

Spotlight on Selangor



With the country's main airport close by and an inventory of business hotels and accessible entertainment, Selangor is the new darling of event organisers, discovers **S Puvaneswary**

The MICE sector in Selangor is starting to see a rebound in business following a tough 2014 when two air tragedies and a slowdown in travel led to a dip in arrivals to Malaysia.

Recovery has been attributed to Selangor's infrastructure developments and the depreciation in the ringgit. Trade players believe that the destination's close proximity to two major gateways into Malaysia, namely Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) and low-cost carrier terminal klia2, is a contributing factor.

The new klia2, much bigger and far better equipped in terms of safety and comfort features than the former budget terminal, enabled low-cost airlines using the facility to expand their frequencies and introduce new routes, thus improving opportunities for inbound players to tap new secondary markets for business events.

Access into Malaysia through klia2 has improved this year, with AirAsia raising its frequency from Manila

from twice to thrice daily; AirAsia and Malindo Air both starting the new Kuala Lumpur-Visakhapatnam route; and AirAsia X commencing a new service from Chongqing with four weekly flights.

Ganneesh Ramaa, manager of local DMC Luxury Tours, said: "The aggressive expansion of low-cost carriers...opens new markets for business events."

Ramaa said business hotels in Selangor are benefitting because they are close to these gateways, have large meeting spaces and guestroom inventory, and are cheaper compared with hotels of similar star rating in Kuala Lumpur.

"Hoteliers (in Selangor) are also more flexible with rates," he remarked, adding that it is "easier to promote Selangor" than Kuala Lumpur to MICE clients.

Arokia Das, senior manager of Luxury Tours Malaysia, said the rates for business events held at four- and five-star hotels in Selangor were "easily 30 per cent lower than

the rates (of similar hotels) in the outskirts of Bangkok".

Adam Kamal, CEO of Rakyat Travel, said: "Regional or international conference organisers with two- or three-day events don't want destinations too far from the capital city, such as Penang or Langkawi which require an additional flight. At the same time, they may choose not to do it in Kuala Lumpur, as there are too many distractions. So Selangor is an obvious choice."

Citing an example of how valuable accessibility is to clients, Kamal told *TTGmice* that Bank Rakyat, the organiser of an international conference on Islamic finances in August, had chosen to host the event at Putrajaya Marriott Hotel because the hotel was close to KLIA and klia2, had large conference facilities, and was near Putrajaya, enabling a day tour to the administrative capital.

Rakyat Travel was the groundhandler for the conference which was attended by 150 delegates from all over the world.

Thanks to a weaker ringgit, foreign MICE groups can get greater value out of their event at Sunway Resort Hotel & Spa (pictured here)

Putrajaya Marriott Hotel also provides free shuttle services for its guests to the nearby IOI City Mall, allowing meeting delegates to end their day with shopping and entertainment. The mall features more than 300 outlets, including an ice skating rink, a cinema with 13 halls, and an indoor Apocalypse themed adventure park known as District 21 which provides challenges and obstacle courses for adults.

Putrajaya Marriott Hotel and IOI City Mall are part of the IOI Resort City, which also includes the four-star 151-key Palm Garden Hotel.

According to Lydia Mae Hendroff, assistant director of marketing at Putrajaya Marriott Hotel, IOI Resort City is being marketed as a single destination this year, resulting in growing interest especially from China, India, Vietnam, the Philippines, Singapore and Brunei.

Hendroff said: "Cluster marketing provides convenience for meeting planners as their main point of reference is the sales team who will liaise with the different entities within IOI Resort City (on their behalf)."

Another hotel that is benefiting from its close proximity to the airports is AVANI Sepang Goldcoast Resort. Pamela Yew, its director of sales and marketing, said event organisers found the hotel convenient for time-strapped foreign delegates, especially speakers who would often fly in to make their presentation in the day and leave at night.

The seafront property also appeals to event planners with its seclusion

from the busy city centre and access to two ballrooms. Its location allows the provision of an "extreme park" with paintball courts, a go-kart track and ATV rides. Corporate teambuilding activities can be arranged on site. The two ballrooms are pillarless and have high ceilings. They can accommodate 1,000 and 400 pax respectively.

Yew said: "Many competing MICE hotels only have one ballroom which is used for the main conference, leaving not enough venues for private dining."

Also playing to Selangor's advantage is the steady depreciation of the Malaysian ringgit this year. At press time on August 14, it slumped to its weakest level in 17 years, and reached a historic low of 4.03 against the US dollar.

