

Interview

Putting Slovenia on the International map

There is stiff competition in the field of international business tourism. Slovenia has to compete with other countries in Europe and around the world. Countries from all over the world have realized the profitability of hosting international conventions. Convention bureaus have been established at city and state levels; they are actively involved in marketing and acquiring international events or MICE's. Slovenia is no exception to the trend, says Miha Kovačič, director of The Slovenian Convention Bureau.

By IGOR DRAKULIČ

What does MICE stand for?

MICE is an acronym for meetings, incentives, conventions and events. Some people prefer to use the term business tourism.

Can Ljubljana become a centre of business tourism in Europe?

I don't think so, because it is too small. The convention centres of Europe are Vienna and London. But Ljubljana/Slovenia can become an important player in this field. We have to raise awareness, improve accessibility by air, communicate properly with our target audience and take care of deficiencies. To achieve this goal all MICE providers in Slovenia must work together.

What is the role of the Slovenian Convention Bureau and what do its members expect?

The main goal of our bureau is the domestic and international promotion and marketing of Slovenia as a convention and incentive destination – to attract national and international events. The Slovenian Convention Bureau works as a professional agent among event organizers, service companies and other organizers. The bureau has 48 members, among them convention centres and hotels, professional convention organizers (PCO's), expert business tourism agencies (DMC's), Zavod za turizem Ljubljana and others. The Slovenian Tourist Organization is a strategic partner of the Slovenian Convention Bureau. Our members expect our bureau to bring them new clients, of course.

Which convention centres in Slovenia are the biggest?

The biggest convention centres in the world are mostly located in capitals and the same is true in Slovenia. The biggest convention centre is Cankarjev dom in Ljubljana with a large meeting room for 2,000 participants and 19 smaller meeting rooms. There are also top-level convention

hotels and other hotels with conference facilities in Ljubljana. The second largest centre of business tourism in Slovenia is Portorož with the Grand hotel Bernardin as the biggest Slovenian convention hotel with a meeting room accommodating 1,100 participants. Other convention hotels near the coast complement this offering. Bled also has a very long tradition of hosting business tourism events; it is a perfect place for international events of up to 500 participants with its beautiful convention hotels within easy walking distance of the town and each other.

Are there any new facilities for MICE events in the works?

The 5* Livada Prestige Hotel in Moravske Toplice with MICE facilities opened a few months ago. When the old 5* Palace Hotel in Portorož is renovated, it will also have some convention facilities. The majority of hotels which are being built or undergoing renovation will have or already have convention facilities.

For what kind of business tourism are the countryside resorts such as Jelenov Greben, Pristava Lepena and Poestvo Pule appropriate?

The countryside resorts are more suitable for company events and incentives with fewer participants.

How well is Slovenia recognized as a location for MICE events?

Slovenia is almost unknown in the MICE field and this is our biggest handicap. It is even worse, when you think of the amount of competition all over the world. And this is exactly the purpose of the Slovenian Convention Bureau together with the Slovenian Tourist Organization – to put Slovenia on the international MICE map.

What attracts MICE guests to Slovenia the most?

Quality products, an appropriate price/quality ratio, diverse offerings, the kind-

ness and openness of the people, Slovenians' knowledge of foreign languages, the cuisine, top-quality wines, safety ...

Can MICE events also be very small and private?

Small exclusive resorts are suitable for such events; such as some castles which operate as hotels (Vila Bled); or something very modern like the Pule Resort in the Dolenjska Region, which is appropriate for small and very exclusive events. It is necessary of course, to engage a professional business tourism agency to assure a program that is first-class in its preparation and execution, regardless of the location or the owner of the convention facilities. Such agencies are PCO, DMC, or incentive or event agencies – it depends on the purpose of the event.

Can you describe a high-quality event in the past which was organized by one of your members? The NATO meeting in Portorož maybe?

This year's NATO meeting in Portorož was a really exceptional organizational challenge not just for the Grand Hotel Bernardin but also for the government as an organizer. Events at the state level are normally the hardest to prepare and execute.

What are the plans for MICE tourism in 2007 and beyond?

