

Meeting *demand*

Bangkok's events offerings are multiplying as the city looks to grow in this lucrative sector, writes Craig Bright

This year is set to be a good one for Bangkok's MICE sector. The Thai capital currently has a slew of venue and accommodation offerings, with eight exhibition centres, more than 60 convention facilities, over 20 unique venues and in excess of 400 hotels, according to the Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau (TCEB). But in December last year, TCEB launched its 2017 MICE Development Plan, aiming to attract a total of 27.1 million MICE travellers over the year. Luckily, event planners will find a lot on offer in the country, particularly in Bangkok.

LARGE-SCALE VENUES

Among the largest venues in the city is the Bangkok International Trade and Exhibition Centre (BITEC) in Bangna district, which has undergone a massive expansion since 2013, culminating in the recent opening of 32,000 sqm of new event facilities. The expanded space was unveiled in November last year, when the Grand Metalex 2016 – organised by Reed Tradex – became the first event to utilise all of BITEC's ten event halls. The venue has effectively doubled in size, from 38,000 sqm to 70,000 sqm, making it one of the largest venues in Southeast Asia.

"Our expansion will provide more opportunities for customers with the increase in available space and dates," says Panittha Buri, director of BITEC.

"When BITEC first opened its doors in 1997, Reed Tradex was our first customer with 'The World of Technology', an exhibition that covered our four exhibition halls at that time."

While not able to offer the same level of capacity as its counterparts, Royal Paragon Hall – a 12,000 sqm events hall located on the fifth floor of the Siam Paragon Shopping Center – positions itself as a premium venue and last year celebrated its tenth anniversary. According to Talun Theng, the venue's general manager, Royal Paragon Hall on average holds about 120 events every year and has enjoyed roughly 10 per cent growth annually since it opened.

Last year the venue invested THB50 million (US\$1.4 million) in renovations and personnel development. "We've changed a lot in the look, feel, mood and tone of the venue and continue to do so, because we'd like to bring a lot of innovation in the social media area as well," explains Theng. "We are in the process of improving our digital media and platforms – all kinds of requirements to do with smart gadget use."

Royal Paragon Hall's managing company, Siam Piwat, is also aiming to expand its MICE holdings in the city with the upcoming True Icon Siam Hall on Charoenakorn Road. Set to open some time in late 2018 or early 2019, the venue is being billed as Thailand's first "ultra hybrid world-class auditorium", offering high-tech facilities with 12,000 sqm of space and capacity for 3,000 seats. ►



The venue is the result of a THB2 billion (US\$56.6 million) investment and will be located on the seventh floor of the upcoming massive Icon Siam mixed-use development, set to open in the first quarter of 2018. “The international hotels around the river, combined with our True Icon Siam Hall, will become a global destination for the MICE and events industry,” says Theng. “The river will come alive again.”

Farther from central Bangkok is the Impact Convention and Exhibition Center, located in Nonthaburi north of the capital. Impact has hosted some 8,000 events since it opened in 1999, and is undergoing a THB1.7 billion (US\$48 million) development plan that includes a new Ibis Bangkok Impact Hotel, a commercial building called The Portal that features a 1,150 sqm ballroom, and a renovation of the Hall 1-8 lobby.

RECENT HOTEL OPENINGS

To accommodate the rising numbers of visitors, hotel options are also growing – many of which offer their own event facilities. Located minutes away from Impact, the MICE-focused Best Western Plus Wanda Grand Hotel recently launched. Featuring 183 rooms and suites, it has four floors of event space, including eight function rooms and a 927 sqm grand ballroom capable of hosting up to 900 people.

However, Bangkok’s most notable recent MICE hotel addition is the Avani Riverside Bangkok Hotel – a 26-storey, 248-room property located in Bangkok’s Thonburi district that opened last September. Offering an array of “over-the-top event venues”, the hotel features more than 20 meeting rooms including a 1,150 sqm ballroom with 11-metre ceilings, car lift access and a show kitchen. (See “Tried & Tested” on page 21.)

Together with its sister property and next-door neighbour the Anantara Riverside Bangkok Resort, there is approximately 8,000 sqm of event space on offer. “Our events facilities are a very good selling point for our hotel,” explains Avani Riverside Bangkok’s general manager, Christian Hoechtl. “Combined with the Anantara, we are now able to take very big groups



that enable us to compete with other large hotels. This was previously not possible at the riverside.”

