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Sydney sizzles on for corporate incentive tours

Post-quake Kumamoto roars back to life

Penang festivals add fun dimensions to business events



OUTLOOK 2019

Geopolitical tensions are not enough to put a damper on inbound business events to the region, while Asian bookers are demanding more personalisation and smarter use of their event budget

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EDITORIAL**Karen Yue**

Group Editor (karen.yue@ttgasia.com)

S Puvaneswary

Editor, Malaysia/Brunei

(puvanes@ttgasia.com)

Mimi Hudoyo

Editor, Indonesia (idmfasia@cbn.net.id)

Pamela Chow

Reporter (pamela.chow@ttgasia.com)

Rachel AJ Lee, Yixin Ng

Sub Editors

(rachel.lee@ttgasia.com, ng.yixin@ttgasia.com)

Adelaine Ng Australia

(adelaineng.abc@gmail.com)

Marissa Carruthers Cambodia, Myanmar,

Laos, Vietnam

(maris.carruthers@gmail.com)

Caroline Boey China & Special Projects

(caroline.boey@ttgasia.com)

Prudence Lui Hong Kong/Greater China

(prului@yahoo.com)

Rohit Kaul India

(rohitkaul23@gmail.com)

Julian Ryall Japan

(jryall2@hotmail.com)

Rosa Ocampo The Philippines

(rosa.ocampo@gmail.com)

Feizal Samath Sri Lanka/Maldives

(feizalsam@gmail.com)

Paige Lee Pei Qi

Assistant Editor, Special Projects

(lee.peiqi@ttgasia.com)

Redmond Sia, Goh Meng Yong

Creative Designers

Lina Tan Editorial Assistant**SALES & MARKETING****Pierre Quek**

Publisher and Head Integrated Solutions

(pierre.quek@ttgasia.com)

Ar-lene Lee Senior Business Manager

(arlene.lee@ttgasia.com)

Jonathan Yap Senior Business Manager

(jonathan.yap@ttgasia.com)

Shirley Tan Senior Business Manager

(shirley.tan@ttgasia.com)

Jon Silva Marketing Executive

(jon.silva@ttgasia.com)

Delia Ng Digital Marketing Strategist

(delia.ng@ttgasia.com)

Cheryl Lim Advertisement Administration

Manager (cheryl.lim@ttgasia.com)

Carol Cheng

Asst Manager Administration & Marketing

(Hong Kong, carol.cheng@ttgasia.com)

PUBLISHING SERVICES**Jonathan Wan**

Head, Operational Support Services

Kun Swee Qi Publishing Services Executive**Nur Hazirah** Web Executive**Katherine Leong** Circulation Executive**OFFICES****Singapore**TTG Asia Media Pte Ltd,
1 Science Park Road, #04-07 The Capricorn,
Singapore Science Park II, Singapore 117528
Tel: +65 6395 7575, fax: +65 6536 0896, email:
traveltradesales@ttgasia.com**Hong Kong**TTG Asia Media Pte Ltd, 8/F, E168,
166-168 Des Voeux Road Central,
Sheung Wan, Hong Kong
Tel: +852 2237 7288, fax: +852 2237 7227**TTG ASIA MEDIA PTE LTD****Darren Ng** Managing Director**Karen Yue**
Group Editor

Invest in Asia

Business sentiments among destination players are a lot more positive in 2019 compared to the last few years, despite stakeholders here in Asia keeping a careful eye on the trade dispute between the US and China.

The source of this optimism? A good appetite for business events coming out of Asian markets.

For destinations like Macau, the Philippines and South Korea, strong and sustained demand from neighbouring markets continue to inspire confidence and determine forward destination marketing plans.

The Chinese have a proverb: a neighbour is better than a faraway relative. What it means is that in times of an emergency, a neighbour close by will be of much greater help than a relative who resides far away.

The US-China trade dispute is not yet an emergency for Asia (and we hope it will never come to be!) but it is always wise to build sustainable demand in markets close by.

Moreover, going by the business outlook offered by Asian event planners who are seeing more careful spending this year, the move to focus on strengthening regional demand is even more sound.

Hong Kong planners, for instance, are favouring Asian destinations in the face of budget cuts. Malaysian clients too, hurt by a weak ringgit, are heading to nearby places and cutting out one or two dinners for their delegates.

For such budget-conscious planners, Asia is a treasure trove of options. More and more secondary and tertiary destinations in Asia are clamouring for a slice of the business events pie and drawing infrastructure investments that benefit corporate groups. This is all great news to planners who need fresh ideas that aren't too many hours of flight away.

Need inspiration? Check out our Penang special feature which will give you ideas on how to weave fun festivals in the historical Malaysian state into a business event programme. As well, don't miss our feature on Kumamoto, Japan, which is bouncing back from its 2016 quakes with new tour options to charm corporate groups.



OKINAWA Japan

Where inspiration meets



OKINAWA MICE PLAYER'S Lip-Dub



<https://youtu.be/LrHfC9OSzZU>



Okinawa Prefectural Government



Penang Global Tourism

COVER STORY

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Geopolitical tensions are not enough to put a damper on inbound business events performance in the region, while Asian bookers are demanding more personalisation and smarter use of their event budget

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Penang is more than just artistic murals and heritage streets. Its lively line-up of festivals are worth noting and can inject plenty of entertainment to even the most solemn of business events

28 Australia // Sydney still sizzles

Already a popular holiday and business destination, Gerardine Donough-Tan finds out what's new and exciting about Sydney for incentive tours

30 Japan // Kumamoto's spirited return

A new way to appreciate Kumamoto Castle, nature highlights and intense destination promotions are helping to win hearts, writes Kathryn Wortley

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Snapshots

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Racines' Chinese New Year menu packs a flavorful punch sure to impress at any corporate meeting or banquet in Sofitel Singapore City Centre.
December 17



TTGmice's Indonesia editor, Mimi Hudoyo, takes three industry leaders through a panel at BE@Penang that discusses how second-tier cities can gun for business events.
December 7



The 6th PCAAE Associations Summit opens today at Subic Bay Exhibition and Convention Centre.
November 23



The 57th ICCA Congress has concluded and what a great week it has been in Dubai!
November 15

PERSPECTIVES

More association and business events are setting good CSR examples by weaving opportunities for their delegates to do good, observes GainingEdge's Jane Vong Holmes



Q&A

Engineering MNC AECOM has more than 87,000 employees in more than 150 countries and many active travellers in the region. Its regional procurement and travel lead, Asia-Pacific, Kelvin Li, predicts the number of business trips will fall in five years' time



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What's happening



February 18-20
AIME,
Melbourne, Australia



March 19-21
IT&CM China / CTW China,
Shanghai, China



April 7-9
ACTE Chicago Global Summit,
Chicago, US



We love



Speed up the slow life with a boat picnic

Sydney Harbour Boat Tours has launched a privately chartered Seafood Beach picnic tour designed as a luxury and fun experience for small corporate groups.

The exhilarating ride takes up to 10 people on the *Spectre*, an Italian Riviera-style sports cruiser which won the 2017 European Sports Boat of the Year. It is equipped with a queen bed downstairs, kitchenette and toilet facilities, while allowing for generous space for enjoying the sun about the boat.

A three-hour tour will take guests past Sydney's famous sights

and icons such as the Opera House, to land on Store Beach, which is home to New South Wales' only little penguin colony.

A seafood lunch of local oysters, prawns, sashimi and fruit complete with wines and beers will be served by a personal steward, who also serves as a guide and commentator.

Guests can be picked up or dropped off at any publicly-accessible or private harbour wharf for their convenience. The tour costs A\$1,980 (US\$1,397) per group which includes the services of a skipper, plus A\$110 per guest for the seafood lunch.

Shangri-La Boracay births eight teambuilding adventures

Shangri-La's Boracay Resort and Spa has rolled out a customised teambuilding package combining physical activities and mental challenges, parked under the banner Collabor8. In total, there are eight teambuilding options that can be conducted indoors or outdoors.

The launch was in response to "a lot of enquiries we get (for) two-in-one events – corporate incentives that have been merged with teambuilding activities and strategic planning," explained business development manager Janine Medina-cue.

She explained that Collabor8 is a three-step winning formula beginning with what the team would like to achieve, followed by eight adventures to choose from, topped off by a team celebration for a winning finish.

The eight adventure options include a QR code experiential tour and mini challenges from taking a selfie photo and uploading

online for the Biggest Influencer challenge, to a mystery escape room for the Code-breaker challenge.

Collabor8 was inspired by the various activities that can be done within the large Shangri-La's Boracay resort. "We injected a storyline to tie everything together and to give team builders the personas they need to step into particular roles and achieve the team's desired goal," Medina-Cue shared.



Mercure debuts in north-eastern Vietnam

Mercure Hotels & Resorts has opened its first midscale property in north-eastern Vietnam.

Located in the CBD, Mercure Hai Phong is the tallest building in the city and is housed within the SHP Plaza shopping centre, a 28-story mixed-use development.

The property offers a total of 176 guestrooms and suites, as well as 57 one- to three-bedroom serviced apartments. Guests staying on the 25th to 27th floors of the hotel will be able to enjoy breakfast and evening cocktails, and complimentary access to the meeting rooms at the Privilege Lounge.

For events, the hotel features six meeting rooms including the city's largest grand ballroom that can cater up to 380 guests. Recreational facilities include the Bloom Spa, a 24-hour gym, and an outdoor infinity pool.

Meanwhile, dining options on-site include two restaurants and three bars, ranging from the all-day Flame Grill & Bar to the first rooftop bar in the city, Cloud28 Sky Bar & Lounge.



- Advertorial -

Travel safely with GeoSure app

A personalised travel safety app is aiming to encourage informed and engaged travel for corporate travellers.

Using artificial intelligence (AI) and real-time, crowd-sourced data from a range of organisations, including the United Nations, World Health Organisation, Interpol and crime statistics, individual neighbourhoods are ranked from one to 100, with one being the safest.

Its CEO Michael Becker shared that the app's ultimate aim is to enrich travel experiences by providing detailed information on localised safety levels, which vary from neighbourhood to neighbourhood. Travel warnings are an example, where they are often unnecessarily placed on entire countries or regions, with detrimental effects. He said: "If you put a travel ban or warning on an entire destination, it can have devastating impacts on the tourism economy when there may only be small parts of the country affected, while the rest is fine to visit."

Operating on a B2C and B2B level, GeoSure is working with OTAs, TMCs, DMOs, tourism boards and other organisations to offer customers, employees and members hyper-local safety information. While the app is free to download, GeoSure has also developed a premium, paid-for duty of care product for corporates and multinationals. Under this, travel brands and organisations will be able to receive safety solutions and awareness and planning content.



Howard Smith Wharves is now ready to roll

Several new venues and lifestyle facilities are now open at the heritage-listed Howard Smith Wharves on the Brisbane River, which is undergoing a three-year-long restoration project.

The first phase of venue openings includes the Rivershed event space, Howard's Hall, Felons Brewing Co., Mr Percival's, the Main and East Lawns and single lift from Bowen Terrace near Wilson's Outlook.

The eventual completion of Howard Smith Wharves will see it transformed into a vibrant entertainment precinct.

Ocean Park gets a Marriott

Located at Ocean Park Hong Kong and just minutes from the city, Marriott's first city resort hotel has opened with 471 keys.

Event planners can avail Hong Kong island's largest pillar-less ballroom – at 1,200m² – and five other meeting spaces.

