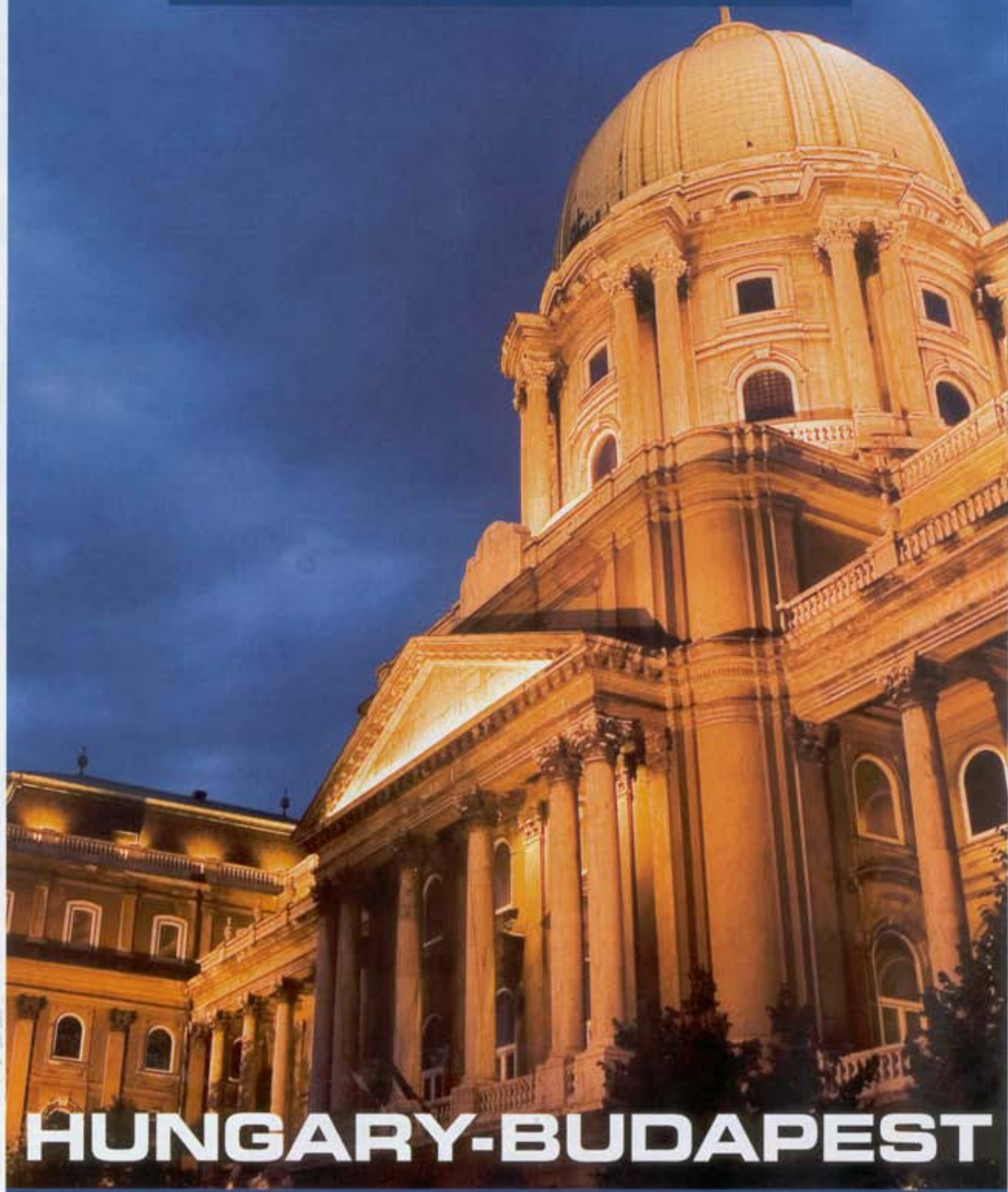


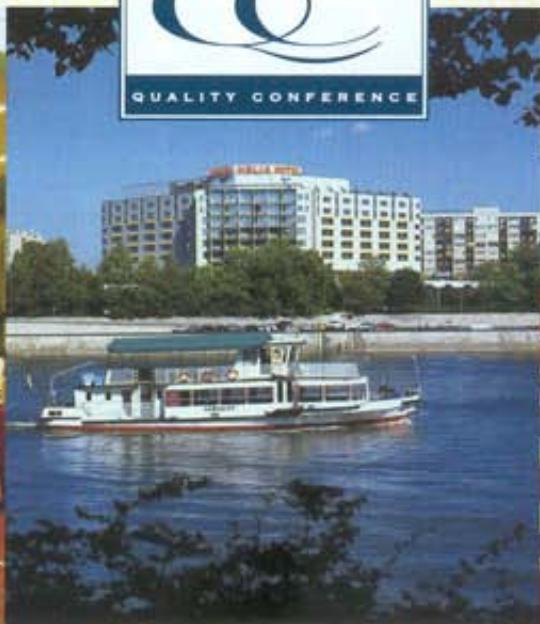
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City lights: Veszprem is just one of Hungary's cities awaiting discovery



Blue Danube: beyond the capital, Hungary has much to admire



Esterházy Castle is just one example of Hungary's many architectural treasures that can be made available to visiting C&I groups

NATIONWIDE APPEAL

With Budapest an established C&I centre, the aim now is to highlight the rest of the country

CONTENTS

4 Budapest

The capital is doing much to build on its fine reputation

6 Conventions

Across the country, venues are honing their offer to the market

10 Microsoft in the capital

The software giant spent two rewarding days in Budapest

12 Pécs and Lake Balaton

While Balaton is the jewel, other destinations are sparkling

14 Sample itinerary

A taste of the incentive offer

Written by Adam Woods. Designed by Phil Heard. This supplement is sponsored by the Hungarian National Tourist Office and published as a supplement to Conference & Incentive Travel, Haymarket Marketing Publications Ltd, 174 Hammersmith Road, London W6 7JP

The ICCA statistics for 2006 were still two months away at the time of writing, but Budapest, a fixture in the worldwide top ten since 2002, has good reason to believe that the past year has been another good one.

According to the Hungarian National Tourist Office's own figures, the number of international conferences held in Hungary increased by 26.7 per cent in 2006, and though Budapest took three-quarters of that total, the news was pretty good right across the board, and there's more to come.

The development of Budapest has rarely slowed since the end of Communism in 1989 and was further accelerated by the country's accession into the European Union in 2004. But in 2007, the list of MICE-related projects in the pipeline for cities such as Debrecen and Pécs and the tourist area around Lake Balaton is easily a match for the capital's own building programme.

