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# GREEN SHEEN

How SUSTAINABLE IS THE  
BUSINESS EVENTS INDUSTRY?



# ASEAN for business events?

ASEAN has the framework for regional collaboration on various fronts. But can it come together on business events? **Gerardine Donough-Tan** delves into the conundrum.



**Collaborative effort...** The ASEAN Tourism Forum promotes the region as one tourist destination, but can more be done to incorporate business events?

**T**he Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a concert of 10 Southeast Asian nations, has achieved success as an economic bloc, despite political challenges.

McKinsey notes that Southeast Asia is one of the world's fastest-growing consumer markets. The International Monetary Fund estimated ASEAN as the fifth-largest economy in the world in 2017 had it

been a single country. Intra-ASEAN and international trade and travel are strong.

In natural disaster management and emergency response, coordination and collaboration transcend different types of government and civilian agencies, including international partners.

At the ASEAN Summit this June, the heads of state announced the possibility of a joint bid to host the 2034 FIFA World Cup. Not all the 10 countries currently meet the

stringent criteria, but optimists point to the successful rotation of the biennial Southeast Asia Games and infrastructure developments coming up in the next decade.

So, attractive and promising as ASEAN looks, can it do better in hosting business events?

"If Southeast Asian convention bureaus want to compete with China, they may be more effective by talking about the size of the regional market rather than their own

national market,” says Gary Grimmer, CEO of GainingEdge, a business events consultancy.

“A collaborative emphasis would elevate the focus and understanding about the economic scale of the ASEAN region and leverage ASEAN countries to strengthen each of their individual brands.”

He adds: “If Southeast Asia lifts the sophistication of its game and enhances the standards of delivery throughout the region, the market will grow faster for everyone.”

Industry veteran Mike Cannon, owner of Mike Cannon Business Events, notes that “if you want to grow, you have to work together”. But lack of commonality in visa regulations, importing goods for exhibitions and sponsorship policy pose challenges.

“Bureaus market the destination and help win business events; i.e. sell. But industry via the bureau in an ASEAN or stand-alone forum will drive the need to enhance and firmly establish the Southeast Asia brand for new, repeat and rotating business,” he says.

This means business events can anchor and grow if there is a solid foundation. Indeed, the 2018 International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA) top city rankings for international association meetings placed Singapore and Bangkok among the top 10.

Yet these two powerhouses lost to Penang in the quest to host the inaugural ICCA Asia Pacific Chapter Summit this December. ASEAN cities Bandung and Manila were also among the 12 contenders. Penang was the only destination in Malaysia that bid, with full support from the ICCA Malaysia Committee. Interestingly, ICCA’s regional office is in Kuala Lumpur.

Hard fights show the desire for prestige as much as for the actual event business and its spin-offs. While some criticise the waste of resources in bidding wars, the lack of a pan-Asian or pan-ASEAN federation stymies a coordinated approach to sourcing for and securing business events.

With the Asian Association of Convention and Visitor Bureaus (AACVB) all but defunct (it was “unable to comment” for this story), the ASEAN Tourism Association (ASEANTA) could perhaps extend its role beyond mainstream

leisure tourism, although some business events industry leaders would disagree.

Nevertheless, as the umbrella federation comprising national associations of hotels, airlines and travel agencies/tour operators of the 10 ASEAN countries, ASEANTA can support business events.

Recently-elected ASEANTA president Mingkwan Metmowlee says ASEANTA aims to develop strong human capital in the business events segment. “We will work together to improve both the employment and capacity of tourism human resource development. From local destinations to luxe cities, we will work professionally to provide the best experiences to visitors.”

However, ASEANTA’s private-public sector alliance still lacks participation from the national tourism organisations of Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam. To fill the vacuum, could AACVB morph into a new entity, such as an ASEAN offshoot?

Aloysius Arlando, SingEx Holdings CEO, is president of the Singapore Association of Convention & Exhibition Organisers & Suppliers (SACEOS) and AIPC (International Association of Convention Centres). He cautions that in re-purposing (AACVB), one must be mindful of where tourism is an economic contributor in member economies.

“ASEAN stems from consensus building and any ASEAN initiative takes a cue from that. What might work for one member-economy might not work for another. That’s why advocacy is key.”

He adds: “Perhaps under the ASEAN Tourism Framework, AACVB can have a new lease of life. A full-time secretariat or association management company will be necessary to ensure continuity and consistency of execution of agreed programmes and priorities. The chairmanship would rotate among ASEAN members as is the current arrangement for ASEAN and its associated meetings.”

While independent business events councils may work at the national level — such as in Australia and Malaysia — the formula doesn’t apply in the international arena. For a start, Cannon suggests holding a regional CEO forum, led by industry experts such as Grimmer and former ICCA CEO Martin Sirk (now the international advisor to Global Association Hubs), in an effort to drive ASEAN collaboration.