There are four restaurants on-site: The Pier Lounge and Bar for modern dining and cocktails; Marina Kitchen, an all-day dining and international buffet featuring live cooking stations; Canton Bistro for Cantonese specialties; and the Prohibition Grill House & Cocktail Bar for an American steakhouse concept.

Recreational amenities on-site include a large lagoon pool, gym, and Harnn Heritage Spa.

In the pipeline



Centara Hotels & Resorts

Centara has struck a deal for three hotels in Laos, which will add 216 keys to the destination over the next five years. The three upcoming properties are an upper upscale Centara Grand Luang Prabang and a midscale Centra by Centara property, both near the town centre, and one under Centara's new lifestyle brand, COSI, catering to independent travellers.



Mövenpick Hotels & Resorts

AccorHotels will continue to expand the newly-acquired Mövenpick brand, with two new signings in Vietnam – one in Van Phong and one in Halong Bay, both slated to open in 4Q2021. Mövenpick Resort Van Phong will feature 200 rooms and suites plus 100 villas, while Mövenpick Resort & Spa Halong Bay will have 325 keys. With these additions, AccorHotels will have a total pipeline of nine Mövenpick properties in the country.



Amari Vientiane

Amari Vientiane is scheduled to open along the Mekong river in 2021, at the intersection of Quai Fa Ngum and Khun Bu Lom roads, a short walk to the city's night market and the Chao Anouvong Park. It will have 250 rooms and suites, alongside meetings facilities, a speciality restaurant, an outdoor pool and a fitness centre.

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IT&CM China MICE and Association professionals and CTW China Corporate Travel executives have even more opportunities to interact as both events are now housed in the same hall. IT&CM China exhibitors and buyers can also pre-schedule business appointments with CTW China delegates.

MORE IN-HALL ACTIVITIES

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Latest developments and updates by the top MICE brands revealed! Open to MICE & Association Buyers and Media.



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Stay up-to-date on the latest event updates, and look-out for games and prizes to be won from now till IT&CM China 2019.

New TPB COO eyes big events for the Philippines

By Rosa Ocampo

The Philippine Tourism Promotions Board (TPB) has mapped out new initiatives to convince big congress and convention players to return to the country.

Rolling out over the next two years, these initiatives include the creation of the Philippine MICE Customary Advisory Council (CAC) to help destinations become MICE-ready, prepare strategic plans and programmes, professionalise the industry, create recognition and certificate programmes, disseminate promotional and information materials, intelligence and latest trends and industry best practices.

The CAC is part of the business events campaign to encourage corporations, associations and organisers to bring their business events to the country, as part of the renewed efforts to put the Philippines back on Asia's business events map.

TPB's new COO, Marie Venus Tan, told *TTGmice*: "I will probably put more people into the MICE Department. I need to build the product before I can market it so that has to go hand in hand."

Tan added that TPB will help with bidding for "big ticket events" including conferences by World Travel and Tourism Council, World Tourism Organization, and UNESCO Creative City, alongside music festivals and film screenings. This will be done in cooperation with associations, government institutions, regional and international non-profits.

Another way to strengthen the business events sector was to "advertise to all markets in cross-hubs of the world", to capitalise on world events and focus on interest-driven strategies.

In the 1980s, the Philippines played host to big conventions and congresses,

and was the first in Asia to have a convention centre, the Philippine International Convention Center.

"Now we're being left behind because of technology, and our neighbours are building convention centres for up to 20,000 pax. We might not have their hardware yet but we know how to serve – it's what we will leverage on," she said.



Tan: big ambitions for Philippines' business events sector

New forms of collaboration needed for Asian CVBs: bureau heads

As competition for business events heats up among Asian CVBs, bureau chiefs say the traditional approach of CVB collaboration needs to make way for other forms.

Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau (TCEB), regarded as one of the more matured CVBs in Asia, has been active in cross-border collaboration. Citing an example, Nichapa Yoswee, TCEB's senior vice president business, pointed to the Thailand MICE Venue Standard which was established five years ago to guide local venues towards global standards in order to improve their ability to win international business events.

Nichapa said the Standards has since been adopted across South-east Asia, something TCEB had pushed for.

Speaking on the panel, The Big Picture: Alliance Asia – Are We Competing or Collaborating at BE@Penang 2018 on December 6, bureau chiefs Gordon Yapp of Sabah Convention Bureau and Ashwin Gunasekaran of Penang Convention & Exhibition Bureau acknowledged that a collaborative approach taken by Asian CVBs isn't a fresh concept. The Association of the Asian Convention Bureaux (AACVB) was formed in 1983, but has since gone silent.

When asked if the sleeping state of AACVB was indicative of the region's steep competition and therefore tough environment for an alliance to succeed, Nichapa revealed that she has been pushing for a revival since joining the Association last September.



Nichapa: standards collaboration

Her plans for AACVB's revival includes pushing for four meetings and a re-prioritisation of alliance objectives. "We have come to an agreement to focus on promoting Asia as a single destination for business events, education, research and standards setting," she revealed.

Jason Yeh, CEO of GIS Group Global in Taiwan, who presented a case study on the successful alliance between Barcelona and Austria Convention Bureaux during the panel, agreed that "cooperation does not always mean sharing business information" and urged CVBs to think out of the box.

Yeh said: "For example, more and more American associations want to grow their Asia-Pacific membership but don't know how. If Asian CVBs can work together and help them grow their membership and create networking opportunities here, we will have the chance to attract association meetings." – **Mimi Hudoyo**

Tourism Fiji launches Asian roadshow

Months after establishing a second events team to power up its pursuit of international business events, Tourism Fiji has moved to launch an annual Asia Roadshow in Malaysia and Singapore, with the first held in Malaysia and Singapore across two days in January.

Speaking to *TTGmice* while in Singapore, Kathy Koyamaibole, regional manager Asia, Tourism Fiji, said the roadshows will allow her team to connect with trade partners in the two markets.

Tourism Fiji regards Malaysia and Singapore as source markets with "huge potential for growth".

While arrivals from Asia comprise a "small percentage" currently, she is confident that this number will grow.

Valerie Yee, general manager of Travco World Events Singapore, agrees that interest in Fiji is growing although she has yet to sell the destination.

"Our clients are always looking for exotic places for incentive trips so Fiji has the potential to sell," Yee explained.

Pamela Chun, MICE senior sales manager, ASA Holidays, expressed that the presence of five-star hotels in Fiji assures her of the quality of MICE facilities.

However, Fiji's distance from Singapore – a long flight of over 10 hours – remains a bugbear for some agents.

– **Paige Lee Pei Qi**

Better accessibility for all event attendees needed: MICE leaders

By Mimi Hudoyo

Industry leaders are urging Asian destinations in Asia to improve their accessibility for physically-challenged participants of business events.

Ajit Singh Sikand, president and CEO of HBC Luxury MICE Consulting, noted that physically-challenged persons “have been excluded” from most business events although they “want to be as independent as other delegates – to be able to move around freely (in hotels, convention centres and airports), with signs and infrastructure that allow them to do so”.

He opined that presently there was little being done by hotel companies, convention centres and destinations, especially for the visually-impaired. As for wheelchair users, some measures have been taken by suppliers to cater to them.

Most of the time, destinations are not ready, according to Rahul Bharadwaj, director technology & operations, of Malaysia-based PCO Anderes Fourdy.

For instance, the PCO handled the Rare Disease Asia Conference in 2016 in Kuala Lumpur, where out of the 500 attendees – comprising companies working on rare disease medical solutions, doctors and the patients – were some 100 wheelchair users.

Rahul shared: “(Our) challenge was to find and get hotels and venues ready for delegates with special needs – such as the setting up of ramps for wheelchair users to get up onto stage, have the hotel remove some furniture to allow guests to move around more easily, and modify seats on vans.”

He added that the company had also made a bid for a few association meetings from Europe with blind participants, but lost it to France because there were no hotels in Malaysia that had braille signs for its facilities and on room doors. Moreover, no hotel or convention centre in Malaysia allowed guide dogs indoors.

Because of this, Rahul said his compa-



Leo Pakhomov/shutterstock

ny has stopped bidding for such meetings as Malaysia was still not ready.

Industry players said the tourism bureaus or venues should be the ones to resolve such issues, as they have the resources to do so. Proper education among event players is required too.

Nichapa Yoswee, senior vice president business of Thailand Convention & Exhibition Bureau, said awareness of this need is rising every year, which is a good sign. She acknowledged that “it is impossible for venue owners to change all at once” and said that it was just as important that “everyone is talking about it” and “know how to move forward”.

In brief

Lotus blooms

Malaysia-based Lotus Asia Tours has unveiled a new integrated team that has been tasked with refocusing and rebranding the DMC, as well as opened a new Singapore office.

Now headed by group CEO Fabio Delisi, Lotus will undertake a rebranding campaign with refreshed products scheduled to be rolled out in 2019, under group director of branding & communications, Silvio Cimenti.

PDMF heads to Pattaya

PATA Destination Marketing Forum (PDMF) 2019 is set to take place in Pattaya, Thailand, from November 27 to 29. It will be hosted by the Thailand Convention & Exhibition Bureau (TCEB), the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) and the Designated Areas for Sustainable Tourism Administration (DASTA) with the support of Pattaya City. All parties agreed that the event will contribute to the city's maturity as a business events destination.

Madrid Fusion Manila's premature end

The Department of Tourism (DoT) has finally thrown in the towel on the fourth edition of Madrid Fusion Manila, citing the need “to focus its resources on the many pressing challenges in the industry, in particular to address the needs of sectors that require support as the tourism industry adopts a policy of sustainable tourism”.

The Philippine Association of Convention/Exhibition Organizers and Suppliers, which won the event management bid for Madrid Fusion Manila in the first three years, cannot afford to do it on its own without government support, said its president Joel Pascual.

Musa Yusof is Malaysia's new tourism champion

Musa Yusof, a familiar face to travel industry players in Malaysia, has been appointed the new director-general of Tourism Malaysia, succeeding Mirza Mohammad Taiyab who has retired.

Prior to his appointment, Musa was Tourism Malaysia's senior director, international promotion division (Asia/Africa). He joined Tourism Malaysia (then known as Tourist Development Corporation of Malaysia) on July 7, 1990, as assistant director of enforcement & facilitation division. Since then, he has taken on several key positions including as special officer (tourism) to the then culture, arts & tourism minister Sabbaruddin Chik in 1997 to 1998. Musa was also the director of Tourism Malaysia Paris office from 1998 until 2003.

His experience in Tourism Malaysia includes market development, corporate, international promotion, promotional support and domestic marketing.

Travel trade players interviewed welcomed the appointment, pointing to

Musa's high level of involvement with and support for industry efforts over the years.

Uzaidi Udanis, president, Malaysian Inbound Tourism Association (MITA), said MITA has been working closely with Musa on the Chinese inbound market

in his role as senior director, international promotion division (Asia/Africa).

“With his support and leadership, Malaysia has been able to increase the number of tourist arrivals from China despite the many challenges and stiff competition from other destinations,” he remarked. “I hope he will encourage and endorse more industry-

led initiatives and help relook marketing plans and strategies together with MITA.”

