

An unpolished gem

Brunei's destination specialists face numerous hurdles in their quest for inbound business events, but they are not giving up.

By **S Puvaneswary**

The business events segment is still very new to the Sultanate, and getting it off the ground will require destination specialists to overcome several hurdles.

An inbound agent who wished to remain anonymous lamented that convincing organisers to hold their event in Brunei is not easy, as the local currency is strong. At the same time, delegates have to adhere to the laws of land, which prohibit alcohol consumption, even at private gatherings. Furthermore, the lack of night entertainment, shopping, world-class attractions and theme parks of international standard also makes it difficult to pitch Brunei as an incentive destination.

So challenging is Brunei for MICE that even domestic companies head overseas for their incentive programmes, noted the agent.

However, inbound agents have found ways to circumnavigate these hurdles.

Khurul Zainie, managing director of MegaBorneo Tour Planner, shared that since it is difficult to sell Brunei as a mono destination for business events due to the lack of attractions, his company combines Brunei with the two Malaysian states on Borneo Island – Sabah and Sarawak – and/or with Kalimantan, the Indonesian portion on the island of Borneo.

He added: “We have marketing representatives in Poland and the Czech Republic who help us market Borneo Island as an incentive destination to Eastern European business event organisers.

“There has been so much negative news about Brunei in media reports, that it has also created curiosity among longhaul markets in Eastern Europe. People are curious enough, and are willing to include Brunei in their business events programme to experience the destination for themselves.”

Khurul said the orangutans are a highlight, with delegates eager to not only see the primates but also be involved in related corporate social responsibility programmes, such as learning about the challenges of orangutan rehabilitation into the wild and work done at the sanctuaries.

“The island of Borneo also has many tribes and live a different lifestyle from that of the West. Business event delegates from the West find this fascinating



▲ Ulu Temburong National Park was the first national park to be established in Brunei

and are keen on visiting the Iban longhouses in Brunei and the multi tribal experiences of Borneo,” he said.

Caroline Ang, executive director of Bonasia Holiday, who targets the Chinese market, said her pitch focuses on Brunei's pristine rainforests and its nature-based attractions.

Ang shared that Chinese incentive groups to Brunei are usually from small and medium-sized enterprises, with no more than 100 participants.

“When we pitch Brunei as a destination, we have to be creative as we are competing with other destinations on price. We have to throw in value-adds,” she said, adding that more inter-governmental support is needed for Brunei to grow its business events potential.

Khurul opined that Brunei could tap the large Muslim travel market for MICE.

“The Muslim market is growing around the world and we cannot ignore it. We should tap this segment by targeting Muslim majority countries such as Bangladesh. We have had a few high-end groups from Bangladesh in the past, and I see the potential for further growth,” he said.

For Mohd Iswandi Maaruf, director of operations with Mulia Hotel, the formation of an active convention bureau is imperative for Brunei. The bureau needs to go out, and promote the destination and bid for international events, as well as educate and train local players.

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Walk down this trail

Kampong Ayer in Bandar Seri Begawan, literally means water village. It comprises a cluster of traditional stilt villages built on the Brunei River and it has been inhabited for several centuries. More than 9,000 people live in Kampong Ayer (left) today, and it is a very important part of Brunei's history, heritage and culture.

The walking trail begins at Kampong Ayer Cultural and Tourism Gallery and takes visitors to view the lifestyle of people living in five villages, namely Kg Lurong Sikuna, Kg Setia 'A', Kg Tamoi Ujung, Kg Peramu and Kg Bakut Berumput. Attractions include the Pottery House, where its owner had landscaped with lots of flowers and potted plants. The walking trail can be done with or without a guide.

ITINERARY

Mulia Hotel

Mulia Hotel, strategically located near the international convention centre in Bandar Seri Begawan, recently renovated its meeting spaces on level two. The three meeting rooms now include state-of-the-art audio-visual equipment and fast wireless Internet connection. They can each host up to 60 people, classroom-style.

Eco Ponies Garden

Located in Kampung Lamunin, Eco Ponies Garden provides the experience of farm-to-table living, while promoting fresh local produce from small-scale farms in Tutong. Visitors can cook the food themselves or have it cooked for them. Workshops can also be arranged on composting and basket weaving.

Ulu Ulu Resort

Considered as one of the best venues in Brunei for teambuilding due to its immaculate setting, Ulu Ulu Resort is surrounded by

50,000 hectares of pristine and untouched rainforest in the heart of Borneo, next to the breathtaking Temburong River.

Sunshine Borneo Tours offers a host of teambuilding activities including kayaking, bamboo rafting and trekking down the canopy walkway.

Freme Adventure Park

Freme Travel Brunei conducts a teambuilding programme at Freme Rainforest Lodge located at Batang Duri, just outside of Temburong National Park.

Participants are tested mentally and physically through white water rafting or kayaking, wall-climbing, abseiling and other games that require teamwork. The programme can be spread out over three days/ two nights, as Freme Rainforest Lodge also provides accommodation.

The Capital Residence Suites

The Capital Residence Suites, which offers both hotel rooms and service residence, has expanded

LINE UP

BIMP EAGA Culinary Challenge

When November 13-15, 2019

Expected turnout 48 chefs and 500 attendees

Asia Expo 2019

When November 27 – December 1, 2019

Expected turnout 230 exhibitors

its offerings with a new block of 42 hotel rooms completed last year. The expansion will bring the total number of hotel rooms to 58, while the number of service residence keys remain at six.

The property is a 15-minute drive from Brunei International Airport. Services include complimentary airport transfer upon arrival and departure, complimentary shuttle service to a few tourist attractions in the city and butler service for hotel guests.

SUP Surfari

SUP Surfari conducts stand-up paddling lessons and eco-tours led by professional instructors who make it safe and suitable even for non-swimmers.

During the lesson, participants are given a full safety briefing and a lesson on stand-up paddling, the different strokes used for kneeling and standing, and how to carry equipment into the water. During the tour, guests are likely to see hornbills, monkeys and other wildlife.



◀ Eco Ponies Garden offers a farm-to-table experience

▶ Water-rafting at Freme Adventure Park



Cambodia's many flavours



More destinations – with improved accessibility and hardware – are stepping out of Siem Reap's shadows to attract corporate events. By **Marissa Carruthers**

An increase in regional flights, coupled with the introduction of international hotels and conference centres have contributed to the expansion of Cambodia's business travel market.

The ancient temples at Angkor Archaeological Park in Siem Reap have been the country's major draw, allowing the city to be positioned as Cambodia's main destination for business events.

However, the capital city has caught up in recent years with the entry of numerous boutique and internationally-branded hotels, as well as upmarket Khmer and Western restaurants. Phnom Penh is now regarded as a hub for meetings and conferences.

Michael James Parker, managing director of Rosewood Phnom Penh, which notes a strong demand from local and international corporates during weekdays, said: "The MICE market is set to grow exponentially in Phnom Penh."

While the meeting and conference segment is growing, Steve Lidgey, general manager at Travel Asia a la Carte, noted incentives remain Cambodia's strongest segment.

He said: "Arguably, incentives are best suited to Cambodia. Besides the historical temples, the country-

▲ Angkor Archaeological Park in Siem Reap has been a main draw for corporate groups

side, resort islands and easy-going way of life means the country is a playground for incentive winners who want local experiences, but also the comfort of quality hotels and resorts."

For Travel Asia a la Carte, Siem Reap remains the top choice, where delegates can visit Angkor Wat, carry out teambuilding activities, and be hosted in a huge range of four- and five-star hotels.

Added Lidgey: "(This can be done) while enjoying the ease of getting around a small town without the traffic hassles of large cities such as Bangkok. Cambodia is also less well-known, and companies look for more exotic destinations as they have already visited more traditional places in previous years."

Virginie Kury, general manager at Asian Trails Cambodia, shared that the sprinkling of islands off the Cambodian coast are also rising stars among corporate groups. Developments on Koh Rong, including the opening of the luxurious The Royal Sands on Koh Rong, have added to the country's appeal.

"There are now international-standards beach resorts with a high number of rooms," she said.

However, Lidgey said higher capacity is essential for Koh Rong to cater to large corporate groups.

Factors that have helped push the country's MICE appeal include the opening of conference centres at Sokha Phnom Penh Hotel, and Sokha Siem Reap Resort and Convention Centre. The recent opening of international hotels, including Rosewood Phnom Penh and Courtyard by Marriott Phnom Penh, has also helped position the capital as a MICE contender.

The real catalyst, however, is the country's improved air access.

Lidgey said: "The largest improvement is the number of regional flights, which have increased. This means delegates from all over the world can easily reach Cambodia in the shortest time."

Despite this, the majority of airlines in Cambodia now belong to Chinese groups. Kury said the local authorities give priority to international flights to China and other Asian destinations, rather than push for longhaul connections.

"Cambodia has become a hub for Chinese airlines as the government offers them very attractive deals," she said.

Looking ahead, Phnom Penh's MICE potential is predicted to continue growing, as the country becomes more accessible and an increase in business-related products grow.