It is a mark of Budapest's maturity as an international destination that the Hungarian Convention Bureau (HCB) is working increasingly hard to

boost the profile of Hungary's other key cities and regions. Hungary was ranked 20th in the ICCA's worldwide list of the most popular countries for international meetings in 2005, while Budapest broke into the top ten cities, being ranked in eighth.

But according to HCB manager Vera Balás, the aim over the coming years is to introduce the international MICE community to the delights of rural Hungary, not at the expense of Budapest, but as a means of growing the country's overall conference and meetings business.

"According to our quarterly MICE statistics, 75 per cent of international conferences take place in Budapest – and that is what we want to change," says Balás. "While a 50:50 split is a bit unrealistic for the coming years, 60:40 would be good."

A major focus is the city of Pécs, which will be a European City of Culture in 2010 and consequently will spend the next two years modernising its MICE and tourism infrastructure.

Pécs certainly has plenty to say for itself – part of its centre is already a World Heritage Site, thanks to its early Christian ruins.

Other destinations already offer significant conference infrastructure, currently in use largely by Hungarian companies. The past year has seen the arrival of major new conference hotels in Debrecen, the country's second city, and Balatonfüred, on the northern shore of the beautiful resort of Lake Balaton.

Meanwhile, Budapest continues to up its game, with the arrival last year of another remarkable five-star restoration in the shape of Boscolo's New York Palace, to add to the celebrated Gresham Palace Four Seasons.