Malaysian Association of Hotel Owners' (MAHO) executive director, Shaharuddin M Saaid, who has known Musa for more than 15 years in his various positions in Tourism Malaysia, too noted the new director-general's support for tourism industry players. – **S Puvanewary**



Musa: favoured by industry players



China now has a Ministry of Culture and Tourism, and industry players hold high hopes for what it could achieve for the business events community, writes Caroline Boey

China's main gateway cities continue to dominate the ranks for Asia-Pacific international meetings and the formation of a Ministry of Culture and Tourism in March 2018 is expected to boost the country's prospects, including second-tier locations.

There are also signs that China's "national image" will get a shot-in-the arm with news that a new marketing campaign will be launched in 2019 and more would be done to foster cooperation between the public and private sectors to promote culture, tourism and trade.

The China Council for the Promotion of International Trade (CCPIT) Commercial Sub-council has already stepped up activities with the ministry, according to Jack Yao, secretary general, and vice president, China Business Event Federation.

Yao said: "For the first time CCPIT is cooperating with the new ministry and the private sector to identify and create business opportunities centred around culture."

While it would be difficult for China to form a centralised convention and visitor bureau like some other Asian countries, Yao, who has also been named second vice president, Asia Marketing Federation, said the government is paying more attention to develop and promote a "national image" with the launch of the new marketing campaign.

Welcoming the news, Sarah Keenlyside, founder and CEO of The Bespoke Travel Company, said more destination marketing support is definitely needed, especially if China wants to spread business to second- and third-tier cities.

Like others in the private sector, Keenlyside said the DMC, which was set up about 10 years ago, has had to rely on its own resources, adding that China can borrow from the many successful examples of what CVBs in Asia have and are doing.

"China is one of the

safest countries to visit or do business in, and the wonderful culture and other positives should be played up," she said, adding that negative stories also needed to be better addressed.

She hopes the new ministry can also consider a "less of a one-size-fits-all approach in dealing with travel companies" and to cut down on paperwork.

A meetings and incentive veteran commented that China is no longer a "cheap" destination and more needed to be done to value-add by applying technology to create "smart travel" and to provide more meaningful and in-depth experiences for event attendees.

The managing director, who had requested anonymity, added: "For SMEs (travel and event agencies) to survive, we need to know early if city or provincial government support will be given, or else it will be difficult for us to cap costs."

His wish list for the new ministry includes establishing a consistent industry standard of service across China.

He explained: "Industry standards are still not uniform in China and the availability of English-speaking staff to be able to attract more international events and business assistance for smaller companies are some of the issues I hope the new ministry will address."

"China is one of the safest countries to visit or do business in, and the wonderful culture and other positives should be played up."

Sarah Keenlyside
 Founder and CEO,
 The Bespoke Travel Company



Big step forward for Tineri

Open Destinations succeeds in scaling up its mobile solution – originally designed for small groups – to serve Nu Skin’s 5,000-plus users, writes **Pamela Chow**



Nu Skin Southeast Asia Facebook

Event brief

For healthcare company Nu Skin’s biennial South-east Asia convention in 2018, Open Destinations was recruited to build an event app using its mobile solution, Tineri.

The app was to communicate the event programme, provide a chat platform, facilitate attendee sign up and feedback, as well as provide additional information on accommodation, the destination and new product details to upwards of 5,000 participants from across the region.

Challenges

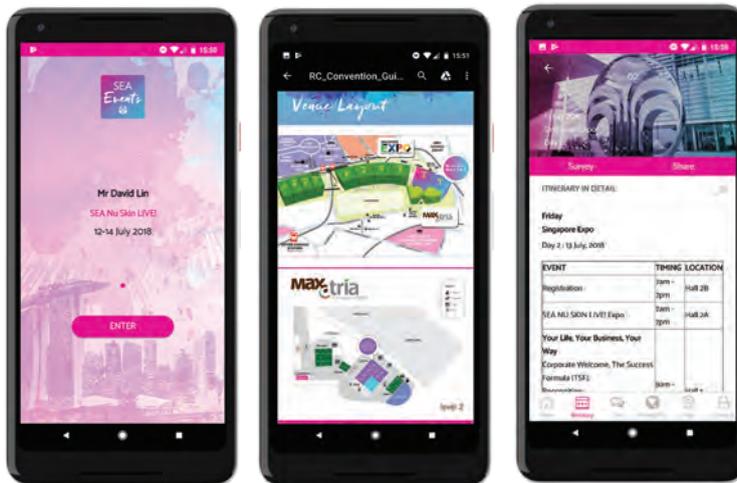
The app had to integrate Nu Skin’s existing online content and corporate branding, and be made available in English, Mandarin, Thai, Vietnamese and Bahasa for the event’s diverse participants.

The large-scale convention challenged Tineri’s original design as a platform for small groups. It now had to be reworked to accommodate some 5,000 simultaneous users.

Tim Russell, business development manager – Asia, Open Destinations, shared: “(The most challenging aspect) for me was ensuring that an app originally designed for FITs and small groups could still work well with (thousands of) simultaneous users, and that our support team could quickly address any issues arising from this. We had a few sleepless nights leading up to the big event in July, as Nu Skin was relying on us to make the huge convention a success.”

Solution

After their initial meeting, Open Destinations



was created for the company to present its own content within the app. New languages were added to the platform, and web sign-up forms were created. All other content and capabilities were then uploaded to the app.

Russell explained: “Tineri is a very intuitive solution and so we never need to spend a lot of time training our clients – we usually find an hour or so on Skype is enough to give them an overview.

“In the end, while we had a couple of minor glitches and outages – mainly in our chat module – we were able to fix these promptly and with minimum disruption, and Nu Skin were

very happy with the product and the support team behind it.”

Key takeaways

The large-scale event expanded Tineri’s capabilities and opened up possibilities for high volume access. Russell said: “Dealing with large loads was our biggest learning; we now know that Tineri can comfortably handle thousands of simultaneous users.

“It also helped us fine-tune our multi-language delivery process so we can deliver the same content, to people travelling on the same tour or attending the same event, in several languages.”

These were especially crucial learning points for Open Destinations in continuing its “rapid growth in 2018”, said Russell.

He concluded: “I learnt that I have a development and support team that will run through walls to ensure our clients provide their travellers with a fantastic mobile platform.”

Event	SEA Nu Skin Live! 2018
Organiser	Nu Skin Singapore
Venue	Singapore EXPO
Date	July 12-14, 2018
Number of participants	More than 5,000

organised two workshops with Nu Skin’s regional team, following which the first priority was reskinning the app with Nu Skin’s branding. Via iFrames, a custom menu feature



DESTINATION PROJECTIONS

Australia

Australia is expecting to see robust activity for business events in 2019, with most event segments seeing strong growth and Asia source markets regarded as a key contributor.

Penny Lion, executive general manager events at Tourism Australia, said: “(We have) overall growth of six per cent for business events arrivals and five per cent for business events expenditure in the year ending March 2018. In particular however, we are seeing strong growth out of China, with an 11 per cent increase in business events arrivals during this time, and 12 per cent growth in expenditure... so we expect a robust 2019 and beyond.”

Lion’s vote of confidence is echoed by Association of Australian Convention Bureaux’s (AACB) CEO Andrew Hiebl, who projects that the number of international delegates travelling to Australia to attend almost 400 business events in 2019 will break the quarter-million mark for the first time since AACB reporting, contributing to a total delegate spend of more than A\$1 billion (US\$722.9 million).

“Association meetings and conventions will continue to be Australia’s strongest performing international segments,” said Hiebl. “(But) international corporate meetings and incentives won dropped by 18 per cent (suggesting these may prove the weakest areas next year)”.

However, corporates are where convention centres like ICC Sydney are banking on for the strongest growth, with CEO Geoff Donaghy seeing incentives and product launches increasingly booking Australia.

“Our close proximity to Asia provides us with an enormous advantage and opportunity,” he said. – **Adelaine Ng**

Hong Kong

Hong Kong is leveraging improved cross-border access via the new High Speed Rail and the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge to grow business travel and events traffic.

Nicholas Chan, director of sales with Kerry Hotel, Hong Kong, foresees an increase in business arrivals in 2019, driven by global interest in the new international transport link to support international meetings.

Chan expects the US to be Hong Kong’s strongest geographical market for business travel and events, while IT will be the top performing industry sector.

Other industry sectors slated “to shine” in 2019 are medical and healthcare, he said.

At Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre (HKCEC), exhibitions remain the venue’s key business segment, with most events specialising in luxury products and services. The HKCEC spokesperson added that niche exhibitions on diving & resorts and technology for elderly people are growing.

HKCEC found that clients were also paying more attention to environmental issues, and expects this trend to continue.

OUTLOOK

2019

Geopolitical tensions are not enough to put a damper on inbound business events performance in the region, while Asian bookers are demanding more personalisation and smarter use of their event budget. By *TTCmice* reporters



From left: Hong Kong's business district; International Convention Centre Sydney

Wellness and sustainability concerns are increasingly common among delegates attending events at Grand Hyatt Hong Kong, with planners now eager to find new ways to appeal to their participants through these aspects.

When asked about major business concerns for the new year, industry players pointed to uncertainty in the global economy and the trade war between China and the US. – **Pru-
dence Lui**

India

India's growing reputation as a knowledge powerhouse is expected to encourage a rise in exhibitions and conferences held on her soil in the new year, while positive international business ties will drive inbound business travel.

Business verticals such as medical, finance, IT and engineering are predicted to be strong drivers of business travel and events demand.

Chander Mansharamani, managing director at Alpcord Network Travel & Conferences, added that the "stability of the Indian economy means that inbound MICE demand will grow 10 to 15 per cent in 2019".

Swadesh Kumar, founder of Shikhar Group of Companies, identified the US, Europe and Japan as key source markets for inbound business events and corporate traffic, as "they have strong business ties with India".

With the Indian tourism ministry stepping up destination marketing efforts in the past year, some industry players are also expecting corporate incentive interest to rise in 2019.

Meanwhile, Sanzeev Bhatia, vice president, The Metropolitan Hotel & Spa New Delhi, is betting on a rosy second half of the year.

He explained: "The Indian union elections are scheduled in the first half of 2019, so a lot of companies have planned their (events in India) for the later part of the year." – **Rohit Kaul**

Indonesia

Indonesian business event players are predicting a slow 1H2019 due to the country's general and presidential elections, as well as the Ramadhan Muslim fasting month following soon after.

The Jakarta Convention Center, for one, is feeling the effects acutely. While the venue's books at year-end typically show strong advance bookings until the following mid-year, this time round it isn't so.

Hosea Andreas Runkat, director of convention services with the venue, explained: "Unlike in 2018, the next January-February period

is quiet for us. March will be busy, but April bookings are down 50 per cent year-on-year because of the elections."

Arya Seta Wiriadipoera, managing director of Napindo Media Ashatama, noted that elections always made for uncertain political situations which could bring about travel advisories against Indonesia.

Despite that, Arya remains optimistic that the seven exhibitions Napindo had planned for 2019 would be successful. "The Indonesian market is (highly regarded) and businesses want to profit from it. As such, trade exhibitions here are less vulnerable to economic (and political) issues," he added.

While Muhammad Reza Abdullah, president director of Royalindo Expoduta, is seeing weaker business in 2019 compared to 2018, he remains encouraged of good business ahead leading from Indonesia's successful hosting of the Annual Meeting of the IMF-World Bank in Bali last October.

Adding to Indonesia's inbound business events woes is a cocktail of rising costs and destination competition, said Ida Bagus Lolec Surakusuma, managing director of Pacific World Nusantara, who believes that these will hurt inbound incentives in 2019.

