

AIPC MEMBERS SPEAK MEETINGS IN AFRICA LEAVE A LEGACY

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Until recently, the number of international meetings taking place in Africa has been limited; while Africa counts for 14% of the global population, it only hosts 2% of international meetings. However, there are now signs that this is changing.

Approximately half of all international non-government events are so-called world meetings which tend to include all continents as hosts on a rotational basis. In the past, more frequently than not, the African continent was skipped in rotation schedules.

One of the more obvious reasons was because African membership in international organizations was underrepresented; most African countries are part of the developing world and a lack of resources has made it difficult for them to play an active role on the international stage. Another valid reason was the lack of good meeting facilities in Africa; until a few years ago, the continent only counted a few 'international' convention centres and these were not always in sought-after locations. Travelling times and international airfare costs created additional obstacles. At the same time, there was a global perception of risks associated with holding a meeting in Africa, from primitive healthcare to overall safety and security.

However, these arguments against meeting in Africa are steadily disappearing. The rebirth of South Africa 13 years ago and the construction of new convention centres have been the most important contributors to this phenomenon; the opening of the Cape Town International Convention Centre (CTICC) in 2003, in particular, brought Africa much closer to the rest of the world.

Last year the CTICC hosted no less than 46 international conventions - one third of all international meetings on the continent. Clearly, there was a pent-up demand from international associations which had been waiting to offer memberships their first African experience, and as soon as decent meeting facilities were available, the international clientele reviewed earlier obstacles and found them far less relevant than originally perceived.

Africa, and particularly South Africa, has an increasingly professional meeting infrastructure; not only purposely built state-of-the-art venues, but also a wide range of DMC's, PCO's, supportive airlines, and business and leisure accommodation. Safety and security can be an issue, but with the right precautions this is no more serious than in many other cities. Access also has become less of a problem given that for many travelers Africa is a mere overnight flight away, without disruptive time differences.

Healthcare in several African countries is on a par with European countries; wild animals disappeared long ago from the streets and tropical diseases are a manageable risk. Most importantly, international organizations enjoy the membership of an increasing number of Africans, proudly representing their countries.

AIPC members in Egypt, Kenya, Morocco, South Africa, Tanzania and Zimbabwe benefit from the new trends which have brought Africa into the picture. The investment made in hotel accommodation in recent years has lured delegates into extended stays for pre- and post-conference programmes. Rising business levels have also seen PCO's and other convention service providers establish operations across the whole continent.

As a result, managing an event in Africa is no more challenging today than elsewhere.

As well as the financial benefits of an African experience there is a feel good effect: that of making a real difference to a continent in development and to the livelihoods of the people of the host city and country. It is widely known that international convention centres contribute substantially to their local economies. This is even more so in Africa where (business) tourism is one of the fastest growing sectors of the economy. In South Africa tourism today is even more important than the traditional mining sector. For example, the 46 international conferences that took place last year at the CTICC made it possible for this convention centre to create 3800 direct and 5300 indirect jobs in Cape Town and the Western Cape, and the centre contributed no less than 2.4 billion Rand (250 million Euro) to the South African GDP. The CTICC since it opened in 2003, has trained more than 1500 temporary employees, and some 79% of these have gone on to find permanent positions elsewhere, benefiting the wider hospitality industry.

It is this kind of legacy that organizations contribute to in bringing their meetings to Africa. Along with the enhanced experience for delegates, they provide a tangible and enriching spin-off for their hosts!

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