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CONFERENCE + MEETINGS WORLD

Moving up the meetings grid

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Turkish delights

A real impetus in events infrastructure has seen Turkey keen to take an ever larger slice of international meetings business. **Rochelle Long** investigates.

Turkey, and capital Istanbul in particular, ticks the boxes for many conference organisers. The accessibility that comes from bridging Asia and Europe brings with it the cultural cachet of East meeting West. Its rich and exotic history, combines with the buzz, nightlife and comforts of a cosmopolitan city, with mosques, bazaars and bath houses balanced by bars, restaurants and the presence of numerous high-end international hotel chains and retailers.

While it has been increasingly embraced as a leisure tourism destination, recent developments have seen Istanbul presenting itself as a 'Congress Metropolis', thanks to some major infrastructure investment.

Istanbul Convention & Visitors Bureau general manager Handan Boyce notes that in the last five years, Istanbul has been steadily moving up in the ranking of top convention cities of the world. "According to ICCA 2007 statistics, Istanbul took its position as 19th city among worldwide destinations with the number of association congresses it hosted. We aim to place Istanbul in the top five, in the years following the completion of additional convention infrastructure."

The kingpin of this construction is the Congress Valley development, scheduled for

completion in 2009. Recent developments have seen the Istanbul Convention & Exhibition Center (ICEC) linked up by a pedestrian campus to an outdoor amphitheater, the CCR Istanbul concert hall, and the Hilton Hotel and Convention Center.

A further new government-funded USD \$157 million convention center with an auditorium for 3,500 people and various meeting rooms will also be erected on site in time to host next year's International Monetary Fund and World Bank Forum. The new development will extend the meeting capacity in Congress Valley to 30,000 people across a range of venues within walking distance.

Furthermore, S tl ce Convention Center, near the Golden Horn, is another new center with a capacity of 5,000 people, which will open its doors for the first time with World Water Forum 2009 in March.

A further 700-room hotel and 3,000-person convention center is expected to open in the Bomonti area by 2010, and, on the Asian side, the new Viaport Outlet Shopping Center will include a five-star hotel and an exhibition and convention center.

Boyce says: "We have been saying for the last five years that Istanbul needed bigger, extended facilities for congresses and

exhibitions. Now we will have options and choices.

"Istanbul is an appealing destination for both corporate and association events. The city is a hub for international finance, trade, education and many other sectors and investors. National associations are keen to host international events now as they benefit from the recent developments in meeting industry in terms of infrastructure, experience and public support to meetings as well as developments in the academic arena."

This year the city has hosted meetings for clients as varied as the International Road Transport Union, the World Hemophilia Congress, the International Congress of Virology, and the World Congress on Accounting Historians.

Challenges and opportunities

Boyce highlights that international visitor numbers to Istanbul are on the increase, up 20 per cent in 2007 to more than 6.4 million visitors. "In 2008, the prediction is that Istanbul will host 7.5 to 8 million visitors. The first seven months of 2008 already shows an increase of 14 per cent compared to 2007's first seven months."

Boyce adds that Istanbul's position as 2010 European Capital of Culture will

The rich and exotic history of Istanbul combines with the comforts of a cosmopolitan city and increasing events infrastructure to create a meetings destination on the rise

reinforce and enhance the city's reputation and "definitely will make a positive contribution to the promotion and branding of the city".

On the ground, Ali Erdem, director (operations) of exhibition, congress and event logistics service provider ExpoLOGIST Ltd, agrees with the positive trend in events.

"Istanbul is a very popular destination for medical congresses. Also many corporate groups are selecting Istanbul as a destination for their international meeting or events (Intel, Microsoft, Coca Cola etc). In addition many more meetings and conferences of international unions and societies are going to be held in Istanbul, such as NATO and OECD meetings."

Erdem says recent developments in hotel investment have helped address previous issues over ensuring bedspace for both leisure tourists and large congress groups.

Boyce notes the city's hotel infrastructure, currently at more than 50,000 rooms, is set to boom by an additional 20,000 by 2010.

As positive as the developments are, Turkey has challenges to overcome in the shape of the international financial crisis which may see meeting planners batten down the hatches on budgets and international travel; and recent terror incidents which may raise security questions among more cautious planners.

