

Fukuoka boasts strong MICE credentials, with major hotels, convention facilities and ample green spaces located in close proximity in its city centre



Fukuoka, Hasegawa/Corbis

Building a city brand

Conditions are ripe for MICE business to bloom in Fukuoka but the city must strengthen its presence and marketing efforts on the international stage, reports **Hannah Koh**

Mention “MICE in Japan” and travellers are more likely to conjure up images of a neon-lit Tokyo or a shrine-dotted Kyoto instead of the harbour city of Fukuoka, but the city’s MICE stakeholders beg to differ.

“Fukuoka lacks only its name value,” opined Shinji Nakagawa, executive director, Fukuoka Convention & Visitors Bureau (CVB) on Fukuoka’s 97th placing on the 2012 ICCA international survey of top association meeting cities, trailing behind Tokyo (31st) and Kyoto (36th).

Fukuoka logged 221 international conferences last year, second only to Tokyo, according to criteria set by the Japanese government, Nakagawa noted. “It proves Fukuoka has the potential to (attract more) ICCA criteria conferences

by boosting motivation of local conference organisers,” he added.

While Japan does not record MICE arrivals, the CVB said 90,000 international delegates travelled to Fukuoka in 2012 for conferences such as the Societe Internationale d’Urology Annual Congress (3,500 pax) and Universal Design International Conference (14,000 pax).

For Congress Corporation, a PCO specialising in medical conferences, its Kyushu branch handled 28 MICE events last year and 14 to date in 2013. Makiko Nishimura, executive director and head of Congress Corporation’s Kyushu office, added: “(Fukuoka) is a right-sized city for MICE – the convenience of mobility, coexistence of modern and ancient culture, nature and technology...and the

unique Hakata food culture (such as roadside food stalls and ramen)."

In addition, Fukuoka's consumer price index is 10 per cent lower than Tokyo, while major hotels, the CBD and convention zones are located within 2.5km of each other, said Nakagawa. And the southern city's proximity to East Asian cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Seoul, Busan and Taipei than Tokyo translates to direct flights shorter than two hours – a boon for international academic societies seeking to expand their Asian memberships, he explained.

Japan's recent visa waiver for Malaysian and Thai nationals is likely to yield positive effects for Fukuoka's MICE business too. "(The number of) incentive travellers from Thailand has shown an obvious increase in these five years," noted Nakagawa. "We are sure that the no-visa (policy) will accelerate a further increase in Thai arrivals."

Meanwhile, Miyuki Matsuda of Fukuoka Directive Council, a multi-sectoral body comprising 86 private and public companies dedicated to promoting Fukuoka as a regional MICE and business destination, pointed out that the newly opened Agora Hilltop Hotel & Spa (see next page) and Hilton Fukuoka Sea Hawk Hotel, which had renovated its top floors specially for MICE users, have ramped up the city's inventory of event venues featuring resort-style settings.

Having recorded 23 events last year and 21 so far this year, the 1,053-key Hilton Fukuoka Sea Hawk Hotel will also host 3,000 of the 25,000-30,000 delegates when the 2016 Lions Club International Congress unfolds in Fukuoka.

Although MICE business is "increas-



Shinji Nakagawa
Executive director
Fukuoka Convention & Visitors Bureau

"Fukuoka lacks only its name value...It has the potential to (attract more) conferences."

ing", there is still room to grow, according to a Hilton Fukuoka spokesperson. Taiwan and South Korea are the hotel's largest source markets, making up five per cent of international MICE, although South-east Asia registered "zero" per cent, he added.

Fukuoka has since stepped up its efforts to net more MICE business. Nakagawa revealed that the CVB was planning to review Fukuoka's existing MICE organiser support system, including subsidies. To tap the existing network of academic institutions within the 49-member strong Conference of Asian University Presidents – which Kyushu University inaugurated – Fukuoka is in discussion with CVBs from member countries to found a new alliance.

Since the establishment of the Kyushu Tourism Promotion Organization eight years ago, Fukuoka has cooperated with local governments to hold familiarisation trips. "Fukuoka city is organising fam trips for corporate incentives from Singapore, Thailand and Taiwan this autumn," said Nakagawa.