Parker said: "With the growth in direct flights from China and South-east Asia to Phnom Penh, the Kingdom has never been more accessible."

But for the country to remain competitive, more destinations need to be developed.

Noted Lidgey: "Cambodia needs to market and grow destinations besides Siem Reap. We cannot rely on just having an excellent product in one location as companies always look for something new. Business is being lost to destinations like Danang (Vietnam) which was not on the map a few years ago."

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▲ Tatai Waterfall in Koh Kong, Cambodia

Good for the soul

As more businesses seek to include CSR into incentive and teambuilding travel, Cambodia has become an outstanding destination option.

A growing collection of community-based tourism initiatives have opened up a wealth of potential for companies wanting to give back, and travel companies are getting more creative as options continue to expand.

The development of emerging destinations has helped to push the sector. Examples include Hanchey Bamboo Resort in Kampong Cham, a wellness retreat that caters to teambuilding and incentive groups. The resort also acts as a training school for underprivileged locals in the area.

Other community projects have cropped up in Siem Reap and remote Koh Kong, specifically in the Cardamom Mountains, while the remote province of Monduliri is emerging as a top destination for eco- and nature-based activities.

Cambodian Rural Discovery Tours has curated a range of community- and nature-based activities that run throughout Kratie Province, and parts of Monduliri Province.

ITINERARY

The Bridge Club Hotel

Located close to fast-developing Koh Pich – or Diamond Island – in Phnom Penh, the four-star Bridge Club Hotel features 900 keys, an indoor, outdoor and rooftop swimming pool, meeting facilities and a business centre, and gym.

The 45-storey tower also boasts sprawling views of the capital city below, a luxury mall on the ground floors and is positioned in an area that is currently undergoing huge regeneration.

The Silk House

Located on the outskirts of Phnom Penh, The Silk House combines a social enterprise initiative with compact meeting space that is perfect for intimate, casual gatherings. Serving as a living museum that aims to revive Cambodia's famed golden silk industry, visitors can learn first-hand about ancient hand-weaving and dyeing techniques in a fresh setting. The Silk House can also be hired for private events.

Kbach Gallery

Aimed at showcasing Cambodia's growing collection of contemporary artists, Kbach Gallery recently

opened its doors at the innovative Factory Phnom Penh.

Offering the option to host an event or meeting with a bit of edge, the spacious gallery – set in a former garment factory – can be hired for private events of up to 150 people, with smaller rooms complete with an array of art, available for smaller meetings.

Cuts

Located on level 38 of the Cambodian capital's Vattanac Capital Tower, Rosewood Phnom Penh's latest opening comes in the form of Cuts, which specialises in steak and seafood.

Offering fine food served in a casual yet stylish space overlook-

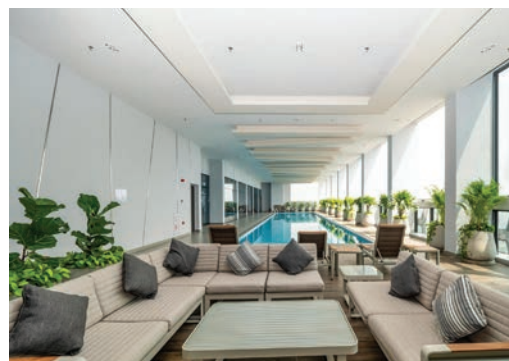
ing the sprawling city below, the restaurant features a spacious dining area, a grill room, private dining suites and a Wine Vault that is home to 3,000 wine bottles.

FCC Angkor

The historic FCC Angkor in Siem Reap re-opened its doors in August after extensive renovations.

The colonial property is now managed by Avani Hotels & Resorts with the US\$7-million restoration spearheaded by Phnom Penh-based Bloom Architecture and Dutch designer Marijke Whitcraft. The project saw the addition of 60 rooms, new bar Scribe, a spa, pool and lounge, and an upgrade to its lush tropical gardens.

▼ (From left) A steak dish from Cuts; and The Bridge Club Hotel



LINE UP

Cambodia International Construction Industry Expo

When December 5-7, 2019

Expected turnout 10,000 visitors and 200 exhibitors

International Conference on Environment and Natural Science

When February 4-5, 2020

Expected attendants 1,000 and 50 exhibitors

Defying all odds



The scrapping of a MICE directorate in 2014 plunged Indonesia's MICE industry into the doldrums, but determined stakeholders are doing all they can to lift the business. By **Mimi Hudoyo** and **Alez Kurniawan**

The business events industry in Indonesia has gone through numerous ups and downs in the last decade, with the biggest obstacle facing stakeholders created by the country's very own government.

Budi Tirtawisata, chairman of the Indonesia Convention and Exhibition Bureau (INACEB), said: "The root of the problem is the Tourism Law, whereby tourism is identified as a leisure activity, while business events are identified as a type of business and not a market segment."

It resulted in the government focusing its strategy and budget squarely on the development of leisure travel, and neglecting the needs of the business events industry, he lamented.

In 2014, the Ministry of Tourism made a decision to scrap the directorate of MICE, sending shock waves

▲ Gedung Sate, a historical landmark in Bandung

through the country's business events community.

Hosea Andreas Runkat, chairman of Indonesian Exhibition Companies Association (IECA), recalled feelings of abandonment among his peers. Without government backing, Indonesia lost power in bidding for international events. He described the situation as being worse than the crippling 2008 global financial crisis.

Ketut Jaman, managing director of Melali MICE, recalled that the hurt was made more severe when the central government went on to ban government bodies from holding meetings in hotels as part of an austerity drive. Between 2014 and 2016, Melali MICE saw a 50 per cent decline in the number of government business events in Bali.

Instead of wallowing in despair, Indonesia's busi-



ness events players took over the reins to steer business back on path as well as they could.

INACEB submitted a letter of recommendation in September with a short-, medium, and long-term plan to the Minister of State Secretary. It sought to ensure that the MICE sector has a proportional position in the government and be allocated a sufficient budget.

“We understand that revising the law will take time. But as the current government is focused on getting more revenue than arrival numbers, (we want to show that) business events is a means to achieve the target,” Budi said.

While the long-term plan is obtaining a revision of the law to classify business events as a market segment, the medium-term plan involved reactivating the Tourism Promotion Board (ITPB) to promote both leisure and business segments. The short-term recommendation, was the call for the Ministry of Tourism to appoint a deputy to be in charge of business events, Budi revealed.

On a positive note, Andreas pointed out that Indonesia’s MICE industry has been able to thrive despite having to face an uphill climb. He said that the

emergence of various world-class convention centres and event venues opening across the country – such as Bali Nusa Dua Convention Center in 2011 and Indonesian Convention Exhibition in Tangerang, Banten in 2015 – was living proof of Indonesia’s MICE success.

Another achievement that Andreas indicated was ICCA’s recognition of Indonesia’s new MICE cities such as Bandung, Yogyakarta and Surakarta.

He said: “In the ICCA Statistics Report, these cities were ranked far below Jakarta and Bali. However, it (their inclusion in the report) proves that the MICE industry there has grown.”

Andreas also noted that many foreign PEOs have opened, or are opening, offices in Indonesia, attracted by the country’s trade potential. He believes that their presence will provide learning opportunities for local exhibition players.

“These PEOs will bring what they have in their home countries to Indonesia. I expect them to create new events to inspire us,” he opined.

Despite the lack government support, Susilowani (Susi) Daud, president director of PACTO Convex, said Indonesia’s status as a business events destination is regarded positively in the global marketplace. She credited the country’s economic and political stability as well as safety for this reputation.

Industry players agree that the road ahead remains an arduous one until the government comes around.

They, however, remain optimistic and believe that a better business climate is on the horizon as the government starts to value tourism revenue over tourism arrivals for the next five years.

The positive shift is partly due to the successful hosting of the IMF-World Bank Annual Meeting, which attracted 34,000 participants from 189 countries to Bali last year. The event drew the attention of the central government and allowed it to realise that business events can bring substantial economic impact.

“The root of the problem is the Tourism Law, whereby tourism is identified as a leisure activity, while business events are identified as a type of business and not a market segment.”

Budi Tirtawisata

Chairman, Indonesia Convention and Exhibition Bureau



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Flying to greater heights

Yogyakarta has been trying to catch up with sister cities Jakarta and Bali to become a business events destination but limited connectivity has made it a challenge to attract major events.

The opening of Yogyakarta International Airport (YIA; left) in the south-western part of Yogyakarta is expected to provide relief. YIA started partial operations last May, servicing domestic airlines for now. It is expected to be fully operational by December this year, with international flights slated to arrive in mid-2020.

YIA features a 3,250m-long, 45m-wide runway, allowing wide-bodied aircraft to land comfortably. It also has 22 aircraft parking stands, 10 aerobridges, 96 check-in counters, and a passenger terminal that can serve 20 million passengers a year.

To make it easier for travellers, a toll road between the city and YIA is under construction. In the meantime, trains are available between Wojo Station and Tugu Station in the city centre.