The promise of a wave of boutique hotels, spearheaded by a new Baglioni wellness hotel and Lánchíd 19, a new Design Hotel in the shadow of the Buda Royal Castle, is a mark of a city which has long since completed the first phase of its MICE development and is now focusing on introducing new layers of luxury. □



City view: the mighty Danube splits the city into two distinct regions – Buda and Pest – and both have much to offer



The Corinthia: one of 14 five-stars



New York Palace: back in style

BUDAPEST ON THE UP

Budapest is creeping up the ICCA rankings, and its 14 five-star hotels are just one reason why

Over the past few years, Budapest has cemented its status alongside Vienna and Prague, as one-third of the great triumvirate of Central European city destinations. Since entering the top ten in the ICCA rankings in 2005, its MICE revenues have grown steadily and new developments continue to add to its appeal.

The opening of the Boscolo New York Palace a year ago gave Budapest its 14th five-star destination hotel to add to the carefully reconstructed Four Seasons Gresham Palace. Meanwhile, whispers on the hotel industry grapevine are pointing to a probable surge in the number of boutique hotels in the next year or two (see box) – a further indication of a city preparing to move up a gear.

"We changed everything 18 years ago," says Tamás Flesch, managing director of established local DMC Continental Travel and co-owner of

the new Best Western Premier Hotel Parliament. "If I were foreign, I would invest in Budapest now, because it is one of the best cities in Eastern Europe and in ten to 15 years, the face of the city will be very different."

The volume of conference business rose by more than 25 per cent in Hungary last year, according to the Hungarian National Tourist Office, with 75 per cent of that traffic coming directly to the capital. Accordingly, the city's infrastructure continues to reinforce its reputation. Of Hungary's 18 five-star hotels, Budapest claims 14, with well over 20,000 five-star and four-star beds in total.

"It is growing, it has grown and it will grow," says Sheryn Bates, director of marketing at the Four Seasons Gresham Palace. "Prague has been out there as the most

popular Central European destination, but Budapest has, I think, more to offer. We are probably five years behind Prague. Will we catch up? Yes, we will."

In MICE terms, though the staple C&I groups remain the automotive, pharmaceutical, IT, banking and insurance sectors, there are clear signs that the calendar is shifting towards a more year-round model.

"There is no clear high-season anymore," agrees Judit Denés, sales manager at the Kempinski Hotel Corvinus which, alongside its next door neighbour, Le Méridien, remains arguably the city's busiest conference hotel.

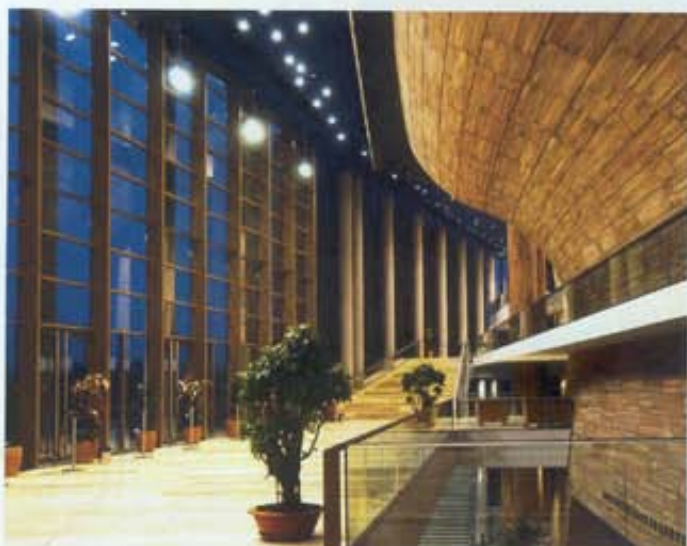
Anecdotally, most MICE professionals express a belief that 2007 will see an upturn from 2006, citing the healthy bookings already taken. "This year, we have had bookings from two or three large



Gellert: famous spa is a great venue



Hungarian National Theatre: another state-of-the-art venue for the city, enhancing its congress credentials



Palace of the Arts: the contemporary venue can seat 1,800 in its main hall



Le Méridien: popular for meetings

BOUTIQUE HOTELS

"If you look towards the start of 2009, you will see 15 or 20 more small, design hotels in the city," says Tamás Flesch, co-owner of the Best Western Premier Hotel Parliament, who is building a boutique hotel of his own in Budapest's Eighth District. "We need that," he adds, "because small incentive groups want small, design hotels."