Furthermore, under Japan Tourism Agency's (JTA) Global MICE Strategic

Cities Project launched on June 28, Fukuoka was identified alongside Tokyo, Yokohama, Kyoto and Kobe as global MICE cities. These cities will receive JTA support in marketing research, strategy making, promotion efforts and seminars organised for local stakeholders. Gaining Edge, the project's appointed consulting company, also dispatches a Global MICE Advisor to each city.

Meanwhile, Fukuoka will also stand to benefit from the launch of JTA's nationwide MICE Ambassador Programme next year, which will leverage on key experts in each sector to lobby and bring new business events to the country.

But Fukuoka still needs to overcome its weaknesses. Asked what was lacking, Congress Corporation's Nishimura cited "Fukuoka's presence outside of Japan", strong competition from Shanghai, Singapore and Seoul, as well as the "pre-conceived notion of Japan being expensive compared with other Asian cities".

Nishimura also remarked that planners with no prior knowledge or contacts in Fukuoka would not find it easy to reach the city's sales office, documents needed for facility use or submit a request for proposal inquiry. "Conducting active marketing to MICE candidates in (key source countries) holds the key to success," she added.

To make Fukuoka better known as a MICE destination, both the public and private sectors should seek to raise the standards of English among staff, documents and websites; make direct sales calls by attending conferences or events of potential clients; and push for more direct flight links from Asian cities, industry stakeholders pointed out. ■

Ideas

Getting in touch with Mother Nature in Kyushu

Day 1

Following touchdown at Fukuoka Airport, head to the city of Dazaifu to visit the Dazaifu Tenmangu Shrine, designated an Important Cultural Property of Japan. After admiring the 6,000 plum trees scattered around the temple, delegates may tuck into local cuisine and shop for souvenirs at the nearby Tenjin-sama Street.

Post-lunch, a one-hour drive leads to Fukuoka's Kurume area, where delegates can gather fruits at local orchards and visit the Kyoho Winery or Benitome Brewery for shochu tasting. Drive to Beppu City for dinner and overnight stay.

Day 2

After breakfast, set off for Beppu Jigoku Meguri, home to eight hot springs each named after a version of hell, including Chinoike Jigoku or 'lake of blood hell' hot spring.

At the health-themed theme park of Aso Farmland, delegates are free to challenge the obstacle courses and games, unwind with a magma clay spa treatment (ladies only) or tuck into a hearty lunch of organic produce.

Then head to the largest active volcano in Japan, Mount Aso, before settling into a ryokan with a good dinner.

Day 3

In the morning, visit Kumamoto Castle, built in the early 17th century with curved stone walls and wooden overhangs to fend off ninjas.

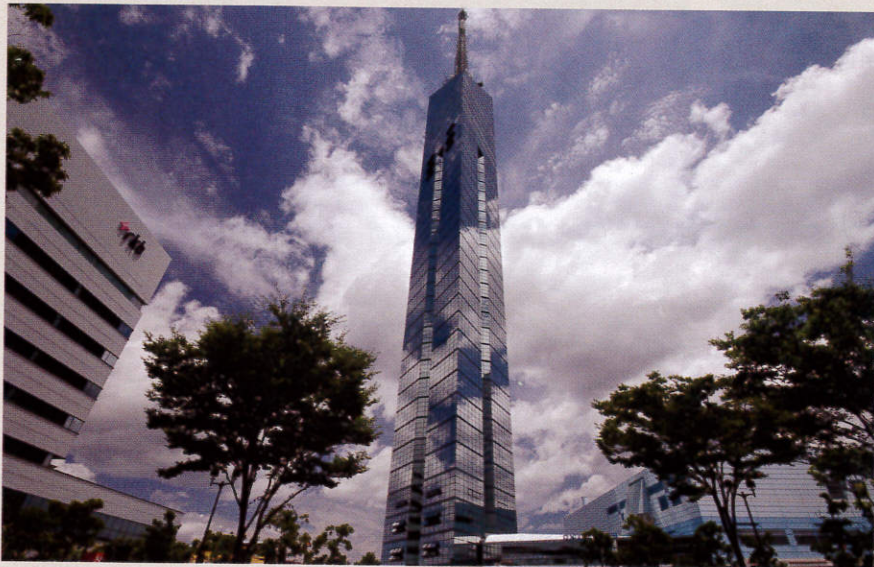
After lunch, a two-hour ride will take travellers back to Fukuoka City for shopping and sightseeing.

