

July-August 2007

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meetings & incentive travel

**Watch out
for the
venue**
small print

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centre survey + Why Electrolux kicked off at Wembley

Malta is swapping the lira for the euro and investing in more opportunities for planners. Katherine Simmons reports

New money



Red carpet and ribbons at the Malta Fairs and Conventions Centre

With inward investment of EU funds and a new venue accommodating up to 10,000, Malta is poised to take advantage of its strategic location in a bid to attract more conferences.

Since its ascension to the EU in 2004, Malta has benefited from 850 million euros (£577.1 million) of improvement funds, much of which has been channelled into improving roads and historic venues.

But with Malta conversion to the euro taking place next year, the Malta Tourism Authority (MTA) is keen to assure planners that the destination will continue to offer the same value for money.

Nadine Brincat, MTA's MICE segment co-ordinator, says there will be no repeats of the price hikes which have been a feature of changeovers in other new eurozone countries. "The government has set up the National Euro Changeover Committee which aims to regulate the changeover to ensure suppliers do not start over-charging," she says.

Malta has also signed a twinning agreement with Austria, with the Austrian delegation assisting in setting up a legally enforceable price monitoring framework to raise consumer confidence.

Brincat explains: "The changeover

comes into effect on January 1 2008 and all prices now have to be shown in euros and Maltese Lira. If the euro price is higher, you can report it. It is not in our interests to be anything other than price conscious – we have to protect our value for money offer."

One of the biggest change to the island's infrastructure in the past year has been the opening of the Malta Fairs & Conventions Centre (MFCC) in Ta'Qali. Now the island's biggest venue, MFCC can accommodate up to 10,000 people seated. Established through private venture, the venue is a joint project between Ruben Caruana, also managing director of production company Sign It Design Group, and the Malta Trade Fairs Corporation, which manages exhibition space at Malta Fairs, due for demolition next month. Caruana says the development meets both local and overseas demand: "Malta attracts conference business from the UK, Germany, Italy and France. In the last few years it has been getting bigger conferences."

It will also allow MTA's meetings segment to target specific markets, according to Brincat. "The MFCC will enable the Maltese Islands to target conferences with over 1,500 delegates. We would particularly like to focus on the international

associations market in the near future, particularly with regards to conferences of around 3,000 delegates to start off with."

The structure was originally the Wembley Arena pavilion which hosted events at the venue while renovation work took place. After serving its purpose, Caruana had the structure shipped to Malta. It was pieced back together in just three months prior to its opening as the MFCC in December 2006.

Locally known as "the tent," the structure will remain in place until the completion of the permanent MFCC. In spite of its nickname, MFCC includes three span arches specially designed for rigging and production, strong enough to support the weight of four cars.

With open space of 6,500 square metres in the main area, which can be divided back to back; 1,950 square metres of additional space and two foyers, MFCC is now the biggest venue south of Milan and in a strategic position for hosting events from Europe and Africa.

Unlike its predecessor, the 16 million Maltese Lira (£25.3 million) permanent MFCC building will have a six year build time. Initial plans include a domed green roof, making the building look a little like the underground home of the Tellytubbies

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MALTA

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Price check - Malta

Malta Fairs & Convention Centre FCC: day hire of main arena — £7,900-£15,800 depending on the logistics package.

Corinthia San Gorg: Conference package price (July-October) for three nights — £211 per person, based on double occupancy including VAT.

Corinthia Marina Hotel: (July-October) conference package price for three nights — £183 per person, based on double occupancy including VAT.

Corinthia Palace Hotel: 24-hour delegate rate prices start at £39 for twin sharing and free main meeting room.

InterContinental Malta: Day delegate rates start at £30.



Quietly does it: The 'silent city' of Mdina

Buyer's Eye

"Malta is an impressive, value-for-money destination with good flight access. Facilities cater for a wide range of group profiles and budgets. Venues range from rustic, secluded farmhouses to ultra-modern, luxury five-star hotels and excellent conference facilities. The three islands lend themselves to team-building and group activities such as a jeep safari or speed-boat treasure hunt, and offer alternatives to your average on-off coach journeys. Schooners, sea planes and fishing boats offer real escapism and novelty."

Katrina Armstrong
BI

- the local population, no doubt, will christen it with a new nickname.

Caruana believes the MFCC, along with experience gained from hosting high profile events such as the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in November 2006 attended by 53 heads of state is changing the island's tourism offer. And Caruana adds professional talent within production, exhibitions, destination management and hospitality is already in place. "Malta's people are its greatest asset. People work hard - it's in our culture. But we need to compete with other countries. This structure will allow us to do that."

Malta has 13 five-star hotels, with the biggest concentration of international chains in the St Julian's area. The 294 bedroom Hilton Malta has a dedicated conference centre featuring eight meeting rooms with the largest accommodating up to 1,400 delegates. A new wing scheduled to open in early 2008 will add another 113 bedrooms.

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MALTA

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Buyer's Eye

"Rightly or wrongly, Malta was viewed as a destination either for your grandparents or for the package holiday brigade.

From a conference and incentive perspective it ticks all the boxes, easy access from London with Air Malta and BA and a budget airline option from Luton. Short airport transfers, high standard good value 5 star hotels, a range of land based and seaborne activity programmes and a great choice of group venues and dining options.

