

Sarawak business event sector sprints ahead

- **Blending** creativity and leisure key to Sarawak Convention Bureau's success
- **Kuching** is now one of Asia-Pacific's main destinations for business events
- **Hospitality** industry also reaping the benefits



by
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BUSINESS events, which typically comprise meetings, incentives, conventions and exhibitions (MICE), are revenue-generating activities and competition is only getting stiffer.

According to Malaysia's Business Events Roadmap by the Malaysia Convention and Exhibition Bureau (MyCEB), business events have generated more than RM4 bil in the past five years.

While such events are mostly concentrated in Kuala Lumpur, other major cities in the country are fast catching up as well. In particular, Kuching in Sarawak is thriving in terms of business events and it is only getting started.

As a second-tier business event destination, Sarawak is fast becoming one of Asia-Pacific's preferred stops for such events and has brought more than RM504 mil to Sarawak's economy since it first started playing host more than a decade ago.

Sarawak Convention Bureau (SCB), which was established in 2006, has been instrumental in catapulting Sarawak's potential in the business event arena.

SCB has gone from providing professional advisory services to winning conference bids. Last year, the agency hit a significant

**Borneo Convention Centre
Kuching is the main venue for
business events in Sarawak**



milestone when the International Conference and Convention Association (ICCA) decided to hold its annual congress in Kuching. This made Sarawak the first second-tier stop ever to win the hosting rights.

In the first six months of this year, SCB brought 40 business events to Sarawak, resulting in about RM37 mil in direct delegate expenditure.

"Beyond the immediate RM50.4 mil revenue, there is a greater impact derived from business events over the long term especially for medicine, technology, science, and other advanced industries. Business events produce meaningful business relationships and international collaborations across a myriad of sectors," SCB chairman Datuk Seri Leo Michael Toyad said at the Redefining Global Tribes campaign recently.

The campaign was to create a stronger global identity by imprinting Sarawak's cultural values of community and unity on the event sector. The campaign gathered more than 100 delegates comprising senior members of national and international associations, academia, corporations and the media.

Strong identity as key success factor

According to SCB CEO Amelia Roziman, branding awareness is the greatest challenge. "This is also a playing field we use to raise our game and we push the envelope by constantly evolving in marketing creativity and keeping up with trends such as digital marketing," she says.

Amelia points out that SCB will have to constantly convince local as well as foreign agencies of the state's potential.

Sarawak has to ensure that its brand is dynamic, integrated and consistent and marries business events and leisure, says Amelia, adding that the government is addressing this with extensive studies.

"We do not view neighbouring states as competitors in the traditional sense. Each city promotes

the country and contributes to its ability to rise in the ICCA rankings.

"Kuala Lumpur offers the bright lights, big-city attraction that relatively new travellers may crave. Cities like Kuching, on the other hand, provide an unconventional and eclectic meeting experience filled with heritage, nature, culture and adventure, which is an incredibly appealing combination to the experienced business traveller," she adds.

On upcoming trends in

business events, Amelia says: "It is an exciting time to be part of business events. First, let me say meetings are the answer to almost everything. By everything, we include problem solving, nation building, alliances, sector growth, advances and exchange in education research and technology, cross-cultural rapport and more.

"We believe that face-to-face meetings will continue to flourish internationally despite issues such as technology creating alternatives to meetings by having visual platforms. (Then there are) global economic crises, travel hazards, and diseases. The number of meetings worldwide will hold or grow," she adds.

Improvement in infrastructure

Excellent facilities and infrastructure are a must for business event venues. SCB partners with various industry leaders in making Kuching a repeat destination.

"We have a vast array of venues to suit every meeting requirement, from international hotels to a state-of-the-art convention centre. Our prices for venues, food, rooms and tours are highly competitive. The current exchange rate makes our five-star hotels cost a fraction of the cost in other locations," Amelia says.

The main venue for business events in Kuching is Borneo Convention Centre Kuching (BCCK), which is equipped with four large halls, five function rooms, 14 meeting rooms and a catamaran. BCCK, which can accommodate up to 4,500 people in its main hall and hosted a total of 220 events

last year, won the Asia-Pacific conference venue of the year award last year.

BCCK CEO Eric Van Piggelen stresses that staff training is a critical area in handling business event venues and firmly believes that it pays to upgrade the skills and knowledge of his team.

A company that is quick to notice Sarawak's business event potential is the UCSI group, which built a university as well as a hotel adjacent to BCCK.

Datuk Peter Ng, founder and CEO of UCSI, says the company is confident that the newly-built UCSI University and Hotel Kuching will bring in about RM600,000 in revenue monthly. The complex costs about RM125 mil to build.

Other major hotels such as Hilton and Pullman are also targeting business events to get more guests to stay.

In terms of connectivity, the Sarawak government is working to have more direct flights from major destinations, especially China. FocusM



Amelia says branding awareness is the greatest challenge for Sarawak Convention Bureau