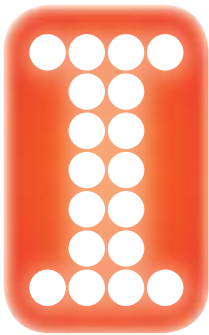


GAMBLING ON THE FUTURE

NEW CASINO



As Macau and Singapore take the wraps off massive new casino-convention complexes, Asia's meetings and incentive travel industry is taking on a new look.



n the first 24 hours of operation following its grand opening on Aug. 28, the Venetian Macao-Resort-Hotel had a total of 114,000 visitors, yet it didn't seem crowded.

The guests, primarily from mainland China and Hong Kong, fit comfortably inside a complex that boasts 1,500 gaming tables and 7,000 slot machines, 3,000 hotel suites, 960,000 square feet of shopping space, and one million square feet of convention, exhibition, and stadium facilities. With the world's largest casino, the \$2.4-billion Venetian is reputedly the most expensive gaming and convention complex ever built in Asia.

At least that's the case now. In Singapore, Venetian owner and Las Vegas billionaire Sheldon G. Adelson is investing \$2.5 billion in a complex featuring a 2,500-room hotel, a 1.2-million-square-foot convention center, and the country's first casino. Called Marina Bay Sands, it will open in 2009. Singapore's second casino will be built in 2010 at the Resort World at Sentosa, a \$3.4-billion project by Malaysia's Genting International. It will include meeting facilities for more than 12,000 delegates, a ballroom for 5,500 guests, and a 1,600-seat showroom.

Viva Las Vegas

The landscape of Asia's MICE—an acronym for the meetings, incentive travel, conventions, and exhibitions business—is starting to look a lot like Las Vegas. In addition to the Macau and Singapore casinos, a proposed \$10-billion Entertainment City casino-convention-hotel is in the pre-bidding stage in the Philippines. Taiwan is due to finalize a statute that will govern casino operations in October. Japan, too, is looking at legalizing casinos.

A few major markets in the region, however, are taking the opposite



tact. Buddhist Thailand, for instance, is staunchly anti-gambling, while Hong Kong is hamstrung by a strong anti-casino lobby and the need to get permission from Beijing, whose communist rulers do not want to see casinos spread from Macau to China.

Malaysia appears more inclined to focus on its natural beauty, ecotourism, and cultural attractions. Two funds provide soft loans to the private sector for safari parks, marinas, and similar projects. "We hope to capture a greater share of the MICE market, with at least 10% of the total arrivals to the country," Minister of Tourism Datuk Seri Tengku Adnan bin Tengku Mansor said in a speech in May. In 2006 MICE accounted for 4.7% of the 17.5 million tourists who visited Malaysia. The country is expecting to welcome 20.1 million visitors this year.

Whatever their strategy, Asia's tourism organizations are all wooing MICE travelers, and it's easy to see why. The latest Convention Ex-

In 2009, Singapore's skyline will gain added sparkle with the opening of the \$2.4 billion Marina Bays Sands convention-casino-entertainment complex.

penditure and Impact Study of Destination Marketing Association International found that participants in MICE events around the world spent an average of \$1,036 in 2005, the most recent year for which figures are available, up 4.7% from 2004. This is twice what the average tourist now spends in Malaysia.

One question is, how much will Las Vegas-style attractions boost MICE arrivals in Asia's casino-friendly markets? A corollary question is harder to answer: Will the new attractions siphon business from the non-casino destinations?

Regarding the first question, the figures from Macau look good. According to the Macau Government Tourist Office, the number of exhibitions and trade shows in the

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city jumped to 360 last year, when seven new casinos opened, up from 305 in 2005. "But it's still too early to tell," cautions David Cheung, executive director of global property services company Vigers in Hong Kong, and author of a recent study on Macau's gaming sector.

Great Places for Off-sites

With increasing commoditization of MICE space around the world and intensifying competition, infrastructure and facilities alone are no longer a key differentiating factor. To stay relevant to industry needs and remain competitive, MICE industry players—ranging from professional conference and exhibition organizers to destination management companies—need to provide exemplary service and demonstrate creativity and innovation across the different segments of the industry.

Singapore (with a population of 4.5 million) has the edge in this area over Macau (population: 457,000). Singapore's well-educated, multilingual, and skilled workforce keeps the wheels of international conventions rolling smoothly. The presence of more than 7,000 multinational companies and over 90,000 expatriates in Singapore—together with a government supportive of nurturing businesses—contributes to a dynamic business environment.

At the Singapore Tourism Board, a dedicated unit called the Business Travel & MICE Group (BTMICE) is tasked with attracting business events and creating exceptional experiences for business and MICE visitors. Two BTMICE divisions, known as Strategic Clusters I and Strategic Clusters II, focus on developing MICE business around the key pillars of the Singapore economy, among them biomedical sciences, information and communications technol-



Inside Suntec Singapore International Convention & Exhibition Centre.

nic spots—marine parks, jungle reserves, and exotic wildlife areas—as well as health spa facilities, sports, and special celebrations, such as the Muslim festival of Hari Raya, the Indian festival of Deepavali, Chinese New Year, and Tadau Kaamatan, Gawai Dayak, and other Malaysian cultural festivals.

Asia's goal is to boost lucrative meeting and incentive travel throughout the decade.

ogy, and environment and water technologies.

The key MICE player in Malaysia is Tourism Malaysia. The agency has embarked on a 27-event MICE promotional blitz, which started with the Asia Pacific Incentives & Meetings Expo in Melbourne in February and will end with the European Incentive, Business Travel & Meetings Exhibition in Barcelona in November. A convention development support package has been devised, involving free services that cover everything from assistance in promotion and publicity to speedy clearance at Customs and Immigration.

Malaysia's MICE offerings focus on the country's diverse sce-

Asia's New Allure

Overall, interest in traveling to Asia has been on the rise, and convention planners attracted to the Asian Las Vegas may rotate their meetings to the region. According to the 2007 Asia Travel Intentions Survey of Visa International Asia Pacific and the Pacific Asia Travel Association, 52% of respondents in ten countries (including Australia, Germany, Britain, and the U.S.) are considering traveling to Asia in the next two years, an increase of 18% from 2005.

Casino or no casino, every Asian destination is sharpening its MICE strategy. At the Venetian in Macau one Saturday last month, family members of delegates to a meeting organized by a French private bank tried their luck at the slot machines and baccarat tables. Those with children (visitors under 18 cannot enter the casino) rode the gondolas on the indoor Grand Canal as a gondolier sang "O Sole Mio," while others browsed in luxury shops that populate St. Mark's Square, a scaled-down indoor version of the Venice landmark.

"That was nice," said one woman shopper. "What's next?" Asia's MICE destinations are determined to come up with the answer.

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