

New play on a heritage city



Above: Ayutthaya City Park shopping mall now boasts a convention centre

Historical Ayutthaya, an hour north of Bangkok, is beckoning event planners with a new convention hall and ease of access from Thailand's main gateways, writes **Suchat Sritama**

Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya province – better known as Ayutthaya – was cast into the limelight in 2012 when the Thai government approved the destination's bid to host World Expo 2020. Although Ayutthaya lost the bid, the global media had done its job and the former capital of the Kingdom of Siam was

impressed into the minds of both local and international visitors.

Besides ancient allures at the Ayutthaya Historical Park, an archaeological site, the province boasts the Rojana Industrial Estate where high-tech productions reside. Ongoing urbanisation works are also helping to reinforce Ayutthaya's readiness for business events.

Ayutthaya City Park, the destination's largest shopping mall in operation the past two decades, expanded recently with a large convention centre. Simply named The Hall Convention Centre, the venue is about to begin courting international business events.

Somphon Rattchathapimolchai, CEO of Klong Suam Plu Co., operator of Ayutthaya City Park, said: "We are the first and only to operate a hybrid lifestyle centre in the province. Our new 2,000m² convention hall can accommodate hundreds of guests. We also offer four meeting rooms, as well as a large outdoor space for up to 10,000 attendees."

The Hall Convention Centre aims to capitalise on the province's rising popularity among business event

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Somphon Rattchathapimolchai
CEO, Klong Suam Plu Co



Above: Wat Chaiwatthanara, one of the many temples within the Ayutthaya Historical Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site

planners. So far it has been serving the domestic market, with events coming from neighbouring cities such as Ang Thong, Saraburi, Pathum Thani and Bangkok.

Although new, The Hall Convention Centre has earned its outdoor events space a Thailand Mice Venue Standard certification from the Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau. With this, the venue can expect to see more business event enquiries, especially from overseas markets.

Somphon believes that the new convention centre will be a game-changer for the province. He noted that Ayutthaya presently draws mostly small and medium-sized events through the Ayutthaya City Park, where 80 events were held in 2018. Those events included concerts, product launches, consumer fairs and seasonal events. With the new venue, the province will be able to gun for more large and international events.

It has a conservative target of increasing events

business by 20 per cent this year, which translates to hosting at least five international events. Within the next three to five years, Ayutthaya City Park aims to become one of the busiest convention centres in Thailand's central region, based on traffic and number of events.

Klong Suam Plu Co claims that Ayutthaya's location and transportation convenience are major factors that will attract multinational companies to use Ayutthaya City Park as a venue for their product showcases. It argued that Ayutthaya does not have the same traffic congestions that plague capital city Bangkok.

Business travellers landing at Don Mueang Airport and Suvarnavhumi Airport are able to reach The Hall Convention Centre within an hour by car.

Besides, with the closure of Queen Sirikit National Convention Centre for major renovations and Bangkok venues typically being overbooked, event planners can



FAST FACTS

1,320,000

Total number of international MICE travellers that Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau is expecting to welcome this financial year ending September 2019

303,182

The number of MICE arrivals from ASEAN+6 countries between October 2018 and March 2019, representing a 23.7 per cent growth over the same period last year

85,498

The number of Chinese visitors to Thailand between October and December 2018, making it the Kingdom's top MICE source market; Laos follows with 29,547 business event arrivals

consider moving their shows to Ayutthaya.

Rinyaphat Chaiaukkarawitt, managing director of Neramit Event Co, observed that more events are spreading into the provinces, especially favouring popular shopping malls. Such events are mostly marketing activations aimed at consumers.

As such, Rinyaphat believes that a mall and convention centre combination is the way to go for future event venues.

Sumate Sudasna, managing director of Conference and Destination Management Co, expressed confidence in Ayutthaya rising up in Thailand's business events arena, largely due to its close proximity to Bangkok. Both cities are linked by highways.

Sumate opined that a single day meeting in Ayut-

Right: Riverside night markets are fun to explore for local snacks and handcraft



Below: Cycling around Ayutthaya's historical sites can be a recreational addition to a meeting programme



thaya would be a viable option for companies based in Bangkok.

As Ayutthaya also offers many attractions and recreational facilities, planners have the flexibility to plan a programme as fun or as solemn as they wish.

An appealing way to bring groups to Ayutthaya is to cruise them over from Bangkok.

Fun additions to Ayutthaya include the Krun Sri Night Market where one could don a traditional Thai costume for just 100 baht (US\$3) and enjoy local food and beers.