"Companies are now tightening budgets while being offered more destination choices. Some budget-conscious clients farther afield are choosing to conduct their incentive programmes closer to home (instead of here in Asia)," he explained.

To get around this, he said the Indonesian Ministry of Tourism should focus on developing stronger business event arrivals from nearby Asian source markets. – **Tiara Maharani**

Japan

On the back of a solid business events performance in 2018 and thanks to a raised profile due to the upcoming Rugby World Cup and Olympic Games in 2020, Japan's outlook for business events in 2019 is very positive.

"Interest in corporate meetings and incentives in Japan is increasing because of the Rugby World Cup next year, particularly among European markets – most notably the UK – as well as Australia and New Zealand," said Etsuko Kawasaki, executive director of the Japan Convention Bureau.

The Japan National Tourism Organization has recently opened offices in Malaysia, Vietnam, Thailand and India, which has also had a positive impact on business event visitors to Japan, Kawasaki said. The Indian market has

in particular been focusing on Japan, she also added.

Lucky Morimoto, president of Tokyo-based Event Services, anticipates continued strong interest from buyers representing large multinational life insurance companies and direct sales firms with operations in Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and China.

The positivity surrounding the inbound business events sector is encouraging the New Otani Hotel to cast its eyes beyond the domestic market.

"We are particularly interested in attracting MICE visitors from Europe and North America as those travellers (tend to stay in) Japan for a longer period of time," said Mika Ikegami, senior sales manager for the Tokyo property.

– **Julian Ryall**

Macau

With the majority (80.7 per cent) of subvention applications coming from Asia-Pacific, the Macao Trade and Investment Promotion Institute (IPIM) concluded that global issues such as the China-US trade dispute or BREXIT have little impact on Macau's inbound MICE performance.

Corporate meetings was the strongest performing segment in 2018, followed by association meetings.

An IPIM spokesman expects to see the same picture in 2019, but said the organisation will "constantly monitor the situation". He added: "If the trade dispute turns long-term, it may affect who does business with who although it may not lead to major downturn in B2B events."

In Macau's favour is the inauguration of the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge which is boosting B2B traffic within the Pearl River Delta region as well as "the desire for the cities (there) to work together and explore business opportunities". "Accessibility to Macau from Hong Kong airport is now 24/7 with the link bridge in place. This enhances our capacity to stage large-scale events," said the spokesman.

Stakeholders like Sands China is projecting a buoyant 2019 for meetings and events. Vice president of sales, Stephanie Tanpure, noted that the average size of events is growing.

"At Sands Resorts Macao, we are particularly optimistic about the anticipated growth in MICE over the next two years and we remain hopeful to increase our market share across key source markets including China, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, South-east Asia, the US and Australia. In 2019, Sands Resorts Macao will

undertake an intensive global roadshow which will cover over 25 cities commencing with the US in March 2019," she detailed.

To encourage continued growth, particularly in inbound incentive trips, the Macao Government Tourism Office is maintaining its support scheme for this segment of events as well as its presence at various relevant tradeshows worldwide to promote the destination.

– Prudence Lui

Malaysia

Malaysia has a healthy forecast for this year, citing new attractions and confirmed venue bookings as reasons for jubilation.

Arokia Das Anthony, director, Luxury Tours Malaysia, said: "Desaru Coast in Johor is shaping up and this will be a new destination for us to promote in 2019. Our main markets, Indonesia and India, performed well in 2018 and we expect the growth to continue in 2019."

Adam Kamal, general manager, Tour East Malaysia, is optimistic as the company has confirmed forward bookings for incentives from Australia and Russia for 1H2019. Tour East Malaysia has also ventured to US and South America in search for new business.

Over in Penang, a fast-rising destination for business events, Setia SPICE Convention Centre is enjoying full venue occupancy from Fridays to Sundays throughout 2019, and will be busier in the new year than it was in 2018.

Yeoh Kheng Ho, senior manager, said advance bookings came mostly (70 per cent) from local companies planning meetings, annual dinners and exhibitions.

Ashwin Gunasekeran, CEO, Penang Convention & Exhibition Bureau, summed up that 2019 will be a busy year for Penang, with many national and international conference bids won in 2016 and 2017 materialising in 2019, including the World Seafood Congress 2019 which will take place in September.

However, Alan Pryor, general manager of Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre, is cautiously optimistic. Describing 2019 as a "moderate international meetings year for the centre", he explained that clients are taking a wait-and-see approach to their event planning against a backdrop of uncertainties in geo-politics and a new government in Malaysia. – S Puvanewary

Philippines

Inbound business events are expected to fare better in 2019 than the previous year, emboldened by agile business from China, devaluing local currency that makes travel in the Philippines much more affordable, and renewed importance being given to this oft-neglected tourism segment.

"Business travel has grown exponentially and demand for corporate events has equally increased. This growth has seen China as the single strongest feeder market," said Agnes Pacis, vice president sales and marketing, SMX Convention Center.

Marco Polo Ortigas Hotel's general manager Frank Reichenbach said that based on tourism figures in 2018, China and Taiwan are expected to bring in more corporate guests. Conventions will continue to grow, he added, due to the "continuous development of infrastructure and facilities" while others said corporate meetings are another growth sector.

Another booster is the continued weakening of the Philippine peso, which fell 53.3 pesos to the US greenback in June 2018 – the weakest in 12 years – as experts predict that it will reach the 55 peso mark in 2019.

Factoring in inflation, currency fluctuations and other global macro issues, Marisa Nallana, president of the Philippines Exhibits and Themeparks, said the industry should take heed of the growing trend for "cost savings, fewer delegates for meetings, shorter meetings and events, and transfer to smaller/less costly venues".

Joel Pascual, president of PACEOS (Philippine Association of Convention/Exhibition Organizers and Suppliers), said 2019 augured well as the MICE roadmap over the next nine years is already in place and the new COO of Tourism Promotions Board, Marie Venus Tan, has adopted the "bid, bid, bid" policy for international events while the government has the "build, build, build" infrastructure policy.

– Rosa Ocampo

Singapore

While inbound business events performance is expected to hold strong for Singapore, industry players are keeping a cautious eye on the ripple effect of international relations.

Jeannie Lim, executive director, conventions, meetings and incentive travel, Singapore Exhibition & Convention Bureau, is keeping an eye on "ongoing global tariff war and potential geopolitical tensions that might affect consumer confidence and business travel sentiments".

Pan Pacific Hotels Group's chief, sales & marketing officer, Cinn Tan, reflected similar sentiments. She projected that the "mounting trade tensions between the US and China will pose the biggest risk to global economic growth in 2019".

The resulting climate may affect suppliers who are reliant on traffic from Central and South America as well as around Asia-Pacific, said Kerry Healy, vice president of sales Asia Pacific, AccorHotels. These markets "consider economic and political safety as their main issue when selecting a meeting destination,"

she explained.

Geopolitical tensions could also affect air connectivity, which is a "top factor influencing meeting location" for planners in North America and Europe, Healy added.

Still, business is proceeding as usual in Singapore, as "the global economic outlook for 2019 and Asia-Pacific travel growth seems favourable," forecasted Lim.

Tan added: "There is a silver lining in the clouds as the longer-term outlook by GBTA is more positive, as business travel-related spending is forecast to increase by 7.1 per cent in 2018 over 2017 (which totalled US\$1.3 trillion globally). 2019 will also see more bleisure travel across all regions worldwide, particularly for top destinations such as Singapore, Tokyo and Shanghai."

Singapore looks forward to a strong pipeline of conventions and large meetings from technology, innovation and direct selling companies. Growth momentum in the exhibitions and conferences sector is also expected to continue, according to Lim, driven by emerging clusters, such as advanced manufacturing, fintech, smart logistics and lifestyle. – Pamela Chow

South Korea

While MICE performance data for 2018 had yet to be compiled at press time, the Korea Tourism Organization (KTO) revealed that corporate meeting and incentive arrivals to the country as of November 2018 had risen 21 per cent year-on-year.

Baeho Kim, KTO's director of MICE planning & management team, believes that the figure will rise further by the year's end.

Cyril Constantino, Asia Pacific supplier management lead, CWT Meetings & Events, reports stronger interest in the country too.

"We've seen an increase in the number of clients enquiring about hosting their events in South Korea and we organised a few large events here in 2018," he shared, adding that Seoul and Jeju were a hit while Pyeongchang might gain more adventurous corporate groups in the new year due to publicity surrounding the 2018 Winter Olympics.

Constantino projects a brighter future for the country in 2019, "helped by the easing of tensions with the North".

Various factors have also led to more intense interest in South Korea, he opined.

"South Korean culture has gained tremendous popularity across the globe. This is a major draw not just for incentive trips, but also for corporate events that are becoming increasingly 'festivalised' and incorporating K-pop elements into their concepts. Coupled with new creative spaces and experiences, these factors will continue to drive demand for South Korea moving forward," he said.

Kim, too, anticipates continued "positive growth" in incentive arrivals thanks to the recovery of the Chinese market and strong economic developments in South-east Asia. KTO will maintain its focus on growing the corporate meeting and incentive segments.

Escalating competition with Thailand, Singapore and Japan will see KTO intensifying its promotional activities. In 2018, KTO moved

Sensoji Temple in Tokyo, Japan



litho/shutterstock



Desaru Coast in Johor, Malaysia

to incorporate Hallyu elements into business event programmes by way of sponsorship of K-pop concerts, souvenirs, and more.

Kim added: "We recently signed an MOU with global hotel chains to conduct partner marketing and create new demand."

Source markets that will get KTO's attention in 2019 are Vietnam, Thailand and Indonesia, as well as Russia and Western Europe farther afield. – **Karen Yue**

Thailand

The Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau (TCEB) recorded 1,255,985 overseas MICE arrivals in 2018, which for Nichapa Yoswee, senior vice president – business, is a "remarkable increase" of 19.9 per cent. These travellers generated revenue of around 95.6 billion baht (US\$2.9 billion) – an 8.1 per cent rise over 2017's performance.

TCEB secured 14 conference bids, 10 mega meeting and incentive groups (each with 2,000 to 20,000 pax), and eight new trade-shows in 2018.

Clearly, the corporate incentive sector continues to be Thailand's strongest performer, growing by 35.9 per cent in 2018, with China being the prime source market.

Nichapa attributed the robust corporate incentive performance to Thailand's introduction of fast-entry online visa system for travellers

from 20 countries, including China, as well as a slew of new tourism products. In late-2018, Bangkok debuted the ultra-glamorous shopping complex ICONSIAM along the Chao Phraya River, and King Power Mahanakhon tower which houses Thailand's highest observation deck at 314m above ground.

In Pattaya, Nongnooch International Convention and Exhibition Center was launched in 2017 and showed off its capability in 2018 by hosting a 10,000-pax Chinese incentive group, and the Miss Universe 2018 national costume competition.

Further boosting Thailand's appeal for business events is TCEB's *Thailand: REDEFINE Your Business Events* campaign, launched in 3Q2018 to strengthen collaboration with global event strategists to make their events in Thailand exceptional, noted Nichapa.

Also turning in a good performance report is IMPACT Exhibition Management, the company behind Bangkok's massive IMPACT Muang Thong Thani convention and exhibition venue. Loy Joon How, IMPACT general manager, said the venue hosted over 100 international business and entertainment events in 2018, including the widely-covered Miss Universe 2018 finals.

