

# Colours, Sounds and Fragrances of the Meetings Industry in Slovenia and South-East Europe

For each important event in South-East Europe - be it a birth, a wedding, a holiday...people would eat, drink, dance to different rhythms and rejoice. Each congress or incentive meeting in Central and SE Europe repeats this ritual and becomes a modern holiday. Europe is thrilled to welcome a new region of congress and business tourism with all its colours, sounds and fragrances.



The participants and critics of the international meetings industry have expressed childlike joy over the entry of a new, colourful, fragrant region to the market. Working in MICE can be tough, market conditions are demanding, traditional convention and incentive destinations don't like to share their profit and their business. Yet still - the organizers and clients wish for something new. They would like - for the same or lower price - to see the yet unseen places, taste un-tasted foods, unknown wines, hear unintelligible languages and experience undiscovered experiences.

Luckily, Central and South-East Europe offers this and much more.

SE Europe is a region at the crossroads of Europe. After the political cards were shuffled some twenty years ago, these countries had to and wanted to create a new image in their international relations, restructure their national economies and open up to the world, to foreign investments and foreign knowledge. Today, most of this work is done. Foreign knowledge is still streaming into SE Europe, but it is about time this region offers the best it has to the meetings industry market. Not just (new or renovated) hotels and other infrastructure, which is no longer missing.

SE Europe can try to “cheat” or look for shortcuts in its development. We can learn from the experience of Slovenia, which proves good infrastructure and fair prices aren't always enough to attract the world market. Far from it. This is why the data on convention facilities is usually accompanied by pictures of breathtaking natural beauty, culinary secrets, cultural gems, tied to the languages, religions, scripts, which can be summed up in just four words: extremely rich cultural heritage.

The region certainly needed influences. They were easiest to find in our northern neighbours, which mostly influenced the countries they were closest to. Luckily, regions like Furlanija Julijska krajina (Friuli-Venezia Giulia), Koroška (Carinthia) and Austrian Štajerska (Styria) are nearby.



Since Slovenia, the most northern part of SE Europe and at the same time a part of Central Europe – depending on the context – was luckily not a part of the political conflict during the nineties; it developed its economy much faster than the other states. Its development was pretty swift since it made up for 60 percent of the markets it lost in SE markets, with markets in the West in just two years. The economic development enabled the formation of new knowledge, which the state, celebrating its 20th birthday in 2011, or better yet the experts from the meetings industry are now investing to the South and East.

The region has been aware of the three P's since the beginning, not only as a public-private partnership, but as a kind of a new mantra: people, planet, profit. This is why protecting the cultural heritage and sharing it with partners has long been a part of a rounded tourist offer. The goal of the ever growing meetings industry in sunny SE Europe is not mass tourism, but building a well rounded offer, developed with nature, local culture, social responsibility and cooperation with existing and potential business partners in mind.

Even though the region offers numerous pleasant secrets, waiting to be discovered, the foundations of economic cooperation are clear: They are set by the European Union. There is no use wasting

breath on politics. This public activity, we sadly cannot do without, has seeded discord and disagreement into this region far too often. That's why we try to avoid it.

So we focus on sounds, colours and fragrances surrounding the infrastructure of an emerging meetings industry in SE Europe, which are distinctive, multilayer, pleasant, unusual. We cannot put it all in the same pot and speak of a culture of the region - we are faced with a rich cultural mosaic, undoubtedly the richest on the continent.

This isn't unusual. The region has developed its culture through the centuries. Despite the predominant Slavic culture we can enjoy dishes shaped by the centuries of influence of Ottoman, Alp, Pannonian, Mediterranean cuisine; poetry containing stories of hill-folk or metropolis tribes... Actually, ten smaller often overlooked nations, each adding their treasure to the treasure chest. Once, rigid religious rules, today an opportunity for celebration discovering unknown colours, fragrances, sounds, dances. There is no predominant language in the region, since more than a dozen are spoken, so nobody gets upset if the "lingua franca" at meetings and after them is English.



Oh, is there anything easier than an evening at one of the fancier (zen, fusion, or whatever's modern) restaurants in Sarajevo, Sofia or Podgorica, to relax with a glass of mojito, followed by salmon and asparagus dressed in prosciutto, then wake up to a tall cup of latte macchiato? The region as any other is following the rules of globalisation. Yet, it's aware of the importance and the beauty of local traditions and cultural patterns, which are an echo of the gifts of nature.

The region is incredibly rich since its northern area begins at the Eastern end of the Alps, slowly dropping into one of the largest flat lands in Europe - the Pannonia plain. To make the geography a bit more interesting, the plain soon rises into the Carpathians. The western borders of SE Europe are warm shores of the Adriatic. Its waves then hit the Dinarides, after that the landscape varies across the central Balkan peninsula. The Karst world turns into the dance of numerous river valleys, lake basins and in between fields, which used to and still grow cotton, tobacco and in Bulgaria -

hectares of fragrant Roses. This region has always been abundant with fruits, vegetables and wood, which it never gave away for free. People had to work hard for their harvest through the centuries, which remains in their blood until today.

Today, this people are - business partners. They enter the European market of business, congress tourism with a lot of zeal and a desire to work and learn. They know what becoming a destination means for a place, so they eagerly cooperate in the business process. The market needs to recognize their effort and the rewards will be mutual.

Welcome to South-East Europe!

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