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Time for... Istanbul

CHRISTY WYATT, 02 March 2010

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The city that straddles two continents is this year's European Capital of Culture.



- Why Istanbul?

With its reputation as a melting pot of culture and history, a wealth of luxury venues and its new crown as Capital of Culture for 2010, the question is perhaps why not? There are 34 five-star hotels in Istanbul, and no shortage of investment to refurbish and restore, with more properties set to open over the next few years.

- Getting there

In November, Turkish Airlines launched direct flights from Stansted to Sabiha Gokcen Airport, where a new terminal opened in October 2009, doubling its annual passenger capacity to 25 million.

- Where to stay

The Hyatt Regency Istanbul was upgraded to a Grand Hyatt in December, and offers 1,507m2 of function space with 13 meeting rooms. Trendsetters should try the 136-room W Istanbul, set among the boutiques of Akaretler Row. For traditional opulence, the 115-room Pera Palace reopens in April after a renovation. If CSR is on the agenda, try the 19-room Five Boutique Hotel, which claims to be the city's first organic hotel. The 231-room Divan Istanbul Asia opened in November with a 1,300m2 gym and spa, and extensive meeting space. The Divan Istanbul Hotel reopens later this year.

- Where to meet

Aside from the city's hotels, delegates can also gather at the £139m Istanbul Congress Centre, which opened last September close to the Istanbul Convention & Exhibition Centre. The venue has already hosted the 2009 Annual Meetings of the Boards of Governors of the World Bank and the IMF. Meeting space includes a 3,500-seat auditorium. To make a lasting impression, the Ciragan Palace Kempinski's opulent meeting rooms are hard to beat.

- Incentive ideas

As European Capital of Culture, the city is hosting a variety of events throughout the year. Highlights include the opening of the Museum of Innocence in the summer. A classic itinerary should include historic favourites such as tours of the Blue Mosque and Hippodrome, Hagia Sophia Museum, the bustling bazaars, and a Bosphorus cruise.

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- Where to eat and drink

The Istanbul Sapphire, billed as the city's tallest and only green building, opened in February and offers a terrace 236 metres up and a restaurant. If a traditional experience fits the bill, up to 450 delegates can enjoy a colourful dining experience at Beyti Restaurant, which offers marinated, charcoal-grilled meats amid Ottoman architecture. There is also the option to hold a gala dinner for 2,000 in the Grand Bazaar along with authentic Ottoman cuisine and entertainment from folk musicians, folk dancers and belly dancers. Meanwhile, Lacivert offers fine dining alongside the Bosphorus, and specialises in seafood.

DIRECTORY

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HINTS AND TIPS

- DMCs include MEP Destination Management and ODS Turkey
- Istanbul is two hours ahead of GMT
- UK passport holders can obtain multiple-entry, three-month visas at the Turkish frontier.

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