Kamal observed that the weak currency has made Selangor a more attractive destination for business events, and said his company had seen increased enquiries from ASEAN member countries, such as the Philippines and Indonesia, for the second half of 2015.

He said: "The depreciation of the ringgit had resulted in clients using their savings to (add value to the programme), such as by organising a gala dinner outside the hotel or requesting for entertainment options."

Yew too is seeing increased enquiries from companies based in Singapore, India and China for 2H2015. While demand is up from financial service sectors, Yew noted that it was the reverse with oil and

gas clients. She explained that the weaker currency had impacted the latter's revenue.

She remarked: "The devaluation of the ringgit has helped business as organisers want to stretch their budget. During the low season, we are able to provide value adds such as room upgrades, complimentary rooms, coach transfers from airport to hotel or from hotel to the city centre, and flexible room rates and meeting packages."

Selangor's Sunway Resort Hotel & Spa group director of brand marketing & communications marketing, Farizal Jaafar, said the integrated resort is now more affordable to its main markets from the Asia Pacific region which contributed 60 per cent of its guests in 2014.

Rakyat Travel's Kamal agrees. "In the past, the total package price of holding an event at Sunway was beyond the budget of our clients. Now with the devaluation of the ringgit, it (is affordable). This is also a good option for clients who have already done Kuala Lumpur and are looking for a new destination."

Meanwhile, the two-year-old Setia City Convention Centre in Selangor's Shah Alam is banking on the integration of ASEAN as a single community to further drive business, said its senior manager, Francis Teo.

Currently, part of its business comes from multinational corporations in Shah Alam and Subang Jaya who prefer to do their events at the centre which is nearer than venues in Kuala Lumpur.

{ Talking numbers }



30

The rank Malaysia holds on ICCA's latest Global Ranking 2014 of top countries for association meetings, up five spots from 2013



3.6

The average number of days international conventions were held in Malaysia, up from 3.3 days in 2013. These events were supported by MyCEB in 2014



1.56

The economic impact - in billions of ringgit (or US\$380 million) - of international business events supported by MyCEB in 2014, up from RM1.2 billion in 2013

{ Spotlight }

Journey into the capital's past



Mud takes the audience into Kuala Lumpur's past

MICE planners having an event in Kuala Lumpur should incorporate this 50-minute live performance in English into their programme as it gives foreign visitors a lively introduction into the early beginnings of the city.

Everyone who watches this show will have their hearts go out to the colourful, multiracial settlers who lost their homes

and their possessions when the Great Fire of Kuala Lumpur broke out in 1881. To further add to their misery, The Great Flood that year destroyed the city and settlers were left with two choices, leave and start anew elsewhere or rebuild the city and their lives. Thankfully they chose the latter.

While the characters are fictional, the story is based on historical accounts from the 1850s during the tin mining boom which promised riches and attracted an influx of pioneers from Asia to the muddy junction of the two rivers, Lumpur River (now known as Gombak River) and Kelang River.

What also makes the show interesting is that the audience can choose to participate, and by doing so, they become part of the unfolding drama. For instance, they can form a line and become volunteers to pass pails of water to help put out the ravaging fire of 1881.

The intensity of the fire is projected through visuals on the LED screen.

It is fitting that the tale of Kuala Lumpur is staged at Panggung Bandaraya, built in 1901. Panggung Bandaraya is

located at Merdeka Square, the heritage area of Kuala Lumpur where buildings are more than a century old. This was the "new" city of Kuala Lumpur then.

Mud: Our story of Kuala Lumpur is the longest running musical in Kuala Lumpur; it will be staged till end-2017. There are two performances daily, at 15.00 and 20.30, except on the second and fourth Monday of the month.

This musical is the perfect post-lunch/dinner entertainment. If an afternoon show is chosen, the programme can include a horse carriage ride – provided the group size is small. The ride starts and ends at KL City Gallery, which is within walking distance to Panggung Bandaraya.

Drawn by Friesian horses, the carriages will take visitors past the old parts of the city, where buildings date back to the 1800s. Visitors will be able to see some of the architecture that will be featured in the musical. The ride lasts 20 minutes and a carriage can fit up to four people.

With advance bookings, Kuala Lumpur City Hall can prepare up to five carriages to take groups around at any one time.

{ Insider }

Ganneesh Ramaa, manager of Luxury Tours Malaysia, points out Malaysia's many attractions that delegates must experience

Diverse destinations

Malaysia has a lot to offer to visiting MICE delegates. There is an old world charm to experience in Penang and Malacca, beautiful beaches to play at in Langkawi, Terengganu and Sabah, and a lively city centre to explore in Kuala Lumpur. Good highways, rail and air links make travelling from one state to another easy.