Other roads connecting Yogyakarta, Solo and Semarang – including places of interest like Borobudur and Prambanan Temples – are also being improved as part of the Borobudur Super Priority Development (one of the 10 New Balis).

ITINERARY

Harper Wahid Hasyim Medan

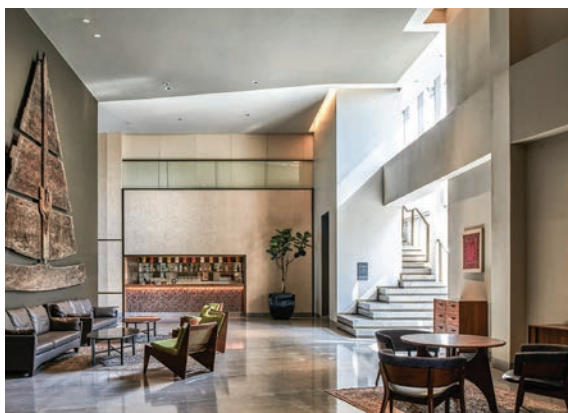
Archipelago International has opened its third hotel in Medan, Harper Wahid Hasyim – Medan. Located in the centre of the city's culinary and entertainment hub, the Medan hotel is a short drive from various tourist spots, such as Durian Ukok, Upside Down World Medan, Rahmat International Wildlife Museum & Gallery. The hotel offers 89 rooms and suites, four meeting rooms, and a Rustik Bistro & Bar.

M Bahalap Hotel

The M Bahalap Hotel has opened in Palangkaraya, Central Kalimantan, with 227 rooms. Facilities on-site include a ballroom with a capacity of up to 3,500, and 10 meeting rooms ranging from 50 seats to 350 seats, restaurants, sky lounge, gym and spa. The hotel is located a 10 minutes' drive away from Tjilik Riwt Airport, 10 minutes from central of town and tourist attractions.

Samisara Grand Ballroom

Culture Royale, a group of companies in the hospitality, F&B and catering businesses, has opened the Samisara Grand Ballroom within the Sopo Del Tower in Mega Kuningan Jakarta. The six-metre-high, pillarless ballroom can accommodate up to 1,500 for a standing reception, or 360



classroom style. Apart from the ballroom, there are two VIP rooms with a dedicated elevator, as well as five meeting rooms with a capacity of 144 seats. The ceilings are fitted with hooks and power to ease event preparations.

Alila SCBD Jakarta

Alila SCBD Jakarta has unveiled two event spaces – the Artisan Bar and Event Gallery – with both available for corporate bookings.

Situated at ground level next to the lobby, the 512m² Artisan Bar offers a high-ceiling and is furnished with curated artworks from across Indonesia.

Meanwhile, the 714m² Event Gallery on the third floor offers a U-shaped spaced that is enclosed by floor-to-ceiling windows. It is connected to the hotel's outdoor Catwalk Pool and terrace, offering a spill-out area surrounded by skyline views.

▲ (From left)
Alila SCBD
Jakarta's Artisan
Bar; kick back and
relax at the Loca
Luna Bay Club



Loca Luna Bay Club

Located on the rooftop of The Crystal Luxury Bay Resort, Loca Luna serves up tasty Spanish fare, as well as some heart-thumping music with seven DJs on the roster. Loca Luna is available for corporate buyouts, and is suitable for welcome receptions and product launches for up to 700 people. A lead time of one month is required for venue buyouts.

Café del Mar

Iconic sunset bar Café del Mar brings its Ibiza beach club vibes to Bali with the opening of its first Asia outpost in Canggu. With its regal white exteriors inspired by the OG Café del Mar in Ibiza, the Bali branch features a 1,000m² infinity pool, private VIP cabanas, and an assortment of bars that can hold a total capacity of 2,000 people. There is also a Mediterranean restaurant on site.

A fine reward



New hotels, rich culture and pristine nature make Laos a rising favourite among incentive groups desiring something unique, writes **Marissa Carruthers**

Laos is emerging as a top destination that ticks all the boxes for innovative incentive travel as new offerings help plant it on the map.

A major game-changer in the country's burgeoning MICE landscape is the recent introduction of products and facilities that can cater to larger groups.

Georgie Walsh, general manager, Diethelm Travel Laos, said: "In the last decade, options for MICE groups have expanded immensely, especially in Luang Prabang."

She noted in 2010, the country's top tourist destinations could only receive groups of about 60 pax maximum. "Even at this number, groups were split across separate hotels and had to have activities swapped."

In contrast, today, there are properties with enough rooms for groups of more than 100 pax. New activities include Pha Tad Ke Botanical Garden and Heuan Chan Heritage, while restaurants, such as Manda de Laos and Le Calao, can cater for more than 100 pax.

Andrea Vinsonneau, events manager at EXO Travel Laos, echoed this sentiment, adding that the opening of the Pullman Luang Prabang in July 2018 has dramatically changed things. The 123-key property also boasts a conference centre for up to 300 pax.

Vinsonneau said Laos previously lost business because of the lack of facilities for large groups. She said: "The Pullman has massively changed things, and as more hotels with more rooms and facilities come along, that will continue."

Improved connectivity has also been a key player in driving forward business travel, opined Laurent Granier, co-founder and general manager, Laos Mood Travel.

The country has direct connections with four South-

▲ Picturesque
Nam Song River
in Vang Vieng,
Laos

east Asian hubs and several to China. Thai Smile operates an early-morning flight between Bangkok and Luang Prabang while Thai Airways recently introduced a larger aircraft to its night flight from Vientiane to Bangkok.

Industry players say Laos will continue to do well as an incentive travel destination.

Ora-uan Mahapol, manager, MICE by ICS, said Laos is especially popular for small incentive groups seeking more intimate and unique experiences.

Added Mahapol: "The rich culture and history provide wellness, cultural and art-based events. Charming Indochinese boutique hotels and renovated villas provide a chic backdrop for product launches, while the wild untouched nature is the perfect playground for adventurous teambuilding activities."

Meanwhile, EXO welcomes incentive and team-building groups of 20 to 80 participants, with Vinsonneau noting that Laos is becoming increasingly attractive as an add-on for small groups, such as board meetings, looking for a boutique destination.

Since the Pullman's soft opening in July 2018, Patrick Basset, Accor's chief operating officer for Upper Southeast and Northeast Asia and the Maldives, has noticed a shift in focus.

He said: "We see a good balance between meetings, incentive groups, conferencing and events, and we believe the whole segment has high potential in Laos. Traditionally, MICE has been weak due to the country's small average room inventory, lack of meeting facilities, limited flight connectivity and strict UNESCO site regulations."

Looking to the future, stakeholders claim Lao holds huge potential as more hotels, conference centre and activities are unveiled. Basset added that the opening of the Vientiane-Boten Railway Route in 2022, will bring increased demand from Thailand and China, allowing for greater MICE business.

However, Mahapol warned: "This is not your 'run of the mill' MICE destination; it requires professional organisers who understand the uniqueness of Laos."



Building a bright future

Malaysia is benefiting from strong government directives to support the local MICE industry and a committed private sector. By **S Puvaneswary**

In 2010, with the launch of Malaysia's Economic Transformation Programme, an organisation was created and tasked with establishing the country as a leading business events destination.

That organisation was Malaysia Convention & Exhibition Bureau (MyCEB), whose strategic priority is to attract high-yield business travellers. Moreover, business events were recognised as a key contributor to the country's acquisition of a developed nation status.

From its establishment in 2010 and up to 2018, MyCEB and its strategic partners secured 1,100 international business events that contributed an estimated RM8.5 billion (US\$2 billion) in economic impact. In the same period, MyCEB provided support to 2,278 events with the aim of increasing average attendance, length of stay and spending in Malaysia.

In January 2016, MyCEB commissioned a study to review the health of Malaysia's business events industry through a series of consultative workshops and

▲ A view of Kuala Lumpur City Centre

interviews with business events industry stakeholders. The goal was to evaluate gaps, brainstorm solutions and chart Malaysia's future in business events. As a result, a national business events roadmap with clear goals, designated roles and performance measurements was drawn to power the country's business events industry to 2020 and beyond.

According to the roadmap, by 2020, Malaysia's business events industry will deliver 16,720 new jobs, RM3.9 billion gross national income and 2.9 million business events visitors.

Zulkefli Sharif, CEO of the bureau, told *TTGmice* that the roadmap is on track. He projects eight per cent of the targeted 30 million arrivals next year will be business event visitors, from the current six per cent.

With 2020 fast approaching, MyCEB and various industry associations such as Business Events Council Malaysia (BECM) have started work on a new roadmap for the next decade.



LINE UP

Asia Pacific Physics Conference 2019

When November 17-22, 2019

Expected turnout 500

Economic impact RM7.7 million

Asian Seed Congress 2019

When November 24-29, 2019

Expected turnout 1,000

Economic impact RM6.5 million

19th International Congress of Infectious Diseases

When February 20-23, 2020

Expected turnout 2,400

Economic impact RM32.3 million

behalf of relevant associations for hosting of international events in Malaysia. This commitment from the government will help us to become a preferred business events destination in Asia.”