Day 4

Send your delegates off to Fukuoka Airport for their flight home.

Itinerary by Fukuoka Convention and Visitors Bureau

NEED TO KNOW



Scaling new heights in Fukuoka

Located in the Momochihama waterfront area, the 234m Fukuoka Tower is the tallest seaside tower in Japan with 8,000 half-mirrors at its triangular cross-section. A 70-second elevator ride will take visitors 123m above ground to the observation room, where 360-degree panoramic views of Hakata wharf, Mount Sefuri and Fukuoka city await. Admission is chargeable but group rates are available. Direct enquiries to (81-92) 823-0234.



A hilltop sanctuary in Fukuoka

Newly launched on September 1, the 48-room Agora Fukuoka Hilltop Hotel & Spa boasts an eye-catching, post-modernist design and a verdant hilltop location with panoramic views of the city.

Situated 30 minutes from Fukuoka airport, delegates can take a break from their busy schedules at the large natural hot-spring facility or the Hilltop Spa, where treatments can be

performed on an open-air sun deck. Other facilities include a library, gift shops, an open-air garden terrace and Japanese restaurant Koyomi.

Occupying the third to fifth floors, the Marcus Square Fukuoka features a bar, two wedding chapels and event spaces that are able to accommodate between 90 and 250 guests.

For reservations and inquiries, email info@agorafukuoka-hilltop.com.

A three-in-one MICE destination

Nestled by the waterfront in the city, Fukuoka Convention Center comprises three gargantuan meeting facilities: Fukuoka International Congress Center, Marine Messe Fukuoka and Fukuoka Kokusai Center. A new 5,000m² exhibition hall is slated to debut within the area in 2018.

Fukuoka International Congress Center offers a main hall that seats up to 3,000 pax and 1,875m² in additional conference spaces and meeting rooms. It is also connected via walkway to the adjacent 2,300-pax Fukuoka Sun Palace Hall. Marine Messe Fukuoka comes with over 9,000m² of floor space and a capacity of 15,000 pax, while the Fukuoka Kokusai Center offers 5,052m² in pillarless floor space and can hold up to 10,000 guests.

Visit www.marinemesse.or.jp for more details.

Swooping in on the MICE market

The 1,053-key Hilton Fukuoka Sea Hawk Hotel is the largest Hilton in Asia with some 6,000m² of meeting and event space. Accommodating up to 2,000 pax, the 2,559m² Argos convention hall can be divided into six areas and comes equipped with a simultaneous interpretation system supporting up to eight languages. Together with Nabi, located in front of Argos, the two venues can accommodate up to 3,500 delegates for a convention.

The adjacent Fukuoka Yahoo! Japan Dome – home stadium for the regional baseball team Fukuoka Softbank Hawks – is capable of holding up to 38,561 pax for concerts, exhibitions or mega conventions, and can be integrated with Hilton Fukuoka for events.

The hotel is currently offering a full-day meeting package, which includes room hire between 09.00 and 18.00, two coffee breaks, lunch and use of basic equipment meeting for groups of 30-100 pax.

Contact fukhi-salesadm@hilton.com for more information.



Luxury on rails in Kyushu

Come October 15, travellers can embark on a luxurious journey through the scenic landscapes of Kyushu on the *Seven Stars in Kyushu* train, which offers 12 suites and two deluxe suites for a maximum of 30 passengers per trip.

Clients can choose between a 4D3N or 2D1N itinerary, with the longer trip bundling a night's stay at some of the region's most exclusive ryokan and excursions to the Aso caldera or a traditional Kagoshima kiln.

Prices start at 155,000 yen (US\$1,556) per person for a 2D1N itinerary, based on a twin-sharing suite. Applications are now open for April-June 2014 departures. Charters can also be arranged but they must be booked one year in advance.

Email cruietrain@jrkyushu.co.jp for more information.