The Ayutthaya Retreat may be favoured by hurried business event delegates. Built in Thai architectural style and boasting a soothing garden, Ayutthaya Retreat offers hotel rooms and a cafe that serves up healthy cuisine. It welcomes private social events too.

For staff retreats that include accompanying family, planners can consider the Rabbit Water Park. Foam parties can be arranged at this new theme park.

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Cebu shines through

Events and tourism infrastructure developments in Cebu are boosting the destination's appeal in the eyes of international event planners, discovers **Rosa Ocampo**

Above:
Mactan Cebu International Airport's new international terminal improves global access to the destination

Cebu was already informed as the winner in the Philippines' bid for hosting Routes Asia 2016. The inspection team, however, changed their mind and chose Manila instead upon seeing ongoing infrastructure projects, including the skyway that now links Ninoy Aquino International Airport to various parts of the metro.

But the loss was reversed with Routes Asia 2019 going to Cebu three years later in March. Cebu's metamorphosis is palpable even though it is traditionally the Philippines' most popular business events destination after Manila.

International event delegates are now able to fly directly to Cebu, unlike in the past when they had to fly via Manila, as Mactan Cebu International Airport's (MCIA) newly minted resort-themed international passenger terminal 2 is the most modern and most efficient in the country, apart from being the most aesthetically pleasing.

The future augurs well for Cebu as more road and infrastructure facilities are under construction, new hotels like Sheraton and Dusit fill in the supply shortage, new attractions including the Temple of Leah are unveiled, and improved marketing spotlighting Cebu's rich culture, cuisine and entertainment options gets underway.

Colliers International Philippines forecasted that "these developments will attract more MICE organisers, specifically from (South-east Asia)....We see regional events further boosting Cebu's overall hotel oc-

cupancy in 2019 and raising Cebu's stature as a MICE destination in the region".

This outlook is supported by Bella Calleja, manager, corporate team 2 MICE, JTB Asia Pacific Philippines, who said: "The new airport is helping a lot. More Japanese people know Cebu as a prime destination than they do Manila. Another factor (in Cebu's favour) is the direct Philippine Airlines flight from Cebu to Tokyo and Osaka."

Besides Routes Asia 2019, other prominent Asian events held in Cebu include the PATA Annual Summit in May and the Center for Aviation's North Asia Summit in June.

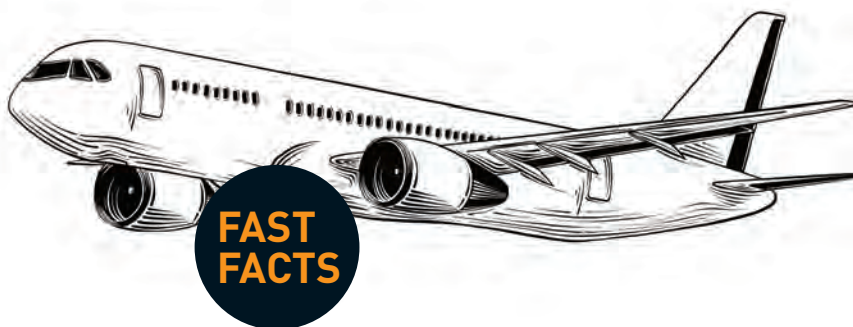
Most business events are held in hotels due to the absence of a proper convention and exhibition centre in the destination. The construction of the SMX Convention Center Cebu – touted to be the same size as SMX in Manila – is being delayed by local government issues.

Undeterred, SMX Convention Center vice president, sales and marketing, Agnes Pacis, said they are in the meantime focusing on their two existing properties, Sky Hall Seaside Cebu in SM Seaside City Cebu and Cebu Trade Hall in SM City Cebu, to meet the demand for medium-sized business events.

"While some of the existing hotel and non-hotel venues can take small to medium-sized events, there is certainly room for bigger players like SMX. Its arrival will only boost the city's competitive position as one of the top business events destinations in both the local and international markets", said Pacis.

Cebu is indeed enjoying a surge in inbound business events if the experience of Waterfront Cebu City Hotel and Casino – the hotel venue whose largest hosted business event numbered 7,500 pax – is anything to go by.

General manager, Anders Hallden, told *TTGmice* that his property is enjoying "record-breaking performance every year in both rooms and MICE," and especially so this year, thanks to much-improved events hardware and intensified marketing and promotions of the destination.



4,500

The number of delegates that attended the CFC Kids for Christ's first International Family Conference in May 2018 – one of Cebu's biggest events that year

590

The number of international flights that Mactan Cebu International Airport serves weekly as of January 30, 2019