Alan Pryor, chairman of BECM, shares the same optimism. Illustrating BECM’s commitment to realising Malaysia’s MICE goals, Pryor said BECM is working with MyCEB to develop a terms of reference for research and data collection, as well as an advocacy kit to help it engage government and stakeholders more effectively.

“We are also re-visiting the MYCEB Business Events Roadmap 2020 and the harmonisation of industry education training, certification and accreditation. All these initiatives will have a phased approach and will take some time, but our vision is to have all materialise to deliver a concrete and sustainable impact for the business events industry in Malaysia, beyond the coming decade,” he added.

Pryor, who is also the general manager at Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre, projected that sustainability “will remain a primary focus and will influence where and how events are executed”, and as such future venues must be “designed to reflect sustainable design and sustainable practices”.

Zulkefli revealed that MyCEB is intensifying efforts to attract more Asian business events, in line with the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture Malaysia’s strategic direction to attract more Asian visitors. Besides the traditional MICE markets of China, India and South Korea, the bureau is now eyeing the incentive markets of Vietnam, Taiwan and Indonesia.

“Asian markets provide quick wins, high growth numbers as well as volume,” he remarked.

The exhibitions segment is also getting MyCEB’s attention, as the country expands its exhibition spaces. Setia SPICE Convention Centre Penang opened in 2017, followed by Malaysia International Trade and Exhibition Centre (MITEC) last year, while Sabah International Convention Centre is currently under development.

To fill these venues, MyCEB intends to gear up its participation in UK and US tradeshow next year, besides those that it is already investing in, such as AIME, IMEX, IT&CM China, IT&CM Asia and IBTM World. It is also encouraging and supporting local exhibition organisers to create more homegrown events.

Zulkefli said: “The future of business events looks bright as we have strong commitment and support from industry players and government agencies.

“Since this year, every ministry has been tasked to set up a dedicated focal point to facilitate requests from MyCEB on



“Asian (MICE) markets provide quick wins, high growth numbers as well as volume.”

Zulkefli Sharif
CEO, MyCEB

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Coastal getaway

Desaru Coast (left) in the southern state of Johor is a young destination, having been officially launched on July 5, 2019. Boasting a 17km stretch of pristine beach along with resorts, hotels and villas bearing international five-star brands, Desaru Coast has the potential to become a preferred destination for both holidays and business events.

Event planners have their pick of accommodation and event venues from The Westin Desaru Coast Resort, Hard Rock Hotel Desaru Coast, Anantara Desaru Coast Resort & Villas (opening December 1) and One&Only Desaru Coast (by the year-end).

To bring recreational fun into corporate programmes, planners can consider Desaru Coast Riverside, a retail destination; Adventure Waterpark Desaru Coast, one of the world's largest water parks; and two championship golf courses, designed by four-time major champion Ernie Els and international golf champion Vijay Singh, as well as state-of-the-art golf training facilities such as The Els Performance Golf Academy and The Little Easy.

ITINERARY

The Grill

Le Petit Chef, the world's smallest chef at only 58mm tall, takes centre stage at The Grill at TREC Kuala Lumpur where he prepares a Tropical Colada with help from an active volcano and a tropical jungle. A product of advanced 3D projection mapping technology, Le Petit Chef promises a memorable dining experience. The Grill sits up to 60 diners, and is open daily from 17.00 to 02.00.

Bukit Bintang tour

A tour of lively Bukit Bintang road in Kuala Lumpur is conducted every evening, during which a guide regals participants with tales of the city's history and heritage. Highlights include a bird's-eye view of the Kuala Lumpur skyline, optical illusions in a 'distorted room', and a special meal comprising local dishes and drinks. The guided walk starts at 16.00 from The Federal Hotel Kuala Lumpur and covers a distance of 2.5km.

Monopoly Mansion by Sirocco

The 290-key Monopoly Mansion by Sirocco in Kuala Lumpur will soft open this December as the world's first Monopoly-themed hotel. Inspired by the popular

board game by Hasbro Inc., the property will comprise 14 floors, each featuring traits of a particular country that Mr Monopoly, a fictional character from the game, has visited.

Event planners rejoice, as the unique hotel will offer function rooms including a junior ballroom for up to 174 people in theatre seating and a grand ballroom for up to 322 people. There are three other meeting rooms to support breakout events.

Penampang Village

Borneo Trails in Sabah offers a half-day cultural experience at the Penampang Village, hub of the Kadazandusun community in Sabah.

Participants will visit the *tamu*, or local market, where they can purchase local food products and handicraft, as well as try local delicacies such as sago worms and rice wine. After a trip to the market with the help of a guide, participants will proceed to Madam Nurhanidah's Kitchen for a hands-on cooking class to create typical Borneo dishes such as *hivana* (pickled fish salad), *lihing* chicken (chicken with local rice wine), and rice cooked with yam and wrapped in a leaf.

The Penampang Village experience is good for 20 people each time.



▲ (From above)
Visit Penampang
Village and try
your hand at a
cooking class; the
unique Monopoly
Mansion by
Sirocco





Better late than never

This emerging nation holds enormous opportunities for the MICE sector, and is playing all the right cards to garner interest. By **Marissa Carruthers**

Incentive travel traditionally dominates Myanmar's MICE landscape, but industry players say its meeting and conference draw is growing.

Edwin Briels, managing director of Khiri Travel Myanmar, said: "Ten years ago, the focus was on incentives and offering real, amazing and unique experiences rather than having meetings or conferences."

He added the lack of basic infrastructure, such as Internet, reliable electricity and visa on arrival, and few facilities to host conferences and meetings meant this sector remained undeveloped.

▲ A fisherman on Inle Lake

But May Myat Mon Win, general manager of Chatrium Hotel Royal Lake Yangon, opined that recent years have seen the country's meetings and conference landscape develop as more upscale hotels, attractions, activities join the scene. This includes the opening of several convention centres in Yangon and Mandalay.

However, Zarni Htwe, managing director of Adventure Myanmar Tours & Incentives, said that despite growth in the MICE market, a major challenge is competing with regional countries.

Zarni added: "Nowadays, the destination is well-known but due to the competitive environment, not only among local DMCs but also among destinations, it is more and more difficult to get business."

The quality of events in recent years is another development in the market, noted Cyrus Pun, CEO of Memories Group. He said: "We have seen a significant increase in business activity in Myanmar, and this has led to rapid development in the MICE industry. This growth can be seen in the number, size and sophistication of events and much higher-level curated options now available."

But due to infrastructure challenges, bigger groups remain limited to Yangon, while Pun noted that smaller parties can "easily venture to lesser-travelled areas of the country in search of a unique experience."

Factors pushing the destination's business travel landscape include the entry of five-star hotels with large meetings rooms and ballrooms, better flight connections, the introduction of an e-visa, and cheap and reliable mobile Internet.

Looking ahead, industry players believe the destination holds great potential, although infrastructure in Yangon and Mandalay has to be further improved, with Bagan's potential – as a conference and sightseeing destination – be better developed.

Opined Pun: "I expect we will see more interest in MICE from abroad, as well as further development of the domestic MICE market."

"Myanmar is a late-comer and we have the late-comer's advantage. This is the place of transformation, which should produce more results in coming years. The future is bright and MICE market can only (continue to grow)," added Win.

LINE UP

Agri Livestock Myanmar 2019

When December 5-7, 2019

Expected turnout 20,000

Global Mandarin Development Conference

When February 22-23, 2020

Expected turnout 500

Myanmar International Food and Drink Festival

When March 6-8, 2020

Expected turnout 5,000

CHECK
THIS
OUT

Banking on Bagan

In July, Myanmar's ancient capital of Bagan (right) was bestowed the status of UNESCO World Heritage. The site – home to more than 3,500 stupas, temples, monasteries and structures built between the 11th and 13th centuries – has been chasing the coveted title since 1995. Industry players believe that this status holds huge potential for the business travel landscape.

Similar to some of the temples at Cambodia's Angkor Wat Archaeological Park, where grand private events and gala dinners can be held, it is hoped that Bagan will be able to follow in Angkor Wat's footsteps to host impressive conferences and meetings. This would be particularly spectacular during the country's green season, when the weather at Bagan is perfect for visitors. The city also has plenty of hotel rooms to accommodate large groups.



ITINERARY

Awei Pila Dive Center

Awei Pila resort has opened a diving centre in the Mergui Archipelago, offering all levels of PADI diving courses including for first-time divers. Once certified, guests can join instructors at 12 dive sites with depths ranging from 12 to 30 metres.

Balloons Over Bagan

The company recently launched Balloon Safaris Loikaw, a hot-air balloon flight in Kayah State.

Hot-air balloon rides in Loikaw take off at sunrise on a daily basis throughout the year and can carry six to eight passengers per flight. Air time lasts one to two hours, and balloons will reach a maximum altitude of 10,000 feet. Flights cost US\$300 per person,

and private charters for groups up to eight persons can also be requested.