Such predictions are striking, given that Budapest's first boutique hotels are only starting to open now. The four-star, 74-room Zara Hotel Boutique is the first of a number planned by the local company, while the Atrium Hotel, which opened in March under the Mellow Mood Group, is the city's Fashion Hotels property.

Meanwhile, a first Design Hotel, the 45-room Lánchíd 19, has been built from scratch by newcomer Duna Resort Group on the Buda side of the river, with views of the Parliament building across the river.

"Rooms either face the Danube or the castle," says Lánchíd 19 sales manager András Bányász. "It is perfect for small incentive groups."

Armed with dozens of interesting features, including its own wine range and a façade covered with moveable glass panels, controlled by a meteorological sensor on the roof, Lánchíd 19 has three conference rooms and is certainly unlike anything Budapest currently offers.

groups," says Flesch, who brought in a party of 500 AstraZeneca staff from France in March and will welcome a 400-strong Honda delegation in September.

Given the number of construction projects pending, a significant increase in visitor numbers in the coming years is both desirable and inevitable. The New York Palace is currently Budapest's star building, just as it was at the end of the 19th Century, when its spectacular café was a hub of high society.

Reopened in May 2006 as the staggeringly ornate adjunct to the otherwise Venetian-style 112-room hotel, the café is unrecognisable from its Communist-era incarnation, when its eye-popping ceiling frescoes, now painstakingly restored, were painted over in drab tones.

A conference centre for 500 people is planned for behind the hotel - a first

The opening of the Boscolo New York Palace gave Budapest its 14th five-star hotel, to add to the carefully reconstructed Four Seasons Gresham Palace. Now the boutique hotel sector is set to blossom

for a Boscolo - though according to New York Palace MICE sales manager Timea Paragi, the new development is still a couple of years away.

In the meantime, Budapest is expecting numerous other major developments. In addition to Baglioni's planned five-star hotel on

the site of the historic Rác thermal baths near the Elizabeth Bridge, another five-star development is planned for the old Ballet Institute, backed by a private Israeli group.

The same investors are behind the so-called Dream Island project, which will bring new hotels and a large new conference centre to Óbuda Island in the northern part of Budapest (see box, overleaf). One more five-star hotel has been mooted for the Ministry of the Interior building next door to the Four Seasons, though plans are not yet firm.

Budapest currently enjoys a satisfying balance between supply and demand, and though the ongoing flood of new hotels will drive business overall, there may be lean years for some operators in the medium-term. "In 2009, 2010, I think we will start

to have some problems selling hotel rooms, because we will have too many," says Flesch. "It was the same situation in the 1980s in Vienna - it takes a while to get the balance."

Like any fast-growing city, Budapest still has certain key items on its to-do list. The absence of a congress centre has been much debated, and though a site near the Palace of Arts to the south of Pest has been presented to the country by Sandor Demjan, head of Hungarian property development giant TriGranit, construction has yet to begin.

Elsewhere, however, construction has been progressing as rapidly as investment will allow. The Best Western Premier Hotel Parliament opened in March 2006 in the heart of Budapest, with 65 rooms and a specific business brief, and picked up a Budapest Architectural Award for its renovation of a historic building. ▶



Luxury status: the Four Seasons Gresham Palace Hotel is one of the city's established five-star properties



Imperial past: the Royal Palace



Budapest World Trade Center: the Novotel's congress offer is back on stream after a refurbishment

DREAM ISLAND

In October, Israeli property investor Elbit Medical Imaging, through its Plaza Centers subsidiary, was granted approval for a development that will transform one of the oldest parts of northern Budapest. The island of Obuda is already known as the location of the huge Sziget music and culture festival, which brings in almost 400,000 visitors each year. The development of a 320,000m² site is expected to bring as many as ten three-star and five-star hotels, plus four apartment hotels, a casino, retail space, leisure facilities, a yacht harbour and a conference centre for up to 3,500 visitors. Construction has already begun on the project, which will take five to six years and will require a total investment of around €1.5bn.

