

INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS TRAVEL DESTINATIONS TO WATCH IN 2010



Perhaps the best predictor of destinations to watch for international business travel is what's happening in the large association market because their meetings are typically scheduled several years out.

"Destinations that proactively targeted this most resilient market segment over the last half decade are weathering the current economic storm far better than their competitors who only focused on big budget corporate meetings," says Martin Sirk, CEO of ICCA, Amsterdam, the Netherlands. However, choices made for association meetings will influence the corporate market. Putting aside any short term shifts in business travel caused by economic factors, **emerging international destinations today have the following in common: offering a strong value for their currency, making investments in hotels and conference facilities, and focusing on excellent service.** They are also popular in their own regions.

When choosing a business destination for meetings and events, planners consider how these factors will help deliver the better travel program results, according to Trish Adams, director of partnership marketing at Martz Travel, Fenton, MO, USA.

So, which destinations are being watched?

Abu Dhabi, UAE. Located between the East and West, the Gulf has made considerable inroads into the meetings market during the last decade; Dubai was its first significant player. But a strong economy, excellent business facilities, luxury hotels, beaches, unique desert activities and an increasing capacity to host meetings are just a few of the reasons why international associations, corporate meetings and incentives are choosing Abu Dhabi.

During 2009 when business travel was down significantly, 1.54 million traveled to Abu Dhabi - a 2% growth; 2010 is projected to increase by 10%. To promote its commitment for increased business travel meetings in this emirate, the Abu Dhabi Tourism Authority is offering financial and non-financial resources to event organizers. Top markets include the UK, USA, India, Germany and Australia.

South Africa. With the 2010 FIFA World Cup taking place at 10 stadiums across South Africa this summer, it's an excellent opportunity for Johannesburg, Cape Town and other locations to showcase their infrastructure for business travel meetings - important for any long-haul destination with a favorable currency rate. New hotels and convention centers have been built and existing ones are refurbishing in preparation for the World Cup.

Beijing, China. In 2009, China had 5.2 million visitors for meetings; its largest markets are Korea, Japan, USA, Russia, Germany, UK and Canada. Beijing hosted the 2008 Olympic Games and gained international attention for the meetings market. Since then, the China National Convention Center opened in Beijing in October 2008 for international meetings (initially used for the 2008 Games).

Slovenia. Europe is a leader in the international associations market, and Eastern Europe has made significant strides in the business travel and meetings industry. Slovenia served as the EU Council Presidency from January to June 2008, and is emerging as a cost effective destination for smaller meetings that offers diverse experiences all within a short drive: the Alps, Mediterranean, wine country, historic towns and more.

Zaragoza, Spain. The fifth largest city in Spain, Zaragoza was host to Expo 2008, giving it world prominence to 99 participating countries and 5.7 million visitors. Cost is an advantage to this mid-sized city located between Madrid and Barcelona. Accessible by air and rail, Zaragoza is targeting the international associations market, and 56 conferences are being promoted as hosted in the city during 2010. Congress Centre of Aragon is its newest conference center, legacy of Expo 2008.

Baltimore, MD. The USA remains the world's largest market for international meetings, and the capital region weathered the 2009 economic downturn better than other destinations. Baltimore is a smaller, compact city, and it's attracting greater numbers. In 2008, Baltimore had 3.82 million business travelers, but only 258,000 international visitors (leisure included); top markets are the UK, Latin America, Germany and Japan. Baltimore is expected to gain greater international attention between now and when it hosts AIBTM, June 21-23, 2011.

Brazil, the biggest player in Latin America, **India**, **Lago Maggiore** (Italy) and **Shanghai** are also business travel destinations to watch.

Whether emerging, growing or fully established, Adams explains that destinations should pool their resources - tourism offices, hoteliers, convention centers, destination management companies - to attract international meetings and events business. Adams also encourages the use of rebates, discounts and other promotions such as local entertainment.

Business travel for meetings and events is a buyer's market right now, according to the EIBTM 2009 Industry Trends and Market Share Report by Reed Exhibitions, Richmond, Surrey, UK.

"The more the industry does to promote itself as excellent value, with no compromise in quality, the more likely it is to emerge stronger than before," says Rob Davidson, senior lecturer in business travel and tourism at the University of Westminster in London, and author of the report.

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