Quick Trips, Short Tours

Sampan Travel has launched a series of short itineraries that make the perfect add-on to a business trip or incentive package.

The journeys allow guests to explore some of the best of rural Myanmar within a compact schedule, such as hiking in Kyaukme, climbing up Mount Kyaikhtiyo, or exploring the ruins of the ancient Pyu civilisation.

Avis Myanmar

Avis has expanded its regional network with a new office located at Inya Lake Hotel in Yangon. Avis Myanmar offers both short- and

long-term car rental solutions with a fresh new fleet, ranging from sedan and SUVs to pick-up trucks and vans.

Avis Myanmar also provides professional chauffeurs for various services such as airport transfer, and event chauffeur-drive service. For individuals, rentals start from US\$39 per day.

Centara Hotels & Resorts

The Thai-based hospitality group has announced it will develop six hotels in the country.

Three of KMA Hotels' existing properties in Inle, Naypyitaw and Taungoo will undergo refurbishment, while there will be three new properties in Bagan and Than Daung. They will all operate as upscale and upper-upscale Centara and Centara Boutique Collection brands. The first to open will be Centara Paradise Inle Lake Resort & Spa in 4Q2019.

Pandaw

Pandaw will soon launch a new 14-cabin K-class ship to meet increased demand for Myanmar cruises, mainly on the Upper Irrawaddy, Chindwin and Delta expeditions into more remote and less-visited parts of the country.

The safari-style vessels offer outdoor and indoor dining, run-round promenades and indoor and outdoor living space. It will be named the *Kanee Pandaw*, and is currently being built in Mandalay.

▼ (From left)
Explore the
waters of Mergui
Archipelago;
cruise the
country's rivers
with Pandaw





Reaching for glory days

Private sector efforts are helping to blast the Philippines back to its heyday of strong inbound business events performance, writes **Rosa Ocampo**

While the Philippines has not kept abreast with its Asian neighbours in drawing international business events, milestones over the past decade are lifting it closer to its aspiration of reclaiming its place as one of the region's premier destinations.

As an archipelago of 7,641 islands, the Philippine challenge is to make them accessible and connected by air, land and sea domestically and at least regionally, which is gradually taking place.

Another milepost is the private sector efforts in building convention centres not just in metro Manila but in other urban destinations too, in the absence of government investment. SMX Convention Centre, for example, has invested in eight convention centres all over the country and more are forthcoming while the Iloilo Convention Centre and the Marriott Grand Ballroom are also birthed from private sector money.

Agnes Pacis, vice president-sales and marketing, SMX Convention Center, explained: "We would like to place the Philippines in the global market, as most of the events happening in the Philippines are still local".

▲ Makati, the business district of Metro Manila, lights up at night

The shortage of accommodation is also being addressed as inbound traffic grows, with more homegrown hotel brands being developed and proving to be steady competitors of international brands.

For one of the most successful homegrown hotel brands, Seda, the strongest business events markets are mainly from Asia – Japan, South Korea, Singapore and Taiwan, according to Seda Hotels group director of sales and marketing, Melissa Carlos. The US is a strong source market too, outside of this region.

Carlos said "healthy economies which mean more disposable income that creates opportunities for MICE, cooperation among countries in the region, intellectual development, and IT accessibility" can expand Asia-Pacific's business events potential.

While the Philippines has a yoyo love-hate relationship with China, Duterte administration has cast a rosy light on the two since 2016. China's former ban on its citizens travelling to the Philippines has been replaced by an open season, with both business and group travelers from the mainland becoming the Philippines' second biggest source market.

The business events sector has not fully taken advantage of this coy relationship that is shoring up the real estate markets and hotel occupancies, but the industry is starting to see events coming from China.

Another milepost is Boracay's six-month closure last year for its continued rehabilitation, stalling business events particularly incentive trips and corporate meetings. However, the bold move demonstrates the gov-

DESTINATION : PHILIPPINES

ernment's commitment to cleaning up destinations. Hopefully, lessons learned from Boracay will not be lost on other areas including Bohol and Palawan.

Meanwhile, the biggest development in the country's business event community is the comprehensive MICE roadmap 2030, detailing how the Philippines can attract more corporate gatherings from Asia and the Middle East a decade from now.

For Tourism Promotions Board (TPB) COO, Marie Venus Tan, the "battle cry is Bid! Bid! Bid!" for international events, create and develop MICE cities including Iloilo and Bacolod, and being in international MICE shows, among other things.

Presently, there is an urgent need for the creation of a national convention and visitors bureau. Right now, there is just a small department within the TPB that takes care of business events; TPB is the marketing arm of the Department of Tourism.

The defunct Philippine Visitors and Convention Bureau was successful in attracting business events, recalled Renato Padilla, general manager of the Philippine Convention and Exhibition Center (PICC). In other countries, cities have their own convention bureau while the Philippines has none, he lamented.

Another tricky issue is the Philippines' lack of big convention and exhibition centres, which keeps it from taking advantage of the international trend for

mega events. The country's largest convention centres, SMX Manila and PICC, dwarf in comparison with those in other Asian countries but they could no longer expand, said Marisa Nallana, president of PETCO.

"To be more competitive in Asia, we will have to build bigger spaces to accommodate the demand of international events," she said.

"We would like to place the Philippines in the global market, as most of the events happening in the Philippines are still local."

Agnes Pacis

Vice president-sales and marketing,
SMX Convention Center



LINE UP

Philippine Franchise Association Franchise Show

When March 2020

Expected turnout More than 53,000

Philippine World Building and Construction Exposition

When March 18-22, 2020

Expected turnout 18,300

ASEAN Gaming Summit

When March 17-19, 2020

Expected turnout More than 400



Manila's restoration

Manila's new mayor means business. Soon after ascending the post several months ago, Francisco Domagoso began a thorough clean up of the woefully neglected city: ridding the thoroughfares of rubbish and popular shopping areas of illegal sellers that have overtaken the streets, while monuments and statues that have been used as urinals have been scrubbed.

Coming up next is a circuit that will connect tourism areas – each undergoing renovation – of Spanish-era Intramuros (left), Rizal Park, National Museum and Binondo Chinatown, revealed Solfia Arborador, director, Manila Tourism and Cultural Affairs Bureau.

She said the bureau is also curating the city's over 3,000 heritage areas and structures, of which many have been forgotten and demolished, and creating a tourism masterplan for Manila's six political districts that will be divided into eight tourism hubs.

It will take some time to restore Manila to its former glory, but a thorough cleaning is a good start for the city that was for centuries the country's political and financial centre.

ITINERARY

Sheraton Manila's ColLab

Freshly-minted Sheraton Manila is the first hotel in the Philippines to offer co-working spaces. Called ColLab, it has six high-tech room categories and a 415m² common area designed for product launches, networking events and gatherings for start-ups and other businesses.

Seda Lio

Seda Lio, the first Seda resort, is the latest accommodation to open at the Lio Tourism Estate in Palawan. It offers 153 keys, four kilometres of ivory beach, and photogenic views of mangrove forests, the bay and ancient limestone cliffs. In keeping with the estate's eco-friendly and sustainable creed, Seda Lio's height doesn't exceed the coconut treeline and the buildings fronting the beach have been built some distance from the waterline.

National Museum of Natural History

The new National Museum of Natural History is proving to be an exciting venue for business events. The renovated colonial building has a soaring ceiling spanning several storeys that offer a natural acoustic for musical and other performances, while the atrium wrapped around the Tree of Life sculpture adds an extra dash of novelty to meetings and conferences. The museum's spacious grounds are ideal for alfresco cocktails.

SMX Convention Center Olongapo

Launched in September, the SMX Convention Center Olongapo spans 2,130m² including five function rooms and seven meeting rooms for an audience of 2,000 to an exclusive conference for 10.



▲ Sheraton Manila

Park Inn by Radisson North Edsa

Opened in July, Park Inn by Radisson North Edsa addresses the shortage of hotels in that part of Quezon City. The 238-key hotel linked to SM City North Edsa mixed-use development also has a ballroom for up to 600 pax, a function room for up to 100, an outdoor pool and a gym. The hotel's Living Room concept transforms the lobby into a shared space for guests to socialise, read or surf the Internet.

Anthony Bourdain's Food Trail

A product of Blue Horizons Travel and Tours, this tour takes corporate groups on the famed food critic's culinary journey to Pampanga, the country's culinary capital. The tour tackles the syncretistic food culture from past colonisers and other influences that were adapted to local ingredients and palate. A side trip to the province's main tourist attractions is thrown in for a bit of culture.

Mindoro trekking

Jungle trekking in Mindoro offers not just the sun, sea and sand of Puerto Galera but also an adventure to Bondong jungle where corporate groups get to meet the ancient tribe of Mangyans in their dwelling untouched by modernity. The trek also offers a glimpse of exotic wildlife including *tamaraw* or water buffalo that can only be found in Mindoro.