For those who enjoy river views, Accor's smart new Novotel Danube, which caters largely to the business market and, along with the Kempinski, is one of the first hotels in Budapest to offer free high-speed internet in every one of its 175 rooms, is an ideal option.

In terms of its larger-scale conference facilities, Budapest has added one new and one refurbished medium-sized venue to its offer in the past year. Hunguest Hotels' Europa Congress Center, which is attached to both the four-star Aparthotel Europa and the three-star Hotel Rege, joins the roster, while the Budapest Congress and World Trade Center, part of the Novotel Budapest Congress rejoins the fray with a new look.

The Hungarian National Tourist Office has seen changes of its own in recent

months, having moved its UK and Ireland director Balázs Szócs back to base to take up the role of marketing director for the organisation as a whole. A replacement is being sought and, until then, a temporary director, Szabolcs Patai, will head up the London office until mid-July, when a permanent appointment is expected.

In the meantime, the HNTO's marketing activity rolls on. Each year, the Hungarian Convention Bureau, operating within the HNTO, brings 60 to 80 buyers to the Business Travel Show, which will stage its fifth annual event this autumn.

This year will also see further fam trips for between ten and 30 people, including one organised in conjunction with the Kempinski.

The three-year-old Conference Ambassador Programme operated by

the HNTO has helped to bring 35 international conferences to Hungary.

"We identify international associations with European members and encourage Hungarian professionals to act as ambassadors in their own fields," says HCB manager Vera Balás. "The aim is to bring as many international conferences to Hungary as we possibly can." □

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HUNGARY MEETINGS

While Budapest welcomes a new venue, the regions are preparing for congress business

The past year has seen the arrival of two new conference facilities in Budapest.

The Budapest Congress and World Trade Center is actually a comprehensively refurbished incarnation of the former Budapest Congress Center; but whereas the venue's drab interiors were previously only likely to draw local business, its €8m refit is bright and airy and offers the largest conference room in Hungary with its 1,800-capacity auditorium, and a further 18 break-out rooms and a 900m² exhibition hall.

Hunguest Hotels' Europa Congress Center is likewise just a year old, but offers nine rooms and some interesting features, including a lawned roof, which can be used for outdoor events, and a pool on the basement level of the building's atrium, over which catwalks have been erected for fashion shows.



Europa Congress Center: one year old

Set in the Buda Hills, this modern venue's biggest space can hold up to 500 delegates theatre-style in its plenary space, and there are a further eight conference rooms available for groups.

Meanwhile, the building complex of ELTE is situated on the Lágymányos bank of the Danube, just a few minutes from the city centre.

The building, which has 86 rooms for hire, is excellent for big events from conferences, exhibitions and congresses to large banquets. The largest hall has capacity for 1,100 delegates.

Facilities include projector, overhead-projector, video, speakers, tape recorder, projection screen, facilities for 400 interpreters, stage, separate phone and internet access. If the weather is nice, the

1,500m² roof terrace is also available for events.

For those who are after something a little different, The Europa Conference Boat in Budapest is a unique venue with capacity for up to 800 people, while out of town, there are also a range of conference venues. These include the Hotel Eger & Park, in Northern Hungary, with capacity for up to 750, the Kolcsey Convention Centre in Debrecen has room for 1,170 in its main room, while the Hungary-Pecs Expo Center has capacity for 1,200.

The Lake Balaton region also offers several venues suitable for large groups including the Balaton Congress Center in Keszthely with capacity for 500, while the North Balaton Regional Conference Center in Balatonfüred, on the northern part of the lake has a large hall that can accommodate up to 1,200 people. □

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A river runs through it: during their stay, Microsoft delegates took to the Danube on the Europa for a floating component to the two-day conference

MICROSOFT AFLOAT

The IT behemoth gathered in Budapest for a two-day meeting with entertainment on the river

Among Budapest's great strengths is the mighty river which separates the two very different halves of the city, with the great Art Nouveau boulevards of Pest on the eastern bank and the rolling hills of Buda to the west. Microsoft took full advantage of the delights of the Danube when it used the river as the gala dinner venue for a gathering of 350 international staff in October last year.