Business tourism in Slovenia will successfully develop. The indexes will be positive every year in which we will invest in international marketing of our business tourism facilities and succeed in hosting top-quality events. This year's indexes are positive in comparison with last year's, the figures aren't bad. With the coming currency change Slovenia will become even more interesting; and a real breakthrough could come in 2008 when Slovenia will hold the presidency of the EU – then we will certainly host more events. ■



Major Goals Ahead

Matjaž Žnidaršič, Marketing and Sales Director, Hoteli Bernardin, Portorož



If Slovenia wants to become one of Europe's major destinations for conferences and conventions, it should first build a convention centre for 10,000 participants, as well as create five times more 4 and 5* hotel capacity in Ljubljana, and two or three times more in Portorož and Bled. Ljubljana Airport would have to become an important hub for Central Europe with direct overseas connections.*

I think that we should seriously re-think this idea of Slovenia as a centre of business tourism. I don't see a real possibility of achieving this vision; actually I think it is unreasonable. We have to take into consideration the power of global and European competition. In my opinion, Slovenia can not become the centre for conventions in Europe; but it can become a competent centre for European conventions. In any case – business tourism is very important for Slovenia's tourism market. Slovenia is already offering top-quality convention services, but our capacities are relatively small. We need additional efforts to increase awareness of this problem if we want to achieve further success in this sector. We must support the Slovenian representatives who are actively involved in several international associations – and who often deserve the credit for the conventions that take place in Slovenia.

As for the Slovenian Convention Bureau, I think that their efforts have intensified over the last year. This can help to create a good basis for further activities in linking the actors in this sector; and for the selection of Slovenian organizers for various international conventions and similar events.

The Rising Star of Business Tourism

Postojna doesn't want to be known just as a tourist spot, but also for its cuisine and convention facilities



The city of Postojna in the heart of the Notranjska region, only 2 km away from the highway from Ljubljana to Koper, has been well known for almost 200 years because it is home to the most beautiful attraction in the Karst region, Postojna Cave. Postojna Cave is a 20-kilometre complex of passages, galleries and chambers into which, over the course of the last 187 years, experienced guides have accompanied more than 30 million visitors from all over the world. Postojna Cave also offers the possibility of special underground adventures, incentive meetings and team-building programmes, under expert leadership. The extraordinary cave environment can also be used as a venue for concerts, musical evenings and other special custom-designed events. Throughout the year special events – from musical to culinary – are held in the Castle.

Just 10 kilometres from Postojna Cave stands one of the most picturesque wonders of human history: Predjama Castle. For more than 700 years it has perched proudly on its rocky cliff – powerful, defiant and impregnable.

Postojna doesn't want to be known just as a tourist spot, but also for its cuisine and convention

facilities. The Jamski Dvorec mansion, home of fine cuisine and a prestigious events venue, is situated directly opposite the entrance to the Postojna Cave. Five halls are available in the mansion. The largest can hold up to 250 guests in a traditional format. The smallest can hold up to 24. The Jamski Dvorec provides a pleasant environment for entertainment and business meetings, receptions, seminars, conferences, cultural events, concerts and culinary experiences.

Just 100 metres from the entrance to Postojna Cave stands the three-star Hotel Jama. Four halls are available for business meetings: the Club Room (which holds up to 40 guests), the Red Hall (up to 120 guests), a special room (up to 80 guests) and a large hall (up to 260 guests). The accommodation wing of the hotel offers 130 standard rooms.

The Jamski Dvorec mansion is an ideal venue for a wide variety of events. The kitchen has a food service tradition dating back 75 years and dishes are still prepared in the traditional way. Specialities include dishes from the Notranjska and Karst regions, with their Mediterranean and Central European influences. The mansion contains several dining rooms – from the formal

'Venecijanka' room, seating up to 24, to the large ballroom, which holds up to 250 guests.

Events can be organised in accordance with the plans and wishes of the client. The mansion's catering staff are masters in the art of preparing and serving hot and cold buffets, winning three gold medals at catering conventions in the last three years. Their sommeliers offer a fine selection of wines from Slovenia's finest winemakers. They can furnish all the necessary technical support for events and provide entertainment, masters of ceremonies, music and dancing.



ADVERTISEMENT

Tourfilm 2006

A Diversity to Advertise

In April 2006, the Slovenian Tourist Organisation presented the Slovenian public with its first tourism advertisement created specifically for foreign TV channels. The advertisement has met with critical acclaim and has won several prestigious awards throughout Europe.