◀ National Museum of Natural History



◀ Aninuan beach in Puerto Galera

Firmly in pole position

The city-state's MICE sector is thriving thanks to several recent high-profile events. **Pamela Chow** shares how it stays ahead of the competition



▲ The glittering Singapore skyline at night

Singapore continues to defend its title as Asia-Pacific's leading business events city, having been crowned Top Asia-Pacific Meeting City for 17 consecutive years by ICCA.

The UIA Global Rankings 2018 also placed Singapore at the top of its international meeting country chart while the Cvent 2019 List of Top Meeting Destinations in Asia saw the city-state in pole position for four years in a row.

A strong testament to the destination's appeal was the monumental 2018 North Korea–United States Singapore Summit between country heads Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump. Held on June 12, 2018, the summit propelled the country into the global spotlight. The event clearly demonstrated the country's ability to deliver high-profile, sensitive gatherings, as well as her high levels of safety and security.

Since the landmark meeting, corporate meetings

from the US at Capella Singapore – where the Summit was held – have risen.

Diana Lee, director of sales & conference services, told *TTGmice*: “The meeting got us a lot of media coverage and many Americans, in particular, have since then showed keen interest in Singapore and our hotel.”

The accompanying stronger overall interest in the hotel's event facilities has encouraged the luxury property to enhance its offerings. For instance, the property recently unveiled an 81m² curved LED wall in its Grand Ballroom – offering four different screen configurations and high-resolution displays – as well as a new sustainable event F&B menu.

“We realised many clients needed an LED screen, and would bring their own supplier to our venue. By offering this built-in LED wall here at our Grand Ballroom, we will help our clients save on events costs and time,” said Lee.

Continuing this upward trend, Singapore went on to host the Bloomberg Economy Forum last year.

In 2018, Singapore welcomed more than 2.9 million MICE visitors, a growth of 12.1 per cent from 2017.

Singapore's MICE landscape continues to flourish this year, with a host of notable events and meetings such as the inaugural Skift Forum Asia, VidCon Asia, Deloitte All Hands Meeting and Bentley Systems Year in Infrastructure Conference. VidCon is the largest event for the global community of online content creators, and its inaugural Asia edition will be held here in December.

The country's pipeline continues to be promising with events secured well into the years ahead. In 2020, it will welcome, for the first time, an expected 8,000 attendees for the International Trademark Association's 142nd Annual Meeting. The Lions Clubs International Convention will also bring to town some 20,000 foreign attendees, making it the largest association congress ever to be held in the city-state.

Next up in 2022, Singapore will be the first Southeast-Asian host for the International Conference on Medical Image Computing and Computer-Assisted Intervention, with an expected visitorship of 2,000 delegates. Singapore has also been selected to host the 25th World Congress of Dermatology in 2023; this will be the largest medical convention to take place in the city, with an estimated 15,000 participants.

Invigorated by its robust events line-up, the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) this year launched the In Singapore Incentives & Rewards (INSPIRE), a global incentive programme in collaboration with 29 local businesses. INSPIRE offers qualified MICE groups a selection of more than 60 complimentary experiences during their time in Singapore, including attractions, thematic tours and teambuilding activities.

Melissa Ow, deputy chief executive, STB said, "These incentives have been designed to complement groups' itineraries and provide exclusive experiences that showcase the best of what Singapore has to offer.

"Building on the positive reception received for the previous INSPIRE programme that was offered to corporate groups in South-east Asia and specific regions, the new global INSPIRE includes markets such as the Americas, North Asia, Oceania and more."

LINE UP

The Special Events Asia

When November 18-19, 2019

Expected turnout 1,500

VidCon Asia Summit

When December 3-4, 2019

Expected turnout 100,000

The Lions Clubs International Convention

When June 26-30, 2020

Expected turnout 20,000

Economic impact S\$58 million



▼ Capella Singapore on Sentosa Island hosted the 2018 Trump-Kim Summit



"Building on the positive reception received for the previous INSPIRE programme that was offered to corporate groups in South-east Asia and specific regions, the new global INSPIRE includes markets such as the Americas, North Asia, Oceania and more."

Melissa Ow

Deputy chief executive, STB

CHECK
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OUT



Going with the flow

The announcement of the upcoming Greater Southern Waterfront precinct is generating much activity in the southern region of Singapore, which has seen developments such as the takeover and transformation of Bay Hotel Singapore into Travelodge Harbourfront Singapore (left), as well as the comprehensive Sentosa-Brani Master Plan.

The masterplan, headed by Sentosa Development Corporation, aims to reshape and redevelop both Sentosa and Pulau Brani into “a game-changing leisure and tourism destination” comprising world-class attractions, new social spaces, rejuvenated beaches, and expanded nature and heritage trails.

It will be implemented in phases over the coming two to three decades, starting with a 30,000m² Sentosa Sensoryscape, set to begin construction in 4Q2019 and scheduled for completion in 2022. It will link Resorts World Sentosa in the north to the island's beaches in the south through a multi-sensory experience, replacing the existing pedestrian thoroughfare.

ITINERARY

Raffles Singapore

After 2.5 years of restoration work, Raffles Singapore has reopened with an all-suite concept. There are 115 keys across nine categories, from the lead-in State Room Suites to the Presidential Suites; 10 F&B concepts; as well as seven indoor and outdoor function spaces. Recreational facilities include the Raffles Spa, 24-hour gym and a rooftop swimming pool.

Silicon Valley of Singapore Insider Tour

Launched by UBE Singapore, the Silicon Valley of Singapore Insider Tour takes participants through Singapore's thriving innovation hubs, one-north and JTC Launchpad, where they can interact with industry leaders, expand their business network and discover new concepts.

lyf Funan Singapore

The Ascott Limited has debuted its millennial-focused brand with the launch of lyf Funan Singapore. The nine-storey property offers 412 keys for both short- and long-term stays. There are also 18 four-bedroom and four six-bedroom apartments, two unique configurations featuring individual bedrooms and shared

living, kitchen and bathroom spaces. Other co-living aspects on-site include a lobby filled with co-working spaces and meeting rooms, a gym and kitchen.

Jewel Changi Airport

Jewel Changi Airport has added the Changi Experience Studio and Canopy Park to its range of offerings.

The 3,000m² Changi Experience Studio includes a singing garden, a runway race, a quest to collect airport trolleys and a battle of smiles. Elsewhere, the 14,000m² Canopy Park features seven play attractions and gardens. Visitors can navigate through the Mirror Maze and Hedge Maze, bounce on the Manulife Sky Nets, explore the sculptural playscape of Discovery Slides or savour the view from the glass-floored Canopy Bridge suspended 23m above ground.

Voyages to the Southern Islands

Yacht Cruise SG has launched a 2.5-hour journey that takes guests beyond the shores of Singapore.

Lap up the luxury yacht life onboard *Le Tara* while visiting places of interests like the Dragon Teeth's Gate and Machine Gun Post at Labrador Park; coral-rich

▼ (From top)
The Lawn at
Raffles Singapore;
lyf Funan
Singapore

Sisters' Islands; former penal settlement St John's Island; man-made Lazarus Island; and landfill-turned-biodiversity haven Semakau Island. The experience also includes a land tour on mysterious Kusu Island.





Growing ever stronger

Thailand's tireless investment in MICE heartware and hardware is raising her appeal for international business events, writes **Suchat Sritama**

Thailand has spent a decade of growing and sharpening her claws – in the form of her business events hardware and capabilities, and now she's ready for a good fight to snag some of the world's most iconic events.

Looking back, Nichapa Yoswee, senior vice president, business, of the Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau (TCEB), said the bulk of development efforts went into raising the standards of local industry players and venues through partnerships with international standard certification agencies.

"Starting from this year and for the next decade, TCEB will deploy aggressive (destination) marketing to bring in big and iconic events that will support the government's new economic policy. Many potential events will involve high-tech industries," Nichapa said.

Thailand's tireless investment in MICE heartware and hardware has made her one of the leading desti-

▲ Bangkok's city view

nations for business events, particularly in the area of exhibitions.

Talun Theng, president of Thai Exhibition Association, shared that exhibitions in Thailand enjoy constant growth, with more spaces being used every year. At the same time, exhibitions are advancing in the use of technology to deliver increasingly exciting experiences for visitors.

TCEB believes that further infrastructure developments will help strengthen Thailand's business events appeal over the next decade.

The U-Tapao Rayong Pattaya International Airport, which is being upgraded to a commercial airport and an MRO facility, is giving the country power to gun for its own international airshow. In August, TCEB announced the completion of a feasibility study on an Asian spinoff of the popular Farnborough International Airshow.

Over in Chiang Mai province, local business event

DESTINATION : THAILAND

specialists have banded together to form Chiang MICE, determined to attract major events with their combined expertise, the destination's unique local culture, large venues and upgraded airport.

When asked about Thailand's opportunities and challenges in the year ahead, Santichai Boonrasri, director of sales and marketing at the Sukhothai Hotel Bangkok, says the country's improving economic standing and strengthening baht against the US dollar, British pound and euro have made her a more expensive option for the key longhaul markets of the US and Europe.