Basing themselves for two days in the Kempinski and Le Méridien – two adjacent hotels which frequently co-host larger groups, the Microsoft delegation took to the river for its second night on the *Europa*, a floating restaurant and more besides.

"The boat is absolutely huge," says Paul Browne, event producer at JB Events, the Wokingham-based event management company which oversaw the trip. "It has got three or four decks and a swimming pool.

They enjoyed that greatly, and we had a disco for them and some roulette tables."

The focus of the conference was a technical orientation for Microsoft staff from across the EMEA region, and by Browne's account the Kempinski bent over backwards to adapt its business centre to the group's needs.

Each of the two days of the event began with a full-group meeting preceded by a percussion ice-breaker – with an African drum for every delegate. The group then split into plenary sessions, before coming together again.

"We had 15 minutes to clear all the drums away and divide the main room up, and we were really pushed, so we asked the hotel if they could help, and they provided ten guys to help with the changeover at really very short

notice," says Browne.

Browne gives full credit to the Kempinski for their role in an event which, for entirely unrelated reasons, almost never happened. Clashes between riot police and right-wing demonstrators were anticipated and the trip was almost called off.

The domestic political temperature was running unusually high at the time, but this was a rare outbreak of internecine politics that did little to detract from the positive experience the group enjoyed.

"We were a little concerned, because there was a bit of angst about the political situation at the time," says Browne. "We would have walked the delegates down to the jetty from the Kempinski, but we couldn't take any chances, so we hired coaches. In the event, nothing happened and there were no problems at all." □



Kempinski: base for half the group



NEW YORK PALACE BUDAPEST

Budapest is one of the most beautifully situated cities in the world. A wonderful rich mixture of civilisations and cultures. The city is known as the "Paris of the East" for its refined bustling. Generations of writers, painters and artists have inhaled the intoxicating scent of Budapest drawing inspiration from it in the creation of their unique works.

A tribute to the history of the capital of the ancient Magyar empire, to its architectural beauty and its cultural heritage, but also a unique and refined model of Italian life-style which shows the Boscolo philosophy of hospitality. That's the New York Palace aim.

Thanks to the Group and the activity of the Hungarian artists working on the project, the building has been reborn to its original splendour ready to delight all Budapest's residents and visitors alike. The project of renovating the building also involved the most famous café of the East Europe: The New York Café. A place frequented by leading personalities of the art and the literature scene from around the world in the beginning of the 20th century has been returned to its former glory.

This 5 stars Hotel has 100 rooms in the historic part of the building, with 2 Royal Suites, 73 Suites and 25 Deluxe rooms. All rooms are a symbol of the highest standard of quality in terms of material and furnishing. The new and modern integrated part of the building includes a further 80 residential apartments and 80 deluxe category rooms.

The main part of the rebuilding project concerns the interior design of the meeting and conference area, which will be located both in the old and new structures, covering an overall area of 1900 square metres. Situated on the first floor of the hotel, the VIP Lounge, breakfast or banqueting hall and 1 large and 3 smaller Conference rooms each hold the most up-to-date audio-visual equipment, such as DVD, wireless internet connection, direct telephone line, screens and projectors. They are appropriate to arrange any kind of meeting, conference, training program, cocktail parties or business dinner.

The seating capacity of the breakfast hall is that of 80 persons or 120 - 150 persons for a standing reception. The VIP Lounge with its Business Centre offers a perfect location for press conferences, presentations and meetings for 12-15 persons completed by a smaller Coffee Lounge.

The Conference Centre accommodating a maximum of 225 persons is made up of 1 large room and holds the special capacity of transforming into 3 smaller rooms. As a bonus, two of these small rooms can be individually separated allowing for smaller meetings though with a communal Foyer between them.