The ICVB's Boyce admits "the current global economic situation will eventually affect the overall tourism industry, mainly midterm business. On the corporate and leisure side, like any city, we may feel it, but I am glad to say that we continue to receive future meeting requests for the city."

She points also to increasing regional co-operation as a means of mitigating the impact of the economic crisis, noting the Mediterranean chapter of ICCA was working hard to promote the region as a whole.

Beyond Istanbul

Of course, Turkey does not end in Istanbul and a number of cities are now making initial steps to attract the lucrative business tourist.

The country's capital Ankara has yet to get its own convention bureau but the meetings hardware is on the increase.

CEO of professional conference organiser Serenas Tourism, Mustafa Gurbuz, says there are two new convention centers under construction: one by the Municipality; and the other by Ankara Chamber of Commerce, which is planned to have a capacity of up to 3,000 people. He notes the capital's Hilton, Sheraton and Bilkent hotels all have conference capabilities also.

While not a preferred incentive destination, Ankara is popular for governmental

meetings and medical meetings, with the number of corporate meetings also increasing, he says.

"At Serenas we do around six to eight meetings per year in Ankara, which corresponds to 10 per cent of our total amount of 76 to 80 meetings per year."

Gurbuz notes the major challenge the capital faces is limited direct flights, with most travellers arriving via Istanbul.

Turkey's third largest city, Izmir, formed its own convention bureau in 2007 and, Boyce says, has joined with Istanbul in a number of

trade shows and international workshops to push for meetings business.

Meanwhile, coastal resort region Antalya provides a strong 'concentive' draw thanks to the attractions of the Mediterranean coast, and has its own convention bureau in place which promotes the destination's large hotel-based conference offering.

While no dedicated organisation exists at a national level presently to co-ordinate efforts and drive convention business to Turkey, Boyce notes that it may well be an option – and an opportunity – in the future.

The Marmara Experience



The Marmara Esma Sultan

While Turkey can claim to host the majority of international hotel chains, Marmara Hotels and Residences is a home-grown chain keen to attract business tourists to Turkey. A trip around its Turkish venues highlights the diversity of the country's events offering.

Marmara's marketing manager for international and corporate projects, Baris Kaya says Marmara offers unique hotels pertaining to the location and clientele, rather than a chain – "a harder way, but important to the brand".

The "centrepiece" of the Marmara empire is the elegant five-star Marmara Istanbul, situated on busy Taksim Square and boasting views across the Bosphorus.

Alongside its 377 rooms, the hotel includes executive suites and a Club Lounge, a business centre floor, 16 meeting rooms and two ballrooms, catering from small board meetings to 1,000 people theatre-style.

The downtown, 200-bedroom Marmara Pera, has five meeting rooms for 15 to 120 people and has a younger corporate draw, with the popular Mikko Restaurant and a roof-top bar.

Still in Istanbul, Marmara's efforts to corner the events market is evident in its newest venue – The Marmara Esma Sultan, a ruined mansion which was formerly the home of Esma Sultan, the daughter of Sultan Abdülaziz I.

Gutted by fire to its stone shell, glass

panels now retain the building's form and create a mix of the old and new that is proving a real drawcard for events, launches, parties, weddings and meetings for 200 to 2,000 people. Past guests hosted at the venue include Prince Albert of Monaco, Princess Raina of Jordan and model Kate Moss.

In 2007, the venue hosted 200 events, and for 2008 it has 220 confirmed events with 40 more pending.

Outside Istanbul, Marmara boasts a boutique experience at Marmara Bodrum, hosting events for up to 125 people.

Meanwhile, the Marmara Antalya caters for the quirky concientive market, with 24 of its 232 rooms in a 360-degree Revolving Loft boasting ever-changing views.

As well as five meeting rooms, its ballroom can host meetings for 1,000 delegates.

Its beach area offers a diving school option for after hours, and an artificial island and river on the hotel grounds provide teambuilding opportunities for outdoor and canoeing activities.

Its vast outdoor area can cater for barbecues, concerts, garden parties and open air events – while its Tull area offers an eclectic mix of business centre, art gallery, library, swings and a climbing wall, catering for a broad range of tastes for post-meeting wind-down.



Meet at the beach of Marmara Antalya