Kittisak Pattamasaei, CEO of Montara Group, an operator of multiple hotel brands in Thailand, observed that companies are increasingly wanting to organise creative events while satisfying sustainability objectives. For him, this trend has presented Thailand an opportunity to showcase her unique venues, especially those that allow an extended lifespan for heritage buildings.

"Many planners no longer want to use large function rooms in hotels, preferring instead smaller or localised places," Kittisak said.

With this in mind, Montara Group launched two unique heritage properties with the ability to support creative, small-sized meetings and product launches.

One is the Prince Theater Heritage Stay – once an old movie theatre near Bangkok's Chinatown – while

the other is the Praya Palazzo, a boutique hotel that was once an old mansion on the Chao Phraya riverbank. The two hotels aim to grow its portion of MICE business from 25 per cent to 50 per cent within the next two years.

"Starting from this year and for the next decade, TCEB will deploy aggressive (destination) marketing to bring in big and iconic events that will support the government's new economic policy. Many potential events will involve high-tech industries."

Nichapa Yoswee

Senior vice president, business with the Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau (TCEB)



**CHECK
THIS
OUT**



A true icon

Ionsiam (left) is an impressive mega mall, drawing attention from locals and overseas visitors with its dazzling collection of retail shops, dining establishments and recreational facilities.

Beyond these fun magnets, the mixed-use development houses the True Icon Hall, an events and entertainment venue on the seventh floor that boasts an array of event technology that will please modern event planners.

The venue features an automatic retractable seating for 2,600 people – said to be Thailand's first and only, state-of-the-art light and sound systems, and soundproofed walls that allow the hall to be split into smaller spaces.

True Icon Hall is supported by 14 meeting rooms with 20 to 200 seats, some of which can be combined to accommodate larger gatherings of up to 520 people in a theatre setting. In addition, planners can utilise the 1,200m² Suralai Hall, which overlooks the Chao Phraya river, for conferences and banquets.

LINE UP

86th UFI Global Congress

When November 6-9, 2019

Expected turnout 550 people from 50 countries

Economic impact More than 44 million baht (US\$1.3 million)

Routes Asia Development Forum 2020

When March 8-10, 2020

Expected turnout 2,000 people from 100 airlines and 200 airports

Economic impact More than 168 million baht

VICTAM Asia and Animal Health & Nutrition

When March 24-26, 2020

Expected turnout 4,650

Economic impact Not available

ITINERARY

Central Village

Opened on August 31 near Suvarnabhumi Airport, Central Village in Samut Prakan is said to be Thailand's first luxury outlet.

It houses over 130 boutique stores, of which more than 60 are exclusive brands available nowhere else in the country. A special zone has also been carved out to focus on local products. Contemporary art fairs will also be held throughout the year to promote local handicraft or OTOP (One Tambon One Product, a local entrepreneurship stimulus programme) items such as handbags, women's shoes, handwoven fabrics, and leather goods.

Bo.lan Restaurant

The Michelin-starred Bo.lan Restaurant in the heart of Sukhumvit in Bangkok serves up authentic Thai dishes, paired with a promise to uphold sustainable practices through its vegetable garden, a water filtering system and waste

recycling scheme. Guests can also join food workshops and enter the kitchen to observe food being prepared.

Ban Bang Phalp Community

Ban Bang Phalp is located on the fertile riverbanks of Samut Songkram, allowing the community to thrive with a plethora of orchards that grow coconuts, mangos, rose apples, lychee and Kao Yai pomelo. Visitors can purchase fresh fruits from the locals – thus contributing to their living – as well as experience the local way of life, and pick up techniques of using local material to create a variety of products.

Kanghunting Sea Salt Spa

When traditional massages no longer cut it for spa enthusiasts, Kanghunting Sea Salt Spa in Petchaburi may well provide the next level of pampering. Here, wellness therapies are delivered using sea salt, which are said to offer many health benefits. There



▲ Bo.lan Restaurant in Bangkok

are also souvenir workshops and a shop that sells sea salt spa products.

Somdet Phra Srinagarindra Park

Somdet Phra Srinagarindra Park in Hua Hin provides a laid-back escape for city folks, offering a host of simple joys such as tree planting, DIY meals that are compatible with the visitor's element (earth, air, fire or water), and workshops that teach how various things are made, such as herbal compresses.



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Out from the shadows



▲ Ariyana Convention Centre

Several Vietnamese cities, especially Danang, are climbing up the ranks, thanks to a huge government effort and various investments. By **Marissa Carruthers**

Vietnam is stepping up its game to better position itself as a major player in the regional MICE market. The last decade has seen the country's business travel landscape expand exponentially as a swathe of products have come online, coupled with various government efforts.

Jeff Redl, managing director of Diethelm Travel Vietnam, said: "MICE business is definitely increasing in Vietnam compared with 10 years ago. The tourism industry as a whole has moved forward incredibly, and the business travel sector has grown."

Vietnam National Authority for Tourism (VNAT) has become a lot more active in international marketing efforts, attending international business travel trade fairs to promote the country's growing collection of MICE-ready destinations – Danang, Nha Trang, Ho Chi Minh City, and Hanoi.

Danang's rapid rise in recent years as a darling of planners is particularly noteworthy. It has helped to elevate the country's standing among its regional competitors, with a raft of event

infrastructure having come online.

In October 2017, the Ariyana Convention Centre opened, attracting numerous international events. It is connected to the Furama Danang's International Convention Palace, which boasts 15 function rooms, and a pillarless Grand Ballroom for up to 2,500 pax.

The Sheraton Grand Resort Danang, armed with 258 rooms and 3,300m² of function space, was the next to open in January 2018.

By end-2019, the total number of hotel rooms in Danang will stand around 43,130, a 37 per cent year-on-year increase.

Said Redl: "Danang has positioned itself as a strong MICE hub, especially with help from the direct flight from Doha by Qatar Airways (in December 2018). This has encouraged business from Europe."

Overall, the hosting of large-scale international events has also placed Vietnam in the spotlight. In 2017, Danang welcomed 21 world leaders to APEC 2017. This year, South-east Asian delegates flocked to Ha Long for the ASEAN Tourism Forum 2019, while the Trump-Kim summit was hosted in Hanoi in February.

Furama Resort Danang's deputy general director Nguyen Duc Quynh, said another element that will help push the country's business tourism landscape is the development of secondary destinations. For example, northern Halong is emerging as a MICE hub, thanks to its world-class conference centres and a range of business hotels opening.

He pointed out that Ninh Binh, Nha Trang, Phan Thiet, Vung Tau and Phu Quoc also hold potential. He said: "Cities with new air routes, conference centres and facilities need to be taken into consideration, especially cities with airports and direct flights."

Meanwhile, Alexander Leven, general manager of Asian Trails Vietnam, noted a shift in source markets in recent years. He said Australians were a popular MICE source market for the country up until about three years ago, but numbers have fallen due to groups choosing to stay on home turf, or explore nearby.

Leven added that "we are now seeing more and more requests from South Africa", while business from European countries, such as Spain, Portugal, Italy and France remain stable.

Other major changes include the decrease in demand from the pharmaceutical industry. "In the 1990s, the pharmaceutical industry was thriving. They would hold crazy incentive trips with huge numbers and stayed at four-star plus hotels. The industry has gone down now and brought with it big changes," shared Leven.

LINE UP

Vietnam International Aviation Expo

When November 20-22, 2019

Expected turnout 5,000

International Conference on Medical and Health Science

When February 26-27, 2019

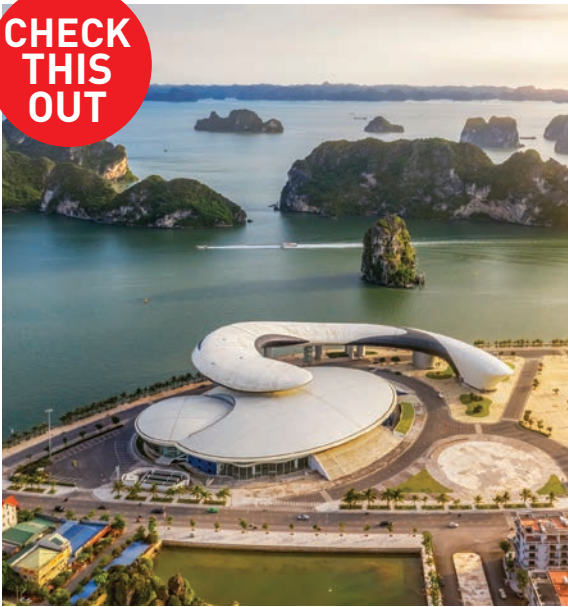
Expected turnout 500 to 1,000

HOTEC

When March 25-28, 2020

Expected turnout 1,000

**CHECK
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OUT**



Coastal developments

Vietnam's business events landscape is developing beyond the traditional cities of Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi.

Recent years have seen central Vietnamese city of Danang rise through the ranks of the country's MICE market, thanks to a series of new products, hotels and activities geared towards the sector. Industry experts are also keeping their eyes on secondary destinations that offer something fresh.