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THE REGIONAL SCENE

Pécs' Cultural Capital status and Balaton's popularity are fuelling new C&I developments

The Transdanubian city of Pécs in the south-west of the country will assume the mantle of European Capital of Culture in 2010 – one of three for that year, alongside Istanbul and Essen in Germany.

The designation rotates around key cities of Europe, and Pécs may be one of the more obscure places to receive the honour, but there is nothing random about the choice. Pécs is rich in medieval history, but it also boasts ancient ruins dating back to 4,000BC and its early Christian cemeteries are the reason parts of Pécs have been designated as a Unesco World Heritage Site.

All this culture, and a thriving annual national theatre festival (POSZT), does not automatically make for a MICE destination, and the city –

Hungary's fifth-largest, after Budapest, Debrecen, Miskolc and Szeged – will have to work hard over the coming years to ensure it is ready for its time in the spotlight that the EU honour will bring.

Because it is going to be the European Capital of Culture, it has to be improved in many ways," says Hungarian Convention Bureau manager Vera Balas. "It has very few hotels – for example, there are no five-star properties, no four-stars and only a dozen three-star properties with limited conference facilities. To be honoured with such prestige, new hotels will have to be constructed."

Hotels are not to be the only focus for fresh investment in Pécs. The

runway at Pécs-Pogány airport, currently only 1,500 metres long, is due to be extended by a further 640 metres by 2009, which will enable it to receive low-cost carrier planes in time for 2010.

With preparations such as these, Pécs may yet develop the same kind of profile as the better known Lake Balaton. It is no exaggeration to describe Lake Balaton as the pride of Hungary, and the default holiday destination for large parts of the population of Budapest.

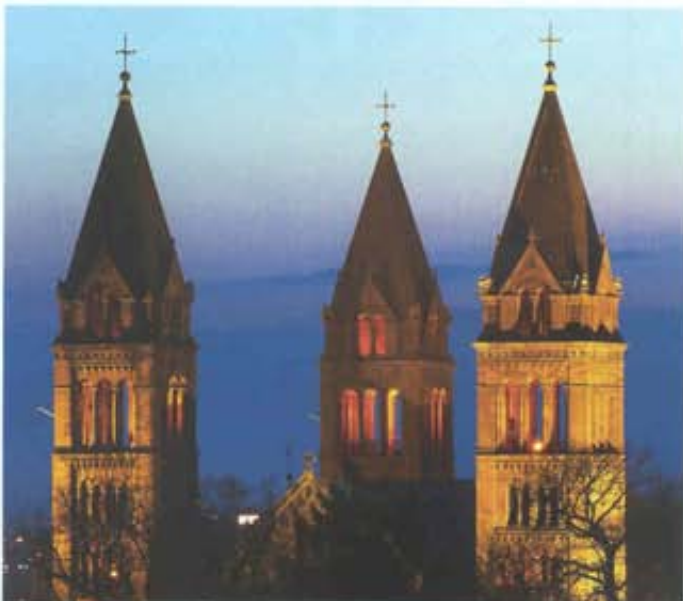
Not only is this the largest fresh-water lake in Central Europe, it is also the second most popular tourist spot in the country, after the capital, but that doesn't necessarily mean its international profile is nearly as high as the tourist office would like.



Lake Balaton: sailing and meetings



Barrels of fun: the famed wines from the Tokaj region are part of the tourist board's plans to develop a focus on gastronomy



Pécs: the city is rich in history, with some remains dating back to 4,000BC



Kölcsey Convention Centre: the Debrecen venue can host 1,170 delegates

Balaton and the Hungarian countryside in general are Hungary's secret weapons, in Balás' view, and she believes their time is coming. "To bring people to the authentic Hungary, you have to bring them to the countryside – to Balaton and the Great Plain [the vast basin which occupies the southern and eastern part of the country], for example."

Around Balaton, the pace of development is particularly intense. Balatonfüred, a town set in the hilly area on the northern shore, is the site of several new hotels with substantial conference facilities.