BY HELENA MARKO

In 'Slovenia, a Diversity to Discover', Slovenia is presented as a country of extraordinary natural beauty with an abundance of cultural and natural heritage treasures, as well as an excellent place for adventure sports. The advertisement, which can be seen in several lengths and languages at www.slovenia.info/video, is a collage of stunningly beautiful landscape impressions, various architectural points of interest and flashes of prominent Slovenian sportsmen and artists doing their thing. They are accompanied with evocative messages such as 'Be Free', 'Sail Away' and 'Ride Off'. Music plays a major role in the advertisement, as it skilfully plays on the viewer's emotions with an achingly beautiful vocal-instrumental arrangement of the folk song *Gizdava* (Conceited Woman). Slovenes have always been regarded as a slightly melancholic na-

tion due to their oppressed history, but a nation that has managed to nurture art and beauty nonetheless, and the song captures this mood to perfection. Originating in the Prekmurje region, the song is sure to bring tears to the eyes of any Slovene expatriate. However, it has not been without its detractors. Almost as soon as it was finished, officialdom intervened and demanded that its original title 'Slovenia, the Perfect Getaway' be changed. They insisted the word 'getaway' implies 'fleeing a crime scene' and this was, therefore, an unacceptable way to promote Slovenia. However, if we take a moment to consider the pressures of modern life, isn't this very lifestyle a crime against our own humanity and something we all want to get away from? The advertisement's message is clear - Slovenia is a shelter of pristine natural beauty where one can get away from the dreadful isolation of industrialized cities and become a free spirit again, if only just for a short while. Unfortunately, when the heavy-hitters from the state intervene, it usually marks the end of the discussion, and the motto 'Slovenia, a Diversity to Discover' was finally 'agreed' to. So, we are a diverse country now - but so is every single country in the world. However, not every country in the world can claim it is the perfect getaway from the pressures of modern life.

The second thing that bothered the government commission was the

flowers that were used as a motif; a directive came for them to be replaced with the Slovenian flag. Ironically, it is precisely our flag that causes constant confusion abroad due to its similarity to others; the flowers were at least unique, and that is what a brand is all about.

There is another unhappy party in this story; Slovenian congress tourism representatives are upset that the advertisement only focuses on the classic tourist attractions and disregards their interest in getting a share of the tourism pie. Their ambition is to turn Slovenia into the centre of congress tourism in South-Eastern Europe. Many European cities aggressively promote congress tourism, and they don't do this by showing galloping Lipizzaners in an advertisement. Speaking of the Lipizzaner, isn't it darkly ironic that they are portrayed in the advertisement as a source of national pride, and yet we have recently learned that a golf course is to be built in the heartland of the Lipizzaner, the protected Lipica National Park?

The Slovenian Tourist Board spent a massive 187 million Slovenian tolar on the advertisement and buying advertising time on CNN Europe, which effectively led to the cancellation of many other promotional activities abroad. The choice of CNN Europe - the Slovenian Tourist Board claims it was chosen because it has global importance in Europe - and

the sum paid infuriated the congress tourism representatives, who claim that CNN Europe's target audience (male, around 46 years old) is at odds with the target group for congress tourism. Thus, the advertisement does nothing to attract European congress organizers to Slovenia. This, of course, raises questions about the primary goal of the advertisement. As anyone can see, it promotes the joys of relaxing in nature, and carefully avoids anything work related. With or without the phrase, it shows the perfect getaway. Promoting nature and business congresses in a single advertisement seems almost impossible.

The advertisement has already won four high-calibre international awards: the **Grand Prix Award** at the 39th Tourfilm 2006 in Karlovy Vary (Czech Republic); first prize at the **Tourfilm Festival** in Plock (Poland); first prize at the 9th **International Tourfilm Festival of Ecology SW ITF 2006** in Split (Croatia). In November, it will also be presented with a major award at the **Comite International des Festivals du Film Touristique** (CIFFT). The creators - director **Jasna Hribernik**, copywriter **Zdravko Duša** and music composer **Barbara Pešut** - are delighted with the festival outcomes and the praise lavished upon them by the President of the Jury in Karlovy Vary, Jiri Makesh: "Among the



647 entries from 137 countries, we saw many advertisements that displayed technical perfection, the latest advertising design trends and professional know-how. But then the Slovenian advertisement came along, which had all these qualities and something more: it had emotion. With this, Slovenia proved that despite being a small country, it can successfully market itself as an interesting tourist destination in the international tourist market." ■


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park
CASINÒ & HOTEL
Nova Gorica, Slovenija
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KORONA
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