The two combined properties, along with the Riverside Plaza mall above which the Avani sits, have given impetus to growth in this area of the city, according to Hoechtl. “The riverside used to be a little bit off the grid, but now it has enjoyed a revival with some construction and other projects moving here.”

FRESHENING UP

Along with the new faces, a number of existing properties are also getting face-lifts. Como Metropolitan Bangkok, a 169-room hotel in the CBD’s Sathorn district with a particular focus on wellness, completed a year-long renovation of its guestrooms in February, as well as updating its Shambhala Urban Escape wellness centre with hydro pools and steam rooms.

Also completing its refresh this year was the Pullman Bangkok King Power in downtown Ratchathewi district – the first Pullman-brand hotel in the world (it opened in 2007) and the first to undergo a complete renovation. The hotel’s lobby, F&B outlets, executive lounges and 354 rooms – which now include 18 Deluxe rooms with

Clockwise from top left: Avani Riverside Bangkok’s Attitude rooftop bar; Como Metropolitan Bangkok; Ibis Bangkok Impact’s web corner; and Pullman Bangkok Hotel G’s chocolate-themed event



balconies – all received an overhaul. The renovation also included the hotel’s two floors of event space with 20 meeting rooms including two ballrooms, the smaller of which has an open kitchen and car entrance.

Another Pullman-branded hotel, the Pullman Bangkok Hotel G in Bangrak district, renovated its event spaces three years ago, including meeting rooms, a ballroom and the funky art-themed Gallery 36 space. According to general manager Philippe Le Bourhis, it is now planning renovation of about 140 of its 469 rooms, along with the club lounge and all-day dining restaurant, and is looking to introduce new themed coffee breaks for events this year, having developed elaborate themes in the past ranging from Alice in Wonderland to a chocolate theme complete with chocolate-filled bathtub.

“Our last ‘G Session’ [a themed lobby party] was on



first class, so we plan to adapt that into an airline-themed coffee break,” says Le Bourhis. “We feel we should have something creative so that when delegates leave the meeting room they can relax during their 20-minute break and feel re-energised when they go back inside.”

LOOKING AHEAD

A slew of new properties will join the party in the coming years. The Park Hyatt Bangkok is currently set to open in May (though it’s already been delayed on a number of occasions). The property will be part of the Central Embassy mixed-use development in the CBD, with 222 rooms and 1,440 sqm of meeting space.

This will be the first of three new Hyatts planned for the Thai capital, with the Hyatt Regency Bangkok Sukhumvit and Hyatt Place Bangkok Sukhumvit also slated to open this year. The former will have 300 rooms and suites and more than 1,000 sqm of event space, and the latter 220 rooms and seven studio suites.

Also looking to join Bangkok’s hotel scene in 2017 is a 154-room Edition hotel. The Bangkok Edition is being developed within the recently opened and attractively pixel-esque MahaNakhon in the CBD – now the city’s tallest tower. The new Edition will be located beneath The Ritz-Carlton Residences in the 77-storey mixed-use skyscraper.

Entering the fray in 2018, meanwhile, will be the Waldorf Astoria Bangkok, located on Ratchadamri Road between the Grand Hyatt Erawan and the Anantara Siam. Part of a mixed-use development that will span 60 storeys, the hotel will occupy the first 16 of these, offering a total of 170 rooms and suites.

The Four Seasons is also set to make a return to the Thai capital in 2018 with the Four Seasons Hotel Bangkok at Chao Phraya River, situated in a multistorey contemporary building by the riverside. More than 300 guestrooms, plus shopping and dining, will be offered at the property, as well as branded private residences within a 73-storey adjacent tower.

The following year will see the launch of the Rosewood Bangkok, another property slated to open on Ploenchit Road. Among its 159 rooms will be a number of Sky Pool Villas with terraces and private plunge pools, and a residential-style meeting space called The Pavilion will be accompanied by a Sky Villa event space located on the top floor of the 33-storey building.

Finally, Spanish hospitality group Melia has announced it will partner with Asset World, a member of the Thai conglomerate TCC Group, in making its Bangkok debut in 2022. The 315-room Melia Bangkok will be part of a mixed-use development in Sukhumvit. “Our growth strategy must be accompanied with major local partners who share our vision, philosophy and culture,” said Melia Hotels International senior vice president Asia Pacific, Bernardo Cabot Estarellas. “Even more so when we’re entering the second most visited country in Southeast Asia.” ■