The four-star Silver Resort Conference and Wellness Hotel offers 56 rooms, 40 suites and a 140-delegate meeting room, plus spa facilities and four swimming pools.

With our regional incentives, we want to combine the different aspects of Hungarian tourism – gastronomy, wine and health'

Vera Balás, manager, Hungarian Convention Bureau

The 210-room Ramada Baiaton has two executive floors, with panoramic views of Balaton itself and conference facilities for 700.

For more select groups, the Hertelendy Mansion Hotel, just south of Balaton, is a grand, Habsburg-era mansion with its own golf course and conference facilities for 80. Set in

forests rich with game, it has recently been restored to five-star standard.

Balaton is a two-hour drive from Budapest, and its airport, Fly Balaton – Hungary's first regional airport – is served by Ryanair flights from Stansted, and there are services from Zurich and numerous German cities.

For groups who take the trouble, the difference in atmosphere in Hungary's rural areas compared to its bustling metropolis is vast. "With our regional incentives, we want to combine the different aspects of Hungarian tourism – gastronomy, wine and health," says Balás.

Hungary's key wine-producing centre is Tokaj, which has just built a new conference centre of its own, in a converted synagogue in the town,

Another key regional development is the major new convention centre in the second city of Debrecen, which opened in early 2006. The Kölcsey Convention Centre's plenary room can take up to 1,170 delegates, making it one of Hungary's largest, and the four-star Hotel Lycium attached to the centre offers spa facilities and 88 rooms, rising to 158 by early 2008.

Meanwhile, the Lázár Equestrian Park, a well known incentive stop in the countryside near Budapest, plans to expand its offering with the addition of a four-star hotel and dining facilities for up to 200 guests. A 70°C natural hot spring was recently discovered in the area surrounding the park, so the proposed Lázár Equestrian Village can be expected to offer spa facilities. □



Getting back to nature: the great outdoors is one of Hungary's specialities with its outstanding countryside



Riding skills: always impressive



Handicrafts: gets groups involved

INCENTIVE ITINERARY

A four-day regional incentive programme showcasing Hungary, supplied by Continental Travel

Day 1

Delegates arrive in Budapest for lunch in the Castle District on the Buda side. Restaurants such as Rivalda and Alabárdos offer panoramic views from this historic area across the whole city.

Depart for two-hour transfer to the south-west part of Hungary.

Dinner and accommodation in the Count Apponyi Castle Hotel, a 300 year-old baroque castle in Hőgyész with Turkish baths and a wellness centre offering treatments, including red wine baths and caffeine body-shaping.

Day 2

A two-hour Trabant rally through the countryside, exploring the area and its traditions in Soviet-era cars.

The group bakes the bread for its own lunch in the old mill at the Folklor-house in Orfő and follows it

with a barbecue in the garden.

Afterwards, they enjoy a presentation of 10th-century equestrian traditions and an archery show on the meadow in front of the medieval church.

The group moves on to the city of Pécs and explores it on a two-hour, team-building treasure hunt. The city has a medieval cathedral, an early-Christian chapel and Turkish mosques, having been occupied by the Turkish empire for 150 years in the 16th and 17th centuries.

A wine-tasting game is followed by dinner in the Villány wine region, before a return for an overnight at the Apponyi Castle Hotel.

Day 3

The group makes the one-hour drive to Lake Balaton by coach

The group takes a boat-cruise on the lake with a glass of champagne and afterwards see the pretty village of

Tihany from a miniature train. Teams then make their own hand-crafted souvenirs after a demonstration of local handicrafts in traditional 19th Century fishermen's houses.

Lunch in the St Donát wine cellar on the hill, with beautiful views towards Lake Balaton.

A visit to the Herend china workshop, with the opportunity to work with the craftsmen to make china of their own

Dinner with a traditional dance show, before retiring to the Balaton Ramada hotel by the lake

Day 4

Day four kicks off with a team-building adventure programme in the countryside, including a GPS treasure hunt with jeeps, quads and bobcats, followed by a picnic lunch at the neo-gothic castle in Nádaslady. Afternoon: transfer to the airport.



Hollókő: World Heritage site

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