride a Porsche and the birthday boy made a grand entrance on a Harley Davidson.

There was also a live tribute band from Elvis Presley, performed by Royden Donohue from Australia, a Michael Jackson Thriller Flash Mob performed by childhood friends and family members, and a performance by South African duo, Jaco van Rensburg and Nadia Marianne Buekes, of West-End fame.

Tan was also unforgettable when she enacted Monroe in singing ‘Happy Birthday Mr President’. The sexy birthday cake was designed by Chef Thierry Delourneaux of Fairmont Singapore.

The next time you need an event planner, you know who to call.



Enacting the famous scene at President Kennedy’s birthday party in 1962, Tan serenaded Rafin in true Marilyn Monroe style



From left: Mohd Rafin with industry members from TTG Media, STB and hotels; Grease Lightning Opening Performance; birthday boy, Mohd Rafin, as Hollywood poster boy



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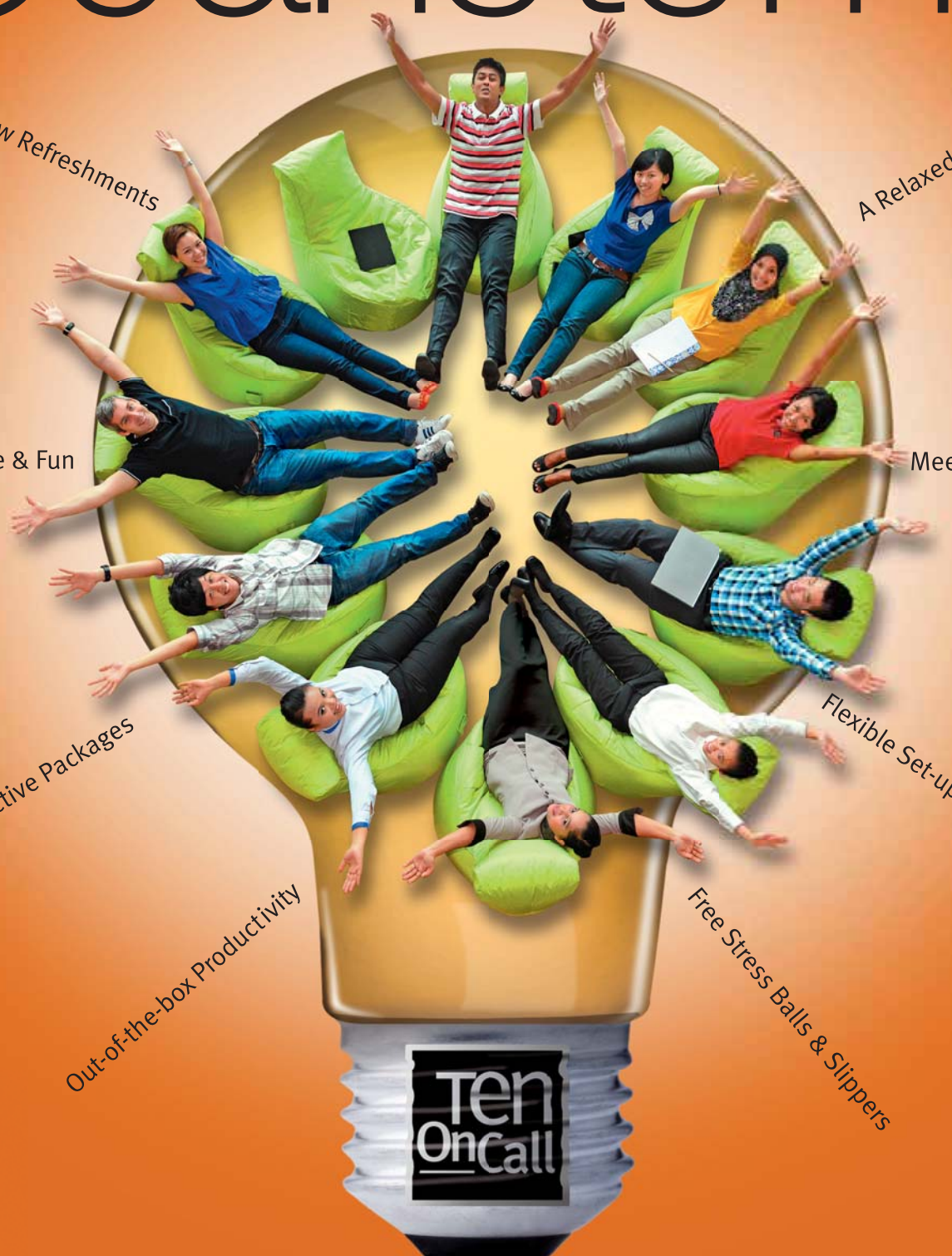
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