Loy is optimistic about 2019's performance, encouraged by Thailand's relative affordability compared to other destinations, easy access, availability of first-class venues and strong government support. Several international trade

exhibitions and incentive groups have been confirmed for the venue in 2019, including the 35th ASEAN Summit. For the new year, TCEB is expecting a five per cent increase in overseas MICE arrivals and a similar five per cent increase in revenue. – **Karen Yue**

Vietnam

Minister of Culture, Sports and Tourism, Nguyen Ngoc Thien, said developing the country's business events industry is a main priority for 2019 as investments into improved infrastructure and new products start to pay off. The ministry will focus on further developing business events capability mainly in Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi, Danang and Nha Trang.

The incentive and conference sectors are expected to be the strongest performing in 2019, with meetings and exhibitions now booked directly through hotels.

Sandor Leinwand recte Rein, general manager of EXO Travel Vietnam, said incentive travel makes up about 70 per cent of the agency's business events bookings, with the remainder being group meetings.

Linh Le, ASIA DMC group director, added: "MICE is no longer limited to meetings and conferences. Several corporates are now requesting DMCs plan meetings in locations where guests can extend to enjoy a well-earned holiday with their spouse or family."

While regional markets continue to dominate, Le said there is potential for growth from India, Australia, Turkey, Russia and China. Brexit is expected to impact business from the UK, while the Spanish market is projected to be sluggish due to increased competition from Europe and Africa.

Sheraton Danang Resort general manager Frank Bochmann noted a rise in regional demand, such as from Thailand, Singapore and Hong Kong. He said: "People are now looking for somewhere new and Vietnam is an attractive alternative. They are tired of Phuket and Koh Samui." – **Marissa Carruthers**

ASIAN APPETITES

China

Domestic business events demand to and from Shanghai in 2019 is expected to be stronger compared to Beijing and developments in southern China – such as the opening of the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau Bridge and the US\$3.9 billion mega Shenzhen International Convention and Exhibition Center – are expected to spur business and growth opportunities.

Kin Qin, deputy general manager, Century Holiday International Travel Group, said Shanghai continues to add new international air links, and there are plentiful domestic and overseas access choices to and from the city.

Julien Delerue, founder and CEO of 1000meetings, said domestic MICE demand for Shanghai is very strong and hotels rates

are getting higher, which is a positive sign the market is doing well.

The technology sector and companies such as Alibaba, Huawei and Tencent, continue to drive demand, according to Sam Braybon, Shanghai ambassador, The Bespoke Travel Company, and the company is looking to extend its product range to Shenzhen to support business in the sector.

Meanwhile, 10-year-old 1000meetings, an RFP technology platform, recently set up a team to address the overseas outbound market, Delerue commented.

"The company has signed a partnership deal with Shangri-La worldwide, other international brands and independent hotels to raise their visibility in China," he added, with increasing outbound MICE groups as the target for its second phase. – **Caroline Boey**

Hong Kong

Business event players in Hong Kong are bracing for weakened demand in 2019, resulting from a global economic downturn and the US-China trade war.

Karen Cheng, director of BCD Meetings & Events Hong Kong, has estimated a downward trend in business for 2019 over 2018.

Rosanna Leung, head of MICE & business development, Towa Tours, echoed the expectation, saying that the Hong Kong market will likely respond with budget cuts. Further challenges will come in the form of increased presence of global business event players who compete with Hong Kong-based outbound events agencies.

When asked for predictions of top performing market segments, Cheng pointed to insurance companies which will maintain a hearty appetite for Japan, South Korea and Bangkok – destinations close to Hong Kong that also charm with good food as well as

Cover story

high quality and inexpensive shopping.

Leung believes that industry sectors specialising in new technology and finance will contribute the most business events bookings to Japan and Scandinavian countries, while Corporate Travel Management Hong Kong's CEO Larry Lo expects banks, investment agencies and insurance companies to shine the brightest for his company.

Lo also noted a "growing trend for personalisation" among clients.

He said: "Hong Kong corporates are demanding for more innovative and unique venues, staff wellness and experiential learning opportunities, culinary experiences and a safe environment. And with an eye on cost efficiency, corporates are preferring to conduct a single, big event to consolidate activities and obtain bulk savings on transportation and accommodation." – **Prudence Lui**

Indonesia

Indonesia corporates are hungry for business events both on home ground and outside of the country, noted industry players.

Multi-level marketing, automotive and heavy equipment companies are picking up in activity levels after a few sluggish years, observed industry players, while insurance companies are expanding their attendee numbers. Financial institutions are also organising more business events in and outside of Indonesia.

Rudiana, sales and marketing manager of WITA Tour said multi-level marketing, automotive, pharmaceutical and consumer goods companies "have put thousands of their members in our listing from year to year". However, he cautioned that the rupiah's poor performance and the resulting decline in consumers' buying power might shift demand for longhaul destinations to shorter ones.

Simon Lomas, general manager of JI EXPO Convention Centre and Theatre Jakarta, credited the country's "impressive economic growth over the past decade" for the strong corporate appetite for business events.

Jona Convexindo is seeing bigger exhibitions and awards events being planned for 2019 compared to 2018, noted director John Nainggolan.

With the country's general and presidential election scheduled for April 17, 2019, business



(Malaysian) companies are requesting for more half-board packages, where one or two times during the entire stay dinner is not provided for.

Rosli Seth
Managing director,
Feel Japan, Malaysia

events demand and movement will likely slow down in the lead-up.

Destination wise, events specialists opined that Japan and South Korea will remain hot favourites for Indonesian incentive groups, due to easy visa processes and strong reach of digital destination marketing efforts.

Bali remains the top domestic destination option, as poor access and pricey airfares to other parts of Indonesia continue to make other local options less appealing. – **Ade Siregar**

Malaysia

While Malaysian companies are still incentivising their staff, travel spend on incentives have not improved much, mainly due to a weakened ringgit which isn't showing signs of strong recovery in the near future.

Rosli Seth, managing director of Feel Japan with K, said: "Companies are requesting for more half-board packages, where one or two times during the entire stay dinner is not provided for. They say it is to give delegates a chance to explore on their own, rather than to reduce expenditure. But that is also how companies are managing their costs.

"Also, to catch the Sakura season, companies are opting to travel to Kawazu in the Izu Peninsula, where blooms happen from early February. This way, they save about 30 to 35 per cent on hotel rates as compared with a stay in Tokyo during the Cherry Blossom Festival (in peak March or April)."

Also pained by the weak ringgit, Abdul Rahman Mohamed, general manager at Mayflower Holidays, expects clients to turn away from longhaul destinations in favour of the more affordable regional ones.

Regional favourites among small and medium enterprises are Bali, Bangkok, Pattaya, Chiang Mai and Ho Chi Minh City, according to Nanda Kumar, managing director, Hidden Asia Travel & Tours. Malaysian clients are also favouring their own backyard for corporate incentives and teambuilding programmes, such as Langkawi, Penang and Pangkor Island.

– **S Puvanewary**

Philippines

The higher cost of travelling abroad due to the Philippine peso's steep depreciation has not marred the appetite for foreign incentive trips, which remain the fastest-growing outbound business events segment.

Industry sources agreed that Europe remains high on the list for top-level corporate champions and it helps that Turkish Airlines and Middle Eastern carriers offer affordable airfares to the continent.

Bella Calleja, JTB's manager for Corporate Team 2, MICE, said big corporations continue to reward their top sellers and dealers with their preferred European destinations although they will reduce the duration from say, 10 to eight days, and cut the number of countries featured in the itinerary.

For those on the lower rung of the ladder, Calleja said they are rewarded with Asian countries such as Taiwan, Thailand and Singapore.

Feliz Axalan, general manager, Tradewings Tours and Travel Corp. is "worried" about the impact on business events of the peso's depreciation combined with the fuel surcharge that two Philippine airlines have imposed in 2018 due to rising fuel prices. She hoped to continue getting good rates with their airline partners to Europe.

Marlene Jante, president, Philippine Travel Agencies Association, noted that corporations will still send their top achievers to foreign trips all the more to reward and incentivise them, while meetings and conventions abroad still have to be attended for networking. – **Rosa Ocampo**

Singapore

The volatile global political climate is expected to dent appetite for corporate travel to traditional longhaul business hubs from Singapore.

Geopolitical tension arising from the US-China trade war and Brexit has had a "dampening effect" on planners' confidence in travel to the US and the UK, observed Crystal Sim, president & CEO, Albatross World.

Instead, longhaul incentives are heading elsewhere, to more exotic European destinations like Croatia, Portugal and Spain. Sim explained: "There will always be clients who will travel high-end. As long as there is no major economic malaise, people will travel, and we will continue to focus on luxury tours."

Regional business cities are also gaining favour. According to a September study by YouGov, business travellers in Singapore rated Tokyo, Bangkok and Hong Kong as their top destinations. Tokyo was the top choice for respondents aged between 35 and 44, and those over 45 preferred Bangkok.

"Japan will be a hot destination in the next two years as it hosts the Rugby World Cup tournament next year and the 2020 Tokyo Olympics," said Kerry Healy, vice president of sales Asia Pacific, AccorHotels. Singapore's interest in Japan will be amplified by the partnership between the Singapore Rugby Union and JTB to promote rugby tourism to Japan and Singapore. To capture this crowd, AccorHotels last year opened the Pullman Tokyo Tamachi, featuring three banquet and meeting rooms.

– **Pamela Chow**



With an eye on cost efficiency, (Hong Kong) corporates are preferring to conduct a single, big event to consolidate activities and obtain bulk savings on transportation and accommodation.

Larry Lo
CEO, Corporate Travel
Management Hong Kong



TRENDS TO WATCH

Incentive travel



Rajeev Kohli

SITE president 2016 and 2017, joint managing director, Creative Travel India

Budget increases

SITE partnered with the Incentive Research Foundation (IRF) and Financial and Insurance Conference Professionals (FICP) in 2018 to deliver the first-ever Incentive Travel Industry Index representing the views of more than 1,000 senior incentive travel professionals in 86 countries.

Fifty-four per cent of buyers predict the per person median in 2019 will be US\$4,000 – same as last year – but \$1,000 more than the 2016 figure. Per person average for corporate buyers is US\$8,151 and per person average for agencies is US\$5,193. Some companies are reporting per person investments of as much as \$50,000.

Rise in the number of qualifiers

Globally 65 per cent of all buyers are increasing the number of qualifiers – 58 per cent in US, 67 per cent in the EU and 73 per cent in Asia. Incentive houses reported a 71 per cent increase in 2018 compared to 54 per cent in 2017.

Inclusion in incentive travel programmes

Eighty-six per cent of buyers highlighted wellness – yoga, healthy meals, etc – and wellness at 86 per cent trumps corporate social responsibility (CSR) at 74 per cent. CSR has fallen out of favour, in particular with corporate buyers, down from 94 per cent in 2017 to 73 per cent in 2018).

Association meetings



Noor Ahmad Hamid

Regional director, Asia-Pacific, ICCA

Greater love for legacy

We see more and more international associations making “legacy” a central part of their thinking and activities. Creating a lasting legacy has become pivotal to their strategy, as many associations begin to look beyond traditional planning.

Shift in role of meetings industry

Meetings once conceived as being “part of tourism” are now seen as delivering “economic and societal impact”.

New focus of international associations

They include knowledge or skill transfer in developing countries, building the local community, advocating issues of relevance or advancing future intellectual leaders to leave a lasting positive impact on the destinations they visit.