Culture club

Explore cultural diversity in Malaysia by sampling different food and experiencing the way of life of locals. Homestay programmes allow delegates to spend a night with locals, while day trips to villages and longhouses promise memorable experiences for foreign delegates.

Be one with nature

Many opportunities for nature-based pre/post-show activities are on offer. For example, Forest Research Institute of Malaysia in Kepong is one of the top eco-tourism destinations in Malaysia, and offers the excitement of walking along a 150m canopy walkway, suspended 30m above the ground. Dark Cave in Batu Caves and Tempurong Cave in Gopeng, Perak are also waiting to be explored. For venues with a twist, planners can pick The Lost World of Tambun's 400 million-year-old Kepura Cave which can accommodate meetings. To escape the tropical heat, head up to Cameron Highlands and explore Endau-Rompin National Park on a four-wheel drive or bicycle.



Batu Caves

idambies/23RF.com

Checking in

Five-star, 250 rooms
Jalan Lapangan Terbang SAAS,
40150 Shah Alam, Selangor Darul Ehsan,
Malaysia
www.shr.my/the-saujana-hotel/

The Saujana Hotel Kuala Lumpur



The Saujana Hotel Kuala Lumpur is a gem. Following major refurbishments which completed in June, the almost 30 year-old hotel feels spanking new. It also scores on location, being accessible via the Federal Highway and the New Klang Valley Expressway.

Although it is a city hotel, I felt transported to a resort on a beautiful island, thanks to the lobby's high ceiling which brought a cool breeze through the reception area. This vision followed through to my deluxe room which offered views of the lake and free-form swimming pool. With views so tempting, I was glad I had my portable notebook with me, allowing me to write this review outdoors.

Meeting facilities There are nine meeting rooms and a ballroom at Block 1, while Block 2 features six meetings venues, all of which were renovated. In my view, they appeal to two types of planners.

For the planner who desires a stimulating environment for brainstorming, an air-conditioned meeting room with beautiful views of the lake may be ideal. There are three venues with such views. They are equipped with two 70-inch flat-screen TVs in each room, whiteboard, LCD projector and sound system. Delegates also get to enjoy the convenience of a well-stocked private minibar and charging stations for mobile devices.

For the planner who wants for a venue for solemn meetings, an enclosed environment would be more suitable and there are five venues to suit this need.

All meeting rooms sit on the ground floor and are close to the Saujana Ballroom which has a permanent stage and capacity for 700 pax in theatre-style. The entrance to the ballroom was renovated, now allowing cars to be easily driven in,

making the venue ideal for car launches.

Saujana Hotel & Resorts vice president of operations, Peter J Hourigan, told me that the hotel is keen on winning over car events "since many luxury automobile brands are located in the vicinity".

With 160 hectares of manicured gardens, there's ample space for outdoor teambuilding activities.

Rooms All 250 guestrooms were refurbished. I enjoyed the 50-inch flat-screen TV in my room and the iPod docking station on my bedside table. A free app, designed for use in the hotel and downloadable from Google Play Store, allowed me to project photos from my smartphone onto the TV, which was great.

My deluxe room was spacious, even with two super single beds, a comfortable lounge chair, a side table and a long work desk with a multimedia hub.

F&B Seven restaurants, each specialising in a different cuisine, provide variety for event delegates who are staying a few nights at the hotel.

Senja Italian restaurant has a live band playing every night, a lounge area, a cocktail bar and a dining area.

Charcoal opened last year, serving prime meats, quality seafood and a wide selection of Peranakan dishes. It has a private dining area for 60 pax.

Kogetsu features a classic Japanese countryside, complete with a shoji kitchen in the main area, separate sushi and teppanyaki counters for alternative seating options and three tatami rooms for private functions.

Other facilities Complimentary Wi-Fi is available for in-house guests throughout the resort. Free parking is offered too.

FACT FILE

Smallest venue

The Boardroom seats nine

Largest venue

The Saujana Ballroom takes 700 pax, theatre style

Events handled

Unilever (M) Holdings Series Training, 30 pax; Kuehne + Nagel Regional Talent Programme, 26 pax; The ARCADIS Asia Management Meeting 2015, 95 pax; La Farge Cement Industrial Workshop, 40 pax; Young Presidents Organisation board meeting, 15 pax

VERDICT



A convenient city hotel with a resort feel.

S Puvaneswary