All this is supported by knowledgeable, flexible DMCs and a local council which encourages business tourism, opening squares like the Piazza Regina for exclusive events. Not to mention the cosmopolitan nightlife, festivals, culture, climate and yes, sandy beaches!"

Mark Ivackovic
Euro RSCG Skybridge

The 451-bedroom InterContinental Malta has 22 meeting rooms including the 2,770 square metre Eden Arena with capacity for 1,700 theatre style and a main ballroom seating 770.

The 250 room newly refurbished Corinthia San Gorg features conference and banqueting facilities for 600 people. Sister hotel, the Marina, has facilities for 40 delegates. Both can be accessed via a jetty for boat transfers.

Both the San Gorg and Corinthia Palace in Attard offer the Maltese chain's Events@Corinthia programme, designed to pamper the planner. Organisers are upgraded to Five Senses Rooms which include a massage chair, relaxing lighting, fresh fruit, essential oils and a CD player with relaxing CDs.

Quality standards for the programme are audited by Corinthia's head office. Score tables compare the individual hotels and the minimum pass mark for customer satisfaction is 85 per cent.

The Corinthia Palace has 147 bedrooms with meetings facilities for up to 500 delegates, two boardrooms and six syndicate suites. The hotel incorporates its own historic venue, the 100-year-old Villa Corinthia.

Within the hotel's tropical grounds, the Athenaeus Spa, the first to open on the island, has just reopened following refurbishment. The spa now features a floatation pool, 14 treatment cabins with chromotherapy colour treatments and Rasul mud room, as well as a pool and gym.



The Mediterranean Conference Centre

HOW to get there

Air Malta operates flights from Heathrow, Gatwick, Manchester, Liverpool, Stansted, Birmingham, Bristol, Glasgow, East Midlands and Newcastle. British Airways flies from Manchester and Gatwick. Ryanair offers budget flights from Luton and Dublin.

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MALTA

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Knights' tales

With a history going back 7,000 years, many planners take advantage of Malta's rich heritage as a backdrop for staging events.

Mdina, the old capital, has several open spaces including bastions and courtyards which can be used for gala dinners and reception drinks - the cathedral square can be used for a gala dinner for 600 people. The downside of staging outdoor events in Mdina - known as the silent city



Hard day's knight: history re-enacted
Photo: Malta Tourism Authority

- is that all noise has to cease at 11.30pm.

Baachus, a former magazine set within Mdina's fortifications, is a function room and restaurant seating 500 people for dinner. A clear span structure is being constructed which will accommodate 1,350. The mediaeval magazine itself is divided into two sections which can accommodate 40 or 60 people.

Once used to treat the patients of the Knights of St John, the former Sacra Infermeria in Valletta now serves as the Mediterranean Conference Centre. Exhibitions or gala dinners can be held in the 600-year-old building's former wards and the Republic Hall auditorium, originally a courtyard, can seat 1,400 people.

The Knights of Malta 1565 is a new show bringing history to life through music, dance and drama. Currently based on Valletta's waterfront, the show, which has a human and equine cast, tells the story of the epic battle for the island between the Knights of St John and the Ottoman Turks.

ASK the expert

BOBBY CARUANA
SMS CONFERENCES
AND INCENTIVES
RECOMMENDS:

HALF TEAM BUILDING EVENT (50 PAX)

I would use a GoKarting venue near MFCC as the base for activities including human table football, mountain biking and a 'Build a Car' competition. Lunch would be in a farming village to sample cuisine at a typical Maltese Taverna.

Price: Activities 30 MTL per person (£47)
Lunch: 7-10 MTL per person (£11-16)

HIGH BUDGET GALA DINNER (100 PAX)

Upper Barrakka gardens in Valetta gives the best views of Grand Harbour. I would organise an orchestra for a 50 minute recital and project the logo of the company across the harbour using one of the forts as a backdrop. Guests would be treated to a four course meal and half bottle of wine. With a good budget you could also organise a five minute firework display.

Price: Includes transfers in Mercedes E-Class (50 vehicles plus police escort and return), show or orchestra, four-course dinner, fireworks display. From 633 MTL per person (£1,000 per delegate)



Open air dining in Mdina



Case study

Organiser: Jane Jones, DRP Group

The client/event:

The spirit of Thomas Cook - a review of the previous six months and projections/plans for the future for the travel firm.

Participants:

Two identical conferences were run over the course of a week, with 1,000 delegates at each. Delegates were managers and senior managers from branches and head office.

The venues:

Malta Fairs & Convention Centre (MFCC) - the event was the first to be held at the MFCC - the marquee was still being built when DRP's crew arrived and this presented many challenges!

DRP also worked with the Malta Tourism Authority to host a spectacular opening ceremony (twice) at the harbour with fireworks and speed boats, and huge projections on the harbour walls.

Key moments of the conference included the displaying of 1,000 photos of the delegates which were taken before the conference and all depicted "The spirit of Thomas Cook", which mounted onto a huge wall which opened to reveal a huge projection presentation.

Talent show auditions were hosted before the conference in the UK, and the winners performed at one of the evening events.