This is the primary reason why ICCA has collaborated with BestCities Global Alliance to launch the Incredible Impacts Programme with the value of meetings tagged in areas such as legacy development, sustainability and accessibility. Launched in 2017, Incredible Impacts grants are awarded to associations who strive to ensure their events make a difference.

Corporate travel



Benson Tang

Regional director, Asia Association of Corporate Travel Executives (ACTE)

The power of technology

Harnessing technology – artificial intelligence, chatbots, blockchain, etc – to manage corporate travel is on the radar for travel managers to consider in 2019.

The rise of millennials

By 2020, millennials will comprise half of the global workforce and are forecast to account for almost 50 per cent of corporate travel spend. To enhance the centrality of these travellers will be paramount in 2019.

Rising trade tensions

According to the International Monetary Fund, disputes between the US and the rest of the world could cost the global economy US\$430 billion. With the US “especially vulnerable” to escalating tariffs, this could affect corporate travel expenditure in 2019.

Exhibitions



Mark Cochrane

Regional manager, Asia-Pacific, UFI The Global Association of the Exhibition Industry

Mergers and acquisition

Following Informa's acquisition of UBM and private equity firm, Blackstone's acquisition of Global Sources, Clarion and PennWell, 2019 should be a year of more deals both big and small.

Mega venues

NECC (National Exhibition and Convention Center) opened in Shanghai in 2015 adding 400,000m² to the market there. In 2019, Shenzhen World will boost that city's capacity by an incredible 500,000m². India is also, finally, adding significant capacity in Mumbai and Delhi. Big venues usually unlock big growth in exhibitions.

South-east Asia's potential

The exhibition markets in the region from the large (in Thailand) to the small (in Cambodia and Vietnam) have been posting significant growth for more than three years. We expect that to continue in 2019 and beyond.





Conquering events

The third edition of the annual BE@Penang conference took place at the Setia SPICE Convention Centre on December 7 and 8, calling on Asia's business event players to discuss ways to grow the industry in more exceptional ways



Destination: Penang Special

FESTIVAL CITY



Penang is more than just artistic murals and heritage streets. Its lively line-up of festivals are worth noting and can inject plenty of entertainment to even the most solemn of business events.
By S Puvaneswary

Destination: Penang Special

FESTIVAL: Penang Hot Air Balloon Fiesta

ORGANISER: AKA Balloon

WHEN: February 9-10, 2019

WHERE: Padang Polo, Penang

HIGHLIGHTS: Ticketed tethered balloon rides will be available on first-come-first-served basis, where visitors can soar as high as 18m. The Night Glow show draws the crowd every evening, featuring 10 balloons lit up with the accompaniment of music and lights. Watch out also for the Cold Inflation activity, where visitors can walk into a balloon envelope that's filled with cold air as it lies on the ground. Supplementing the balloon-themed fun are art & craft and F&B stalls.

The massive balloons are inflated for displays thrice a day – from 07.00, from 18.00 and from 20.45. Displays are subject to weather conditions.

While there is no entrance fee, charges apply for certain activities such as tethered balloon rides at RM50 (US\$12) and Cold Inflation at RM5.



FESTIVAL WONDERLAND

FESTIVAL: Penang International Dragon Boat Festival

ORGANISER: Penang Tourism Development, Culture, Heritage & Arts

WHEN: June 1-2, 2019

WHERE: Teluk Bahang Dam

HIGHLIGHTS: Held in conjunction with Pesta Pulau Pinang (Penang Festival), the Penang International Dragon Boat Festival draws hundreds of participants from around the world to compete for the prize money. They converge in Penang as part of a year-long world race circuit under the auspices of the International Dragon Boat Federation headquartered in Beijing. For visitors, it is an opportunity to enjoy a weekend of pulsating thrills and spills to the vigorous beating of drums and strong thrust of oars as the teams battle it out in the water. Expect colourful dragon boats and various stage performances to add vibrancy to the event.



FESTIVAL: Penang International Food Festival

ORGANISER: TLM Event

WHEN: April 13-28, 2019

WHERE: Across Penang

HIGHLIGHTS: The annual Penang International Food Festival (PIFF) celebrates Penang's reputation as the food capital of Malaysia. The 16-day event showcases new-age food invasion, such as through colourful food trucks, and offers themed dining experiences, cooking challenges and other mini festivals.

Now into its third year, PIFF has grown from strength to strength. The inaugural edition in 2017 presented the transition of Penang's food history from the authentic culinary methods of days past to the innovative fusion cooking of present and future cuisines. Last year, the event showcased Penang's varied street food as well as food scenes at cafes, restaurants and hotels.



On this page, from above: Penang Hot Air Balloon Fiesta, Penang International Dragon Boat Festival, Penang International Food Festival. Opposite page: George Town Festival



held in July for two weeks. Visitors can expect the same excitement surrounding the festival, when George Town is transformed into a global stage, showcasing world-class performances, installations, and collaborations from both international and local artists.

FESTIVAL: George Town Literary Festival

ORGANISER: Penang Convention & Exhibition Bureau festival director Bernice Chauly, with support and funding from the State Government of Penang

WHEN: November 21-24, 2019

WHERE: Across George Town

HIGHLIGHTS: The George Town Literary Festival (GTLF) is an international literary festival celebrating world literature, translations and literary arts. The event is world-renowned and in 2018 it seized The International Excellence Awards 2018: The Literary Festival Award at The London Book Fair 2018.

GTLF is an initiative by the State Government of Penang. Since its first edition in 2011, the GTLF is open to the public at no cost.

The festival provides a space for thinkers, writers and audiences at large to share and discuss some of society's pressing issues. It is an avenue for people of all walks of life to engage, inspire and be inspired. During the four days, there will also be free film screenings, performances, literary activities and book launches.

FESTIVAL: George Town Heritage Celebrations

ORGANISER: George Town World Heritage Incorporated

WHEN: July 7, 2019

WHERE: Across George Town

HIGHLIGHTS: George Town Heritage Celebrations is held every year to commemorate George Town's inscription as UNESCO World Heritage Site on July 7, 2008.

The day-long event commences with simultaneous activities across the heritage district, from site excursions and interactive workshops to a vibrant street festival which takes in performances and cultural shows.

No festival in Penang is complete without showcasing the local cuisine. Recipes handed down generations make a tantalising spread at the celebrations.

The collection of activities present visitors with numerous opportunities to immerse in the living traditions of George Town and to get a glimpse of what the future holds for the city.

FESTIVAL: George Town Festival

ORGANISER: TLM Event

WHEN: July 13-28, 2019

WHERE: Across George Town

HIGHLIGHTS: In past years, George Town Festival was a month-long celebration of culture, heritage, art and community, held in August and produced by Joe Sidek Productions.

However, for 2019, this festival get a new producer and will be



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A DESTINATION THAT SHINES

Penang is armed with diverse charms for business events, opines Ashwin Gunasekeran, CEO of Penang Convention & Exhibition Bureau



What makes Penang a unique destination for business events?

Penang is the ultimate 'Experiences Unfiltered' destination that provides both facilities and capacity. It also boasts the Penang Factor which comprises:

- Penang's rich heritage and culture which uplift the status of any business event held in Penang
- Penang's extraordinary venues which range from convention centres and hotel ballrooms to gardens, hills and traditional buildings
- Penang's famed street food and local cuisine which are available around the clock
- Excellent accessibility, made possible by Penang's direct connection with 25 major local and regional airports as well as over 100 destinations worldwide via Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, Bangkok and Hong Kong. Within Penang, there is an integrated public transport system that connects the Rapid Penang bus services to the ferry, cruises and high speed rail
- A common language – hospitality. The friendly people of Penang are always ready to welcome visitors while venues

are always equipped with complimentary high-speed wireless Internet

- Penang's must-visit status, which has placed it on the world's Bucket List Destinations

Planners today want unique destination experiences. What can Penang offer?

Penang is home to a few new outdoor attractions. Groups can escape into a tropical rainforest or the curated Tropical Spice Garden to watch mischievous dusky leaf monkeys and playful long-tailed macaques going about their activities.

Groups can also cycle past green pastures and explore animal farms in Teluk Bahang, away from the bustling city.

We have Penang Hill located 833m above sea level, offering 360-degree views of Penang. Up on the peak sits The Habitat where visitors can have a sunset cocktail party.

Yet another highlight is The Top Penang, a revitalised theme park with a plethora of activities, retail and F&B outlets. It also features the Highest Glass Skywalk in Malaysia as well as the Jurassic Research Centre.

Penang is also a city of festivals. How can planners marry their business events with these festivals?

These festivals help to bring corporate groups out of the conventional meeting venue. There are festivals all year-round, from those that celebrate the arts to religious ones. The cultural festivals, such as Chinese New Year, Wesak, Thaipusam and Hari Raya, give business event attendees a chance to experience local customs.

PCEB is the festival producer of the George Town Literary Festival (GTLF). How are you using this event to promote Penang for business events?

With GTLF, we might be able to attract and bid for more conferences related to the subject matter or literary-based conferences like the International Conference on English Language, Literature, Teaching and Translation Studies (CELLTTS), the 16th International Conference on Literature, Languages, Humanities & Social Sciences and many other potential ones.

Penang is also becoming a knowledge hub, which will further attract more educational conferences.

FAST FACTS

1 The Penang Convention & Exhibition Bureau (PCEB) has a year-old conference ambassador programme that comprises local and international association leaders who have experience in organising conferences or are industry leaders in their field of expertise, and who strongly believe in Penang as a business events destination.

2 PCEB has a Strategic Partnership Agreement with Malaysia Airlines which includes providing value-adds to business event organisers, especially in terms of special rates for flights.

3 The biggest convention held in Penang in 2018 was V-Malaysia 2018, organised by QNET and held in April. The five-day event held at Setia SPICE Convention Centre and Setia SPICE Arena was attended by 16,000 delegates from 70 countries.

4 PCEB's efforts to grow inbound business events from India is intensifying, with the launch of the inaugural Penang International Travel Exchange (PITE) last September. Some 150 Indian buyers were hosted in Penang, where they attended a B2B session and attended

site inspections, destination education workshops and networking events with Malaysian suppliers. Aside from PITE, PCEB has been running roadshows in various Indian cities.

5 The third edition of BE@Penang was held last December. The annual event started off as a gathering of local business event stakeholders and is now an international event that provides local suppliers and DMCs a valuable opportunity to broaden their global network and learn from international experts in the field.

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MASTERS OF CREATIVITY

HOST YOUR EVENT HERE:

Tropical Spice Garden

ADD A FESTIVAL SLANT:

Tropical Spice Garden showcases over 500 varieties of exotic flora and fauna, spices and herbs, spread over eight acres of secondary jungle. It is a great venue to visit and see the spices grown before visiting the Penang International Food Festival.

Planners can take advantage of pre-planned guided tours that are offered daily at 9am, 11am and 1.30pm, each lasting an hour and 15 minutes. Private tours are available upon request.

Another splendid idea is to have a hawker-style dine-around event held in the attraction's two indoor pavilions. This will give delegates a precious opportunity to sample much-loved local street food.

As well, a cooking class can be arranged, with Peranakan, Malay, Indian-Malay, Thai, Penang street food and Asian vegetarian dishes on the menu.

