

CEI – SANUR RESIDENCE

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Singapore
in bloom

Gardeless by the Bay hosts World Orchid Conference Page 20

Culinary challenge for chefs: recreate recipes or using the kitchen for great teambuilding

Special Feature

Private villas
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By Ed Peters

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RED-CARPET REWARDS

Unusual venues and special treatment pay off in terms
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There's MICE, and there's luxury MICE. And rather than being separated by a yawning gap, it's more like a cheering gap. An event with a luxury theme pays off in spades; delegates warm to extra-special treatment, and make an extra effort to take part in return for the red carpet roll-out.

Five-star hotels and resorts in China and the rest of Asia are trumpeting their luxury market wares, and also looking further afield for unusual venues and ways to stage events. This might be a themed party in places such as the ArtScience Museum at Marina Bay Sands in Singapore, or teambuilding activity in exotic surroundings that prompt thinking out of the box.

The Indigo Pearl on Phuket is a case in point. Cocktail functions are enlivened by a strolling saxophonist, guests can be shipped to a deserted island for a gourmet barbecue, and the island's top golf courses are more or less on the doorstep. Delegates can also take part in a cooking competition directed by the resort's top chefs.

Anna Olsson, director of sales for Indigo Pearl, says team motivation and leadership is fostered through flexible activity programmes or tailor-made exercises. "The facilities grant freedom to take your team in the direction they need to grow, from cool table-centred planning to on-board excitement and island adventure," she says.

For other hoteliers, luxury business events open up a new vista, but planners and their clients are nonetheless price conscious. "The MICE market in the region is consistent, but not outstanding," says Richard Hatter, general manager of Hong Kong's Hotel Icon, a five-star property run by the Polytechnic University.

"MICE groups are very price sensitive and increased inventory throughout Asia Pacific has had an impact. Other destinations – such as Macau and Singapore – are very competitive. Very often MICE organisers sacrifice quality for price and are prepared to go to destinations and hotels simply because they offer slightly lower rates."

In China, luxury MICE is seen as a highly promising niche market. George Benney, general manager at The Regent Beijing, looks back on 18 months of luxury events for corporates and brands with pride.

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and stationary. Smaller groups, however, can opt for private villas, where the surroundings are of hotel quality but with the exclusivity and novelty of an off-site venue.

Private villas feature a more personal design and are fully staffed. They often have a pool and some have private cinemas or similar facilities.

Jon Stonham, CEO of the Singapore-based Private Homes & Villas, has scores of such properties on his books, from historic homes in the Unesco World Heritage listed city of Galle in Sri Lanka to palatial mansions in Phuket. "Luxury villas are a great alternative for small business meetings or MICE events where business can be mixed with fun," he says. "With stunning views, lush tropical surroundings and lovely facilities, colleagues will be inspired and motivated to work as a team. The private and tranquil environment offers a relaxing alternative to busy offices and congested urban centres to induce creativity and new ideas."

However it is Bali that hosts the largest inventory of MICE-friendly private residences. Sanur Residence boasts a large meeting facility supported by a trio of three-bedroomed properties. The palatial Istana is an iconic villa on top of a cliff that is suitable for small executive meetings or product launches. And similar attractions are on offer at five-bedroomed Puri Bawana and The Longhouse, which can sleep 12.

New hotspots Luxury properties across the region

Banyan Tree Tianjin

With an opening set for September, the property will offer a sanctuary in the city with a waterfront setting and is a 30-minute drive from the airport. As well as meeting facilities, there is also the trademark spa.

Lilianfels Blue Mountains Resort & Spa

Located just a short drive away from Sydney, the resort is now part of Starwood's The Luxury Collection and has 85 rooms and three function rooms, the largest being the Banksia Room that can fit 120 theatre style and 80 for a banquet. It has the award winning Darley's Restaurant for modern Australian cuisine, as well as The Orangery for casual dining.

Four Seasons Guangzhou

When it opens high above Pearl River New City in September, this 344-room hotel will host delegates in the heart of the provincial capital's new business hub. Housed in the Guangzhou IFC Tower, highlights include a contemporary art gallery. There will be six F&B outlets, ranging from the Cantonese restaurant Yu Yue Heen to the all-day dining restaurant Caffe Monde on the 72nd floor.

The Royal Begonia, Sanya

Due to open in June 2012, the Starwood property in Haitang Bay is part of the group's Luxury Collection, with 260 guest rooms and 280 sqm of meeting space.

Hyatt Regency Danang Resort and Spa

The resort is among the many opening up in Danang and is located close to the airport. There are function rooms of various sizes, including a Regency Ballroom that can fit 400 people theatre style and a courtyard for 72 on round tables. The hotel has its own Vie spa, while F&B outlets include the seafood and grill restaurant Beach House.

"Regent Beijing hosted a variety of teambuilding exercises for a number of global pharmaceutical companies and organised a gala dinner to mark National Geographic's 10th anniversary," he says. Benney wants to see meeting and events, and in particular the luxury segment, expand in future. "Beijing has great potential for MICE, given both its position at the heart of the dragon economy, and the enormous interest this is creating among businesses worldwide," he says.

"The fact that there are many great historical monuments to discover also adds to Beijing's appeal as a business destination. The only other Asian city that can compete in its own right is Bangkok.

"We would love to see a government-funded convention bureau established in Beijing. When government bodies in other Asian capital cities stimulate such activity, the revenue and taxation streams that flow from this present a great return on investment."

Prestige advice

1. Weigh up the pros and cons of booking an off-season location, such as Phuket during the monsoon, especially if you can stage most events indoors.
2. Look for something luxurious that will add value: perhaps the hotel can organise a Champagne breakfast, a wine tasting with the sommelier, or a meal in an unusual venue.
3. Unusual transfers – airport to hotel, or hotel to venue – through stretch limos, classic cars, rickshaws or helicopters. kick off events in style,
4. Negotiating room upgrades – or even something such as a free minibar or a set number of items for dry-cleaning – helps raise the perception of a more luxurious stay.
5. A destination with unique appealing factors can add a great deal of lustre to any event: for example, events in Seoul can leverage the country's distinctive cuisine for memorable dinners.

Q&A Michael Chiay, managing director of MCI Group Hong Kong

Are clients still seeking high-end properties for events such as teambuilding, and has the economic uncertainty in Europe and the US had any effect on this type of demand? Despite any crisis, there will always be demand for high-end properties. During boom times, companies want to reward their best performers and retain talent. In less rosy times, motivation becomes even more critical. The majority of our clients organising B2E events prefer fairly 'decent' five-star properties and this is a sure sign the best-performing companies still value high-end properties when organising their B2E events.

Is the choice of a luxury property for a launch or corporate meeting a sure sign of success? Is there anything new that clients are demanding from such venues? There are obvious merits with luxury properties. More often, these properties understand the importance of impeccable hospitality and anticipate requirements. These are really helpful for the agency and important to the client. But a successful event can only be the result of a three-way partnership between the property, agency and the end-client. Our most satisfying events are always the ones where there is win-win-win factor among all the stakeholders. With connectivity being a given, companies expect to be provided with complimentary internet connection for their delegates during their event.

Five-star properties may specialise in opulence, but are they adaptable for different types of corporate gatherings such as teambuilding? Many larger luxury properties have in-house sports or teambuilding teams. So most would be eager to up-sell and provide these under one roof. It is a convenience and usually, if the pricing is reasonable, we would be open to recommend these to our clients.

With so many luxury properties available on the market, how do you evaluate which are the most suitable for MICE groups? In our post-event evaluation with our teams and with clients, the flexibility of a property to cater for additional requirements and changes came up tops many times.