Halong, home to World Heritage Site Halong Bay, is emerging as a prime spot. This is fuelled by Quang Ninh Exhibition Centre (above) and a mounting collection of business-oriented hotels with large capacity meeting and conference facilities, coupled with a new highway halving transport time from Hanoi and Noi Bai International Airport.

Another destination to watch is Ninh Binh, thanks to its combination of cultural sites and breathtaking landscapes that can be combined with the recently-improved infrastructure such as business hotels.

ITINERARY

Ngon Gallery Nha Trang

Luxury hospitality group Paradise Vietnam has opened Ngon Gallery Nha Trang, located at Citadines Bayfront Nha Trang Hotel. The restaurant specialises in lobster, with live cooking stations that serve up Vietnamese, Japanese, Korean, Western and Chinese buffet fare for up to 200 diners.

Meliá Ninh Binh

Rebranded from The Reed Hotel, this 153-key property will boast a fitness centre, an infinity pool, VIP Lounge, and several F&B outlets. In addition, the neighbouring Convention Center – offering 4,000m² of meeting facilities – will also be managed by Meliá Hotels International.

Breeza Beach Club

Melia Ho Tram Beach Resort has opened the country's first Spanish beach club. With seating for up to 160 people, the beach club features an open kitchen, airy interior and a spacious terrace with an outdoor bar that provides the perfect spot to soak up the sublime sunsets.

It is located on the five-star resort's grounds on Ho Tram beach, next to the 1,491m² swimming pool, with private cabanas available with premium drinks packages.

Alba Wellness Valley by Fusion

Groups seeking wellness packages can indulge in a series of new

three-, five-, or seven-day wellness voyages that include accommodation, nutritionally-balanced meals and detox drinks, alongside daily wellness activities that range from hiking and bike rides to water meditation, spa sessions, and soaks in Vietnam's only Japanese-style onsen.

The five- and seven-day packages also include a cooking class and excursions such as a craft village visit, and trip to Chùa Công Thành pagoda.

Corona Resort and Casino

Corona Integrated Resort – comprising Radisson Blu Resort, VinOasis hotel, a convention centre, theatre, retail shops, golf course, safari park and amusement park – has opened the country's first casino on the island of Phu Quoc.

The two-storey casino spans an area of 18,800m² and houses 100 tables and 1,000 electronic gaming machines, three restaurants, and two speciality bars and lounges.

Northern Vietnam Helicopter Company

The country's first helicopter tourism service makes use of two five-seat Bell 505 helicopters. Guests can now enjoy bird's-eye views of Halong Bay's limestone karsts that jut from the ocean with various flight options, routes and timings. Alternatively, travel in style from Hanoi to Halong, or the service can be used for aerial surveys and event photography.



◀ A lavish buffet spread can be found at Ngon Gallery Nha Trang

▶ The Radisson Blu Resort Phu Quoc, part of the Corona Resort and Casino IR



Community heroes

Beyond chasing dollars, these hospitality and event organisations have invested resources to make the world a better, happier place.

By **TTGmice** reporters

Werkudara Nirwana Sakti, Indonesia

The event company based in Yogyakarta conducts the Werkudara Care CSR programme which focuses on three pillars: Care for Share, which routinely distributes funds and items to the needy; CarEducation, a social programme that assists school children with their studies and provide internship opportunities in the company; CarePreneur, which empowers community-based businesses.

I Gusti Putu Yaktianuraga (Bagus), managing director of Werkudara Nirwana Sakti, said: "Werkudara Care is our way of creating value for the community. Beyond donating money, we want to give back to the society in a sustainable way that helps them to grow."

Citing an example of the programme's long-term commitment, Bagus said through CarEducation the company hired an English language teacher to conduct courses for high-school students in an orphanage, and then selected 30 to take a written test issued by the University of Cambridge.

"While six passed the written test, they failed the interview. This got us thinking that apart from equipping them with the ability to write in English, we also need to build their confidence in speaking the language," shared Bagus.

Hence, Werkudara established an internship programme that allowed the students to enrol, where they could practice the language while learning how to manage events.

"We also want them to acquire a strong mentality and positive attitude, not just skills," he added, believing that the event profession's need for creativity, discipline, teamwork and long hours will teach the students all that.

Offering another example of how Werkudara Care invests in building self-sustainability, Bagus said CarePreneur provides short courses on budgeting, marketing and product quality control for small-scale, community-based businesses. Besides arming them with better business acumen, Werkudara also engages these community-based businesses as partners to serve corporate clients.



Memories Group, Myanmar

This integrated tourism company implements a range of projects in remote areas that aid people and the environment.

For example, it currently operates a sailing clinic that offers medical care around the Mergui Archipelago, and in 2018, launched Moken Kids, an ongoing initiative to preserve and understand the Moken (sea gypsies) culture by handing out waterproof cameras to Moken children. The ultimate aim is to publish a coffee table book with proceeds going back to the community.

Rainforest and marine conservation projects are also carried out, including a clean-up campaign to rid the waters around Mergui Archipelago of ghost nets, or ALDFG (abandoned, lost or discarded fishing gear), include fishing nets, lines and traps left in the ocean. The first clean-up saw 300kg of ALDFG removed from surrounding reefs.

Memories Group's Community Light Centre also helps the 84 per cent of rural households in Myanmar that have no access to electricity by installing solar lights.

Manila Marriott Hotel, Philippines

For the past eight years, Manila Marriott Hotel has been quietly but consistently donating excess food monthly to the Philippine Red Cross in Pasay City.

These are not leftovers, but excess food from banquet events and staff canteen that are prepared by the culinary team in the same way it is prepared for hotel guests.

Red Cross then distributes the monthly food donation to depressed communities that abound in the city.

So far, the donated food, apart from reducing the hotel's food wastage, has served a total of 17,534 beneficiaries, particularly children, pregnant women and the elderly. Victims of natural calamities like typhoons and flooding also benefit.

The hotel also embarks on biannual donation drives, community outreach and feeding programmes in support of the Philippine Red Cross.

Luxury Travel Vietnam

In September, the company stepped in as a Gold Sponsor for World Clean Up Day 2019 in Hanoi, which combats the global solid waste problem, including the problem of marine debris.

The company is also joining the Travelife certificate, the global programme managed by ABTA. Its essential management requirements comply with ISO 14001 and EMAS III standards, including OECD Corporate Social Responsibility guidelines that include labour conditions, human rights, environment, biodiversity and fair business practices.

The company recently launched sustainable action plans for its travel services, such as replacing plastic for recyclable materials for every tour, as well as on its ships under Heritage Cruises and Emperor Cruises. It also works with a range of social partners to combine tour activities and environmental protection activities.



Sofitel Phnom Penh Phokeethra, Cambodia

The capital city-based property has carried out a range of CSR activities throughout 2019. These include donating goods to organisations, such as soap to Indochina Starfish Foundation and linen to NGO L'Ecole du Bois. Eco-friendly charcoal briquettes made from coconut shell to protect Cambodia's natural forest have been introduced to its restaurants, and fresh eggs are bought from cage-free chickens at Eggscellent to promote local products.

The property has also held three Musica Felice Charity Concerts to support local NGOs, schools, and social associations. Environmental efforts include fighting against plastic waste by collecting 1.5-litre bottles for donation to Malaria Consortium Organisation, using paper straws in its restaurants and bars, recycling food waste and using it as fertiliser, and using LED light throughout the hotel to slash energy consumption.

Pullman Luang Prabang, Laos

Since opening, the property has introduced several CSR initiatives that include authentic activities, locally-sourced cuisine and unique opportunities for guests to interact with the local community in a responsible and sustainable manner.

For example, the hotel's executive chef focuses on local, seasonal and organic ingredients, including Lao herbs, vegetables and tropical fruit grown onsite. The resort's terraced paddies produce rice for the restaurants, and guests – including corporate groups – can help with harvesting. Rice husks, a by-product of the cultivation process, are donated to MandaLao Elephant Conservation. The property also sources several types of cheese from Lao's first buffalo dairy farm, and guests can visit the socially-responsible enterprise which provides support and education to local farmers.

In line with Accor's Planet 21 initiatives, Pullman Luang Prabang also supports the local children's hospital, wildlife conservation efforts, and local handicrafts.



Pan Pacific Hotels Group

Pan Pacific Hotels Group (PPHG) has been delivering its Eat Well With Us community programme since 2015, launched in partnership with Singapore's National Council of Social Service, to impart healthy recipes through regular chef visits and culinary training at charity homes.

From serving just four charity homes then, Eat Well With Us today benefits 20. Its latest project was a month-long effort in July 2019 that saw six senior chefs from the group's hotels in Singapore conduct 10 hands-on classes to arm cooks from 20 charity homes with tasty local recipes that eventually fed 4,000 residents on National Day, August 9.

Corporate executive chef, Tony Khoo led the effort, utilising a central training kitchen sponsored by Unilever Food Solutions. Recipes were tweaked to suit residents, featuring tasty blended dishes, healthy vegetarian dishes and nutritional soups.