CAPACITY:

Private spice tour, up to 120 people per session; cooking class, up to 20 people per session; dine-around, 100 people

HOST YOUR EVENT HERE:

Hotel Equatorial Penang

ADD A FESTIVAL SLANT:

Being only 20 minutes from UNESCO Heritage Site George Town, Hotel Equatorial Penang is perfect for private events tied

with the district's heritage festivals. The hotel has the flexibility and the capability to accommodate groups and events of all sizes, and venues are available both indoors and out.

Planners could kick off an incentive event during George Town Heritage Celebrations or George Town Festival with a welcome cocktail by the outdoor pool, before proceeding to ballroom or one of the 21 function rooms for the main party.

CAPACITY:

Grand Ballroom, up to 70 tables; Matahari Ballroom, up to 170 tables; outdoor pool deck, 150 to 200 people cocktail style

HOST YOUR EVENT HERE:

Khoo Kongsi

ADD A FESTIVAL SLANT:

Leong San Tong Khoo Kongsi, or Khoo Kongsi in short, is one of the most distinctive Chinese clan associations in Malaysia. It is well known worldwide for its extensive lineage that can be traced back 650 years, as well as its closely-knit and defensive congregation of buildings and a magnificent clanhouse situated at the southwest of George Town. This clanhouse is the perfect venue for themed business events that coincide with the Chinese New Year festivities. One such event is the Penang Hot Air Balloon Fiesta, that falls on the ninth and 10th day of

Chinese New Year.

Here on the Khoo Kongsi grounds, which comes with a stage, planners can have a private event showcasing Chinese arts and traditions such as lion dance performances, Chinese opera, Chingay parades, *bian lian* or Chinese face changing.

CAPACITY:

800 people cocktail style

HOST YOUR EVENT HERE:

Sunway Hotel Georgetown and Sunway Hotel Seberang Jaya

ADD A FESTIVAL SLANT:

Sunway Hotel Georgetown and Sunway Hotel Seberang Jaya both house function rooms, and are familiar with catering to corporate events.

Sunway Hotel Georgetown offers three function rooms which can be combined to form a single, large ballroom for up to 200 banquet guests or 300 pax in theatre style.

Sunway Hotel Seberang Jaya offers 11 meeting spaces of varying sizes, with the largest capable of accommodating 450 people in theatre style.

These hotels are ideal for private functions held in conjunction with Penang International Food Festival. Delegates can sample a wide selection of local food that Penang is known for, in the air-conditioned comfort of both hotels. Additionally, organisers can also arrange for cooking demonstrations.

CAPACITY:

Sunway Hotel Georgetown ballroom, 300 pax theatre style; Sunway Hotel Seberang Jaya ballroom, 450 pax theatre style





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HOST YOUR EVENT HERE:

The Eastern & Oriental Hotel Penang

ADD A FESTIVAL SLANT:

With its links to the colonial era and offering great views of the Andaman Sea, The Eastern & Oriental Hotel Penang is a perfect venue for corporate events looking to have a literary spin with local or foreign authors as guest speakers.

CAPACITY:

Grand ballroom, 400 people in banquet seating; six meeting rooms, 30 to 180 people in theatre seating

HOST YOUR EVENT HERE:

Roof garden, Setia SPICE Convention Centre

ADD A FESTIVAL SLANT:

The six-acre roof garden at Setia SPICE Convention Centre provides an outdoor space that is perfect for private concerts, cocktails and dinners as a finale to any gatherings themed around a festival in Penang. In the evenings, LED lights on the roof bring a sparkle to functions held in the roof garden. The lights can bear



Setia SPICE Convention Centre's roof garden

colours that reflect the event theme or corporate shades of the organiser/host.

CAPACITY:

4,000 pax for standing cocktail; 1,500 people for sit down dinner

HOST YOUR EVENT HERE:

Macalister Mansion

ADD A FESTIVAL SLANT:

This century-old colonial mansion houses five unique indoor spaces of varying sizes as well as outdoor spaces which include

a large lawn and a pool area. Its beautifully conserved infrastructure provides an impressive backdrop for private events themed around the George Town Heritage Celebrations or George Town Festival.

Planners can put together an ethnic fashion show featuring the latest outfits from the various ethnic groups in Malaysia.

CAPACITY:

Varies, up to 200 people on the lawn for example.

MY PENANG

S Puvaneswary shares her favourite finds in the destination

SEE

TEDDYVILLE MUSEUM PENANG

I have had a soft spot for cuddly toys, so TeddyVille Museum Penang leaves me smiling. What's interesting is that the displays showcase the rich history and cultures in Penang. Visitors also get a chance to build their very own teddy.

PENANG WAR MUSEUM

The Penang War Museum was originally a fort built by the British to protect the island from invaders but it was later taken over by the Japanese during the Japanese Occupation and was then used to incarcerate British prisoners of war. Today it is a sprawling complex exhibiting war paraphernalia, and features underground military tunnels and ammunition bunkers. Visitors are reminded not to take peace and freedom for granted. I recommend visiting during the early opening hours to avoid the afternoon heat.

EAT

TASTE CAFÉ AT G HOTEL

The highlight here is the lava stone barbecue, where meat and seafood are grilled on lava stones to retain their juiciness. This experience is only available for dinner, from 18.30 to 22.30, daily. I always

opt for the outdoor seating area which is breezy. Advance reservation is advisable.

TOP VIEW RESTAURANT & LOUNGE

The draw here is its location on level 59 of Komtar, making Top View Penang's highest restaurant. Offering stunning 360 degree panoramic view of Penang, the restaurant is certainly the place to impress your guests. An international dinner buffet is available on Friday and Saturday, while an a la carte menu is offered for the rest of the time. I highly recommend the herb-crusted rack of lamb, beef wellington and salmon en crouete. Also worth trying is the English tea service, available daily from 11.00 to 17.00.

DO

ESCAPE THEME PARK

Escape is both a waterpark and an adventure course that's sure to give every visitor an adrenaline high. The collection of exciting rides and activities is great for thrill seekers. What impresses me is that safety is of utmost consideration. Every visitor has to watch a safety video before they attempt the various adventure activities which are also well-staffed.



TeddyVille Museum Penang



Penang War Museum



Taste Café at G Hotel



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hotel Equatorial

PENANG

Sydney still sizzles

Already a popular holiday and business destination, **Gerardine Donough-Tan** finds out what's new and exciting about Sydney for incentive tours

For starters, bring the group on a heritage walking tour around The Rocks area, led by an Aborigine, whose Dreamtime stories will contrast history with the modern, built-up cityscape.

Likewise, the iconic Sydney Opera House and Sydney Harbour Bridge offer more than concerts or a climb. They can literally be seen in a new light at Australia's largest event, Vivid Sydney.

New South Wales minister for

tourism and major events Adam Marshall described it as "an unmissable experience for Sydneysiders and visitors alike as our capital city is transformed into a kaleidoscope of colour".

The three-week festival of light, music and ideas runs every May-June with spectacular, free public exhibitions of outdoor lighting sculptures, installations and grand-scale projections on iconic buildings.

But if peak-prices and large crowds (2.25 million in 2018) are a

put-off, Sydney Opera House – Australia's top attraction – runs customised events for incentive groups throughout the year.

Tours are available in seven languages, highlighting architecturally-striking venues and spaces usually off-limits to the public.

"Performance tickets, private opera recitals, curated menus from on-site caterers and even a sunrise yoga class on the Monumental Steps can also be arranged to create an unforgettable experience for incentive visitors," said its head of sales, tours and experiences, Sarah Duthie.

Last October, Mandarin-speaking guides took a 75-member commercial real estate development group from China on a one-hour private tour of the performance venues and foyers. As the tour ended in the Concert Hall, a soprano surprised them with an opera recital beside a grand piano. They later mingled with her before taking a group photograph in front of the iconic Opera House sails.

When the function centre renovation is completed this April, premium and flexible events space will present more top-notch facilities and

Clockwise from below: Luna Park Sydney; The Rocks Market; artist impression of the future Sydney Fish Market



EA Given/Sutterstock



panoramic views of Sydney Harbour.

Another good view of Sydney Harbour is from the sea. Instead of a cruise, stage a sailing regatta! No prior sailing experience is required. Professional instructors assist in the yacht race as team members work together to steer their yachts to victory.

Cross the Bridge to Milsons Point where Luna Park Sydney delights not just with its ferris wheel, rides and superb harbour views but also event-staging options. Luna Park Venues offers 10,000m² of indoor and outdoor spaces in up to 13 different event settings.

Crystal Palace takes 30 to 1,300 people while the Big Top holds from 500 to 3,000. Outdoor capacity varies between 250 to 1,000 guests at Lavender Green. Sonar features live music and entertainment, and The Deck bar and brasserie hosts smaller parties. Whole-of-Park events can accommodate 8,000 people.

"It has been our goal to provide the very best catering Sydney has on offer in our harbourside venues. Team work is a massive part of what we do today; it all comes down to creating lasting experiences for people in such an iconic location," said James Granter, general manager of sales at Luna Park Venues Sydney.

Beyond the city

Incentive planners can also organise a beach bash. Instead of the famous Bondi, head to Manly, Coogee or

TALKING NUMBERS

45

The average number of delivered Asian incentives in 2015-2017, at an estimated average direct expenditure of A\$105 million (US\$74.1 million) per year

20

The percentage year-on-year growth over the past decade in value of events secured from Asia. This market now forms almost half of the business secured and delivered each year

94

The percentage of delegates satisfied with Sydney – highest-ever rating for an Amway China incentive. Amway China has returned to Sydney three times



"We are pleased to see the growth of incentive business from our northern neighbours across Asia in recent years."

Lyn Lewis-Smith
CEO, BESydney

quiet Bronte. Enjoy a picnic, sandcastle building, beach volleyball, surfing lesson or just snap photos of surfer 'hunks and babes'.

Alternatively, ride three hours' north to Port Stephens. Activities include a quad-bike safari through the Stockton sand dunes, kayaking and stand-up paddle-boarding taught by accredited instructors. On a dolphin-watching buffet lunch cruise, the skipper will give a commentary on the region's dolphins.

A day-trip to Hunter Valley can be scaled up or down for the group's size. Besides cellar door stops, try a blind-tasting quiz or contest, short talk on wine appreciation or wine and food-pairing lunch. To placate beer guzzlers, visit a brewery. And don't skip the cheese and chocolate shops!

In the Blue Mountains, Scenic World is a popular attraction due to its range of activities. Adventurers may take the Skyway cablecar, walk to the Three Sisters, climb down the 1,000-step Giant Stairway, walk through the temperate rainforest to the Railway bottom platform and ride back up to the main building.

DEVELOPMENTS TO WATCH

1 Sydney Fish Market at Black Wattle Bay will be redeveloped over three years to feature a waterfront, boardwalk, wholesale market with live auctions, seafood retail outlets and fresh produce markets. Expect expanded and upgraded F&B options with different day and night experiences, and venues for festivals and events. The current market, the largest of its kind in the Southern Hemisphere, remains in business throughout.

2 The new, standalone Sydney Metro will have 31 stations and more than 66 km of new rail by 2024. When extended into the CBD and beyond, it will run from the booming North West region, under Sydney Harbour, through new underground stations in the CBD. Target capacity is 40,000 passengers per hour. Capacity will increase by 60 per cent combined with the existing rail network.

3 Set to open in 2026, the 24-hour, international Western Sydney Airport will initially handle five million passengers, growing to 80 million annually by 2056.

Shorter and easier routes are also available.