“The return on investment of business events is vastly different to that of tourism.”

**MIKE CANNON**

Owner  
Mike Cannon Business Events

**Regional proxy?**

TRAVEX (Travel Exchange) at the annual ASEAN Tourism Forum is under ASEANTA’s auspices. Each year, buyer and seller manuals list ‘MICE’ as a target interest of many participants. To satisfy these mutual interests, could TRAVEX include business events within its ambit? The World Tourism Organization identifies ‘business tourism’ as encompassing meetings, incentives, conventions and exhibitions.

Cannon and Grimmer, however, stress that the two industries are different.

Cannon says business events must be kept outside of tourism. “If they keep it in and aligned with tourism at ASEAN, it will fail. The return on investment of business events is vastly different to that of tourism, which in the eyes of most government officials, equates to numbers of visitors.”

“Different customers, different customer motivations, different distribution channels and, once you go beyond hotels and airlines, different supply chains,” says Grimmer. “Tourism organisations don’t really understand the MICE industry, nor are most of them engaged in a meaningful way unless they have a convention and exhibition bureau as a department. Even then, most bureaus aren’t getting the support they

Photo credit: TTG Asia



Raising the bar... ASEAN MICE Venue Standards certified Conrad Manila (top left), Novotel Singapore Clarke Quay (top right) and Sofitel Luang Prabang (above).



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**GARY GRIMMER**  
CEO  
GainingEdge

need from their tourism organisations and their destinations are underperforming as a result.”

Messe Berlin’s launch of MICE Show Asia at this year’s ITB Asia in Singapore also suggests that business events merit separation from mainstream tourism. And the inaugural IBTM Asia Pacific will join the fray in April 2020 — also in Singapore. Meanwhile, IT&CM Asia — now in its 27th year and anchored in Bangkok — proves the strength of the business events sector.

#### ASEAN MICE Venue Standards

The ASEAN Tourism Strategic Plan designates ASEAN as a single tourist destination by 2025, and MICE venues come under its scope. In terms of industry standards, there has been progress.

The ASEAN MICE Venue Standards (AMVS) is based on the model developed by Thailand. Phase one, from 2016 to 2018, focused on hotel meeting and convention venues; 33 properties were certified across all ASEAN countries. More

are in the qualification process. The next stage, exhibition venues, has begun and will be followed by special event venues.

The Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau (TCEB) is steering the project. TCEB president Chiruit Isarangkun Na Ayuthaya says: “AMVS provides all member states with guidelines to make their properties competitive. They can join hands to provide quality business event venues, making ASEAN a competitive business events region.

“Through the AMVS-certified venues, we will be able to develop and enhance the capacity and competitiveness of MICE in serving both organisers and visitors in a professional manner.”

According to TCEB, a uniform standard across MICE venues in ASEAN builds confidence in the professionalism of the region’s MICE industry. It helps venues to achieve international standards in physical structure, services and technology. AMVS also prepares them to work professionally with organisers and planners to ensure smooth operation

of MICE events and to meet customer requirements.

On emerging destinations, Chiruit acknowledges that successful MICE destinations in ASEAN could support and pass on lessons learned to newer ones. “It is achieved on a bilateral basis as neighbouring countries share expertise and skills,” he says.

TCEB has already found an ally in ASEANTA. Its members will support Thailand’s leadership of AMVS, says Metmowlee. “In addition, ASEANTA will initiate MICE professionals’ capacity-building across our member countries to enhance HR and quality development to meet the needs of clients.”

Another collaborative opportunity is emerging. At SMF2019 in July, five ASEAN national convention and exhibition associations — from Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand — signed a joint pledge. “We will mutually support our respective professional development programmes and research efforts to help build our regional business events community,” says SACEOS’ Arlando.

No time frame was stated, but in general, the associations aim to share research data and hold joint activities to encourage digital adoption, upskilling, professional development and capacity development. Such activities may facilitate technology adoption in terms of cybersecurity and data protection.

In June, AIPC, ICCA and UFI (Global Association of the Exhibition Industry) launched their global alliance. They are exploring exchange and reciprocity in four primary areas: educational content, research, standards and advocacy.

Besides strengthening their own interests and those of their members, perhaps they could also consider offering emerging MICE destinations and organisations advice, training and preferential rates to bring them up to speed. That will bode well for the collective good. ■

*This continues the dedicated series Biz Events Asia will be publishing on collaboration. Share your views with us via email: lauren@untangledgroup.com*



“ASEANTA will initiate MICE professionals’ capacity-building across our member countries to enhance HR and quality development to meet the needs of clients.”

**MINGKWAN METMOWLEE**  
President  
ASEAN Tourism Association



**New opportunity...** Heads of five national convention and exhibition associations in ASEAN signed a joint pledge of support and cooperation at SMF 2019.