BESydney has been promoting Sydney globally for 50 years. Its CEO, Lyn Lewis-Smith, said: "We are pleased to see the growth of incentive business from our northern neighbours across Asia in recent years. We look forward to welcoming more organisations rewarding their top teams here in Sydney in 2019 – as new hotels come online, existing stock is completely refreshed, and exciting new experiences are added to 'wow' visitors."

Carolyn Lenehan, BESydney deputy general manager corporate affairs and communications, added that several major infrastructure projects are rapidly changing the face of the city, such as new public transport links, great walkability improvements, and the new Western Sydney Airport.

"We already have our primary airport close to the CBD. When this second airport opens in 2026, it will provide new access routes to key tourist attractions and regions to the west of Sydney as well as our emerging 'second and third city' precincts," said Lenehan.



Post-quake repairs to Kumamoto Castle (above) are drawing the interest of specialised corporate groups

Kumamoto's spirited return

A new way to appreciate Kumamoto Castle, nature highlights and intense destination promotions are helping to win hearts, writes **Kathryn Wortley**

Kumamoto prefecture is bouncing back from a drop in inbound business events visitors following earthquakes that shook the southern Kyushu region in 2016. Tremors of 6.5 and 7.3 magnitude struck the area on April 14 and 16 respectively, causing damage to buildings, infrastructure and tourist sites in Kumamoto city and neighbouring areas.

The biggest blow to the prefecture was the damage sustained to the turrets, exterior buildings, roofs and walls of Kumamoto Castle, an icon of the prefecture. Also a designated Important Cultural Property, the structure has long been a draw for business event travellers eager to see what is ranked as Japan's third most beautiful castle.

Although visitors stayed away in the immediate aftermath of the

tremors, in 2018 they returned with vigour, thanks to a new tour option.

Today, the castle remains out of bounds but travellers can follow the path around its outskirts. A popular option for corporate groups is to be led by a professional guide who explains the restoration process to date and what is yet to be carried out until the castle is completely restored, in about 20 years.

Guides report welcoming a growing number of groups in the fields of architecture, history, design, craftsmanship and construction, who want to see the component parts of the historic building and the cutting-edge reconstruction techniques used.

Outside the city, Kumamoto is being promoted as a haven in which to enjoy nature and delicious cuisine. As 21 per cent of the prefecture was designated part of a national park on March 31, 2018, local efforts are

being supported by an Environment Ministry target to welcome 10 million visitors annually to Japan's national parks by the time Japan hosts the 2020 Olympics.

Approximately six million international visitors visited national parks across Japan in 2017, of which 926,000 entered Aso-Kuju, the national park that straddles Kumamoto and Oita prefectures. This marks a 37.2 per cent rise in visitors to the Kumamoto park year-on-year, including the more nature-hungry incentive groups from China and South-East Asia.

Aso-Kuju is one of only eight national parks in Japan that is being promoted by the new national government project as part of efforts to support tourism and business event recovery. According to a park representative, grassland-centred activities such as early morning yoga

REVIEW CENTRAL

Kuma River Boating By Kathryn Wortley

Combining a historical experience with stunning views of nature, a wooden boat ride down the rapids of Kuma River in Japan's southern island of Kyushu is perfect for both adrenalin junkies and those who want to take things slow.

Concept

With excellently preserved temples and shrines as well as castle ruins, Hitoyoshi City in Kumamoto Prefecture is renowned as a place to dive into Japan's history. Kuma River Boating taps this heritage by offering unique rides on traditional wooden Japanese boats dating from historic times.

While cruising along, passengers can enjoy mountainous scenery along the river's ravines and get up close to some of the area's historic sites downstream. The crew provides a commentary on the area's historic and natural points of interest, including pointing out birdsong from various local birds.

There are four courses available year-

round: the Long Course (120–150 minutes), the Middle Course (50 minutes), the Short Course (30 minutes) and the Rapids Course (45 minutes). The Kotatsu Course (50 minutes) provides a roof and heated tables with attached rugs and is available solely in winter.

As the Kuma is one of the three fastest-flowing rivers in Japan, the Rapids Course offers a thrilling ride, while the others offer a more tranquil experience.

While on slower-moving water, passengers can try steering the boat using the traditional heavy, long wooden paddle, supported all the while by the skippers.

MICE application

Each traditional boat can fit up to 12 people, but a number of boats can depart in succession, helping to accommodate larger groups. Groups can book out an entire boat or fleet of boats. Prices range from US\$299 to US\$598 per boat, depending on the course.

As various courses are available, the activity is ideal for diverse groups. The

and horse riding have proved successful in attracting corporate groups seeking wellness programmes.

Such groups are also attracted to nearby Aso Farm Land, a resort in rural Kumamoto. Its sales increased by two to three times year-on-year in 2017. It offers 450 earthquake-resistant domed homes as accommodation for guests who can experience a vast range of wellness treatments, hot springs and sports as well as gourmet cuisine. With direct flights to South Korea, Hong Kong and Taiwan from Kumamoto Airport, Aso Farm Land has been successful in targeting these markets.

Yet officials note that inbound visitors to Aso still lag behind pre-earthquake levels. At the 2018 Visit Japan Travel and MICE Mart, Kumamoto representatives reminded attendees that the prefecture is ready to welcome corporate groups. City officials point out that although the traditional access road from Kumamoto City to Aso remains closed due to damage from the earthquakes, other routes are available, which add a mere 15 minutes onto travel times.

Local tourism bodies, in association with Japan Agriculture, are eyeing agri-tourism as part of efforts

to boost arrivals, particularly from Taipei and Singapore. Delegates would visit orchards to pick various fruits and enjoy tastings on site or at farmers' markets.

According to Sun Sun Ong, senior manager at Singapore-based EU MICE, event organisers could "leverage the area's Instagrammable scenery" to increase the appeal of the tours. Improving transportation to the sites, meanwhile, would "increase the area's competitiveness with other Asian destinations" while greater promotion would raise awareness of Kumamoto's capabilities in the agri-tourism sector.

Promotion has been recognised as vital by the Kumamoto International Convention and Tourism Bureau. According to spokesperson Hiroyasu Fukuoka, 2018 saw the bureau team up with the cities of Fukuoka, Sasebo and Kitakyushu to offer familiarisation tips for guests from China, South Korea and Taiwan to promote the three key pillars: nature, cuisine and culture.

"We will continue to focus on these markets (for incentive groups) but we aim to develop Europe, the US and Australia in the future," he added.



year-round availability is also helpful.

There is a comfortable waiting area at the departure point where guests can sit, shop or have refreshments.

A free shuttle bus is available from the end point of the river cruise to the start point, so groups do not have to arrange transport to return.

A professional photographer located downstream will take the group's picture, which is available for sale after the cruise.

Service

The skippers happily pointed out local historic sites and encouraged us to steer the boat. I was impressed with their teaching skill and patience.

Contact

Email: info@kumagawa.co.jp

Website: www.kumagawa.co.jp

TALKING NUMBERS

10

The position Kumamoto Airport takes in a ranking of Japan's biggest airports. It handles more than three million passengers yearly

37.2

The percentage increase in visitors to Kumamoto's Aso-Kuju National Park in 2017

740,876

The number of overnight visitors in Kumamoto prefecture in 2017, a record high for the destination

Improvements planned for Kumamoto Airport are expected to give the prefecture a further boost. Japan's Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Tourism are to privatise the airport by April 2020 in a bid to accelerate its post-quake reconstruction. The existing domestic terminal is scheduled to be demolished and replaced with a new terminal for both domestic and international flights by 2022.

■ Catch up

Vivian Zhang



A people person, the director of MCI China thinks she landed the perfect job in conference management as she gets to interact with people from all walks of life

How did you get started in business events?

I have always been fascinated with interacting with and understanding people from different cultures, so after I graduated with a masters degree in Social and Culture Anthropology, I chose a career that matched my interest and values.

I started off in Brussels, Belgium with a European PCO where I worked on a vast number of international conferences.

Is work satisfying?

Although the PCO workload is heavy and complicated, there is a

great sense of achievement when the conference outcome is successful.

Whenever I see intelligent people gather to promote and spread new ideas, showcase advanced technology, get consensus on industry resolutions, give newcomers a stage to shine, enhance the urban economy and increase someone's visibility and reputation, it is very satisfying.

The more I immerse myself in the industry, the more I find myself knowing too little. So I have committed myself to absorbing new knowledge and skills during every

moment of my career.

What is your main role at MCI China?

I am in charge of the overall operation and management of the PCO Division, and training is an important aspect.

How has the business events industry evolved?

There has been a big change in the overall environment. The industry is working hard to find new profit channels and breakthroughs. Competition is intense, especially in recent years. China's strict compliance requirements have affected PCO

business, and PCOs need to stay up-to-date and familiarise themselves with the changing compliance regulations across different industries and associations, as well as financial process, approval procedures, etc.

What challenges do you face at work?

The question we think about every day is how to remain competitive, and how to be an industry leader with leading innovations that other competitors strive to emulate.

PCOs are in a mature industry where many traditional practices have been used over the years, so we always strive to utilise the most advanced technology ahead of our competitors.

We introduced innovations – including face recognition technology registration, chip tracking of large data and 3D surgery live broadcast a few years ago – which are now widely used. On top of technological advances,

we also constantly revamp our traditional service model to provide the best customer experience. We do not only have to learn new content, but also innovate and constantly step out of our comfort zone to explore the wider marketplace.

What motivates you?

I am an optimist. I believe that there are more solutions to be found than there are problems.

I am also thankful to MCI and my boss, Frankie Gao, for their trust and for giving me the platform and opportunity to do my best.

What do you do for fun?

I like to spend quality time with my family on my days off. I find time to travel around the world to visit new and fun places. I also do volunteer and charity work as well. As for my career, I just want to give my best in whatever I do, and see where this will take me.

– Caroline Boey

■ Appointments



Adrian Chan

Adrian Chan

Adrian Chan now leads Sanya Marriott Hotel Dadonghai Bay and The Shanhaitian Resort Sanya, Autograph Collection as general manager. Prior to this, he was the pre-opening hotel manager for Rosewood Sanya.

Dane Clouston

Dane Clouston is now executive chef at Grand Hyatt Melbourne in



Dane Clouston

Australia. He joins from Park Hyatt Melbourne after serving six years in the same role.

Dave Junker

Dave Junker is Shangri-La's Boracay Resort & Spa's new general manager. He is no stranger to Shangri-La hotels, having held roles in properties such as Sule Shangri-La, Yangon and Shangri-La Hotel, Chiang Mai, Thailand.



Dave Junker

David Thompson

IBTM has appointed David Thompson as exhibition director for IBTM World. He brings with him an international perspective having organised exhibitions and conferences across Europe, the Middle East and the US.

Juan Samso

Marriott International has named Juan Samso general manager of The



Shona Pang

St Regis Zhuhai. The Spaniard was most recently general manager of The Ritz-Carlton, Macau.

Mark Bulmer

Former general manager of Carlton Hotel Singapore, Mark Bulmer, has relocated to Thailand take up the new role of general manager at the Carlton Hotel Bangkok Sukhumvit, set to open in late 2019.



Juan Samso

Shona Pang

New World Petaling Jaya Hotel has named Shona Pang as director of sales & marketing. She was the pre-opening director of sales and marketing for Sheraton Petaling Jaya.

Yuji Tanaka

Yuji Tanaka is now general manager of The Ritz-Carlton, Tokyo. He was last general manager of Bvlgari Resort Bali.



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