



The Isle of Man: the investment in C&I infrastructure means that all the signs are pointing to a successful future in business tourism

Star on the horizon

With its A-list celebrity fans, off-shore banking status and commitment to invest in its infrastructure, the Isle of Man is a business tourism outpost worth discovering. **Ben Lerwill** investigates

Reel off the names of recent visitors, such as Brad Pitt, Alicia Silverstone, Johnny Depp and Madonna, and which destinations spring to mind? Monaco? The Maldives? The reality, and one that flies in the face of its unfair caricature as a haven for bikers and elderly day-trippers, is one of Britain's least understood outposts – the Isle of Man.

Ambassadors for the island will tell you that its appeal has never been broader. Last year's reopening of the spectacular Villa Marina after an eight-year £15m refurbishment has given the conference bureau real impetus. The refurbished Victorian promenade in the capital, Douglas, is now complete and the island's burgeoning film industry, founded on tax breaks and rolling scenery, is helping to attract funds and big name stars. Even more pertinent to the C&I world is the fact that movie-star guests mean top-notch hotels.

Marketing efforts are moving with the times too. "You'll see more of a focus on the meetings industry from now on," says Michael Doherty, marketing executive for the Isle of Man Conference Bureau. "We're expecting more funding next year, which will help us revamp the website, update our

brochure and increase exhibition space at the Confer show and Confex."

The bureau has been a member of the BACD for 15 years, a period that has seen the island's reputation as an offshore banking centre grow. This, in turn, has resulted in a continuously growing demand for meeting space, which makes the Villa Marina's reopening all the more important.

Easily the largest conference space on the island, the Villa takes pride of place on the seafront and its lofty centrepiece, the Royal Hall, could be taken straight from a Russian imperial palace. It can seat more than 1,500 people, has seven meeting suites and is linked by covered walkway to the charming Gaiety Theatre, another renovated venue that can hold 341 delegates. Other key venues include St Johns Mill, the baronial International Business School and King Williams College.

Royal Liver Assurance held its annual conference at the Villa last year. Administration manager Mark Cox found it hard to fault. "It's a magnificent venue, and the investment has really paid off," he says. "We had a real geographical spread of delegates, and were surprised at how problem-free access was." ▷

ISLE OF MAN

HOTEL FACTFILE BEST FOR...



Harbour lights: the revamped Douglas seafront

Golfers Just ten minutes from the airport, **Mount Murray Hotel & Country Club** is a plush property with its own championship golf course. It offers five dedicated meeting rooms, the largest of which can hold 300, and has recently hosted the likes of Axa, Barclays and Natwest. The C&I market makes up 50 per cent of its business, and as such the 90-room property offers special corporate accommodation rates. **Murray's** restaurant provides local specialities overlooking the course.

Hipsters The seafront promenade in **Douglas** is home to many of the island's leading hotels, and the interior of the **Claremont Hotel** acts as a funky contrast to the one-and-a-half mile sweep of Victorian buildings outside. Buddhist paintings and a modern soundtrack provide the ambience, 65 guestrooms



Boy racer: the TT attracts corporate crowds

and conference space for 180 address the logistics. It may be slightly frayed around the edges and would benefit from a larger lift, but the property boasts a great location and a superb view over the Hogwarts-esque **Tower of Refuge** in the bay.

Traditionalists If you want shiny wooden floors, polished brass and a typical slice of upmarket seaside hospitality, the **Empress Hotel** fits the bill. With 102 rooms it is one of the island's largest properties and a major refurbishment carried out in the 1990s has left it with some excellent facilities. A gym, swimming pool and health club are all laid on for guests and can be used after a meeting in the Prince Albert Suite, which can hold up to 180 delegates. An on-site French-style brasserie caters for the bon viveurs.



Sefton Hotel: four meeting spaces

Night owls When Motorola brought more than 30 staff across to watch the TT motorbike races earlier in the year, it chose the **Hilton Hotel & Casino**. The casino itself stays open until 3.30am, while for daytime matters, the Cushag Suite can host meetings for 300 theatre-style. Last year's £5m refit has left the 136-room property as one of the main draws for business groups. A fully equipped **Living Well Health Club** is a further attraction.

Budding botanists A high-class promenade property, **The Sefton Hotel** offers a combination of 19th-century grandeur mixed with some new millennium touches. Most notable is the remarkable four-storey atrium garden wing that offers solace to those delegates without a sea view. The property has 100 ensuite rooms and four meeting spaces.

Indeed, airlift has improved in recent times. Where once Manx Airlines held a virtual monopoly, today Euromanx, British Airways, Eastern Airways and Air Arran all run regular services from the mainland. Flights can be pricey, but, as Doherty asserts, "room rates and extras are generally much lower".

The island's incentive potential is unfulfilled, but options abound. The annual TT motorbike races are a natural draw for corporate hospitality, and the dramatic topography means gorge-walking, golf, clay-pigeon shooting, sea kayaking, quad-biking and 'flight-seeing' are all possible. The island is renowned for its picturesque steam and electric railways, and the former can be exclusively hired as the Champagne Express, allowing up to 100 delegates to chug and glug in luxury.

The Isle of Man is unlikely to top the ICCA charts anytime soon, but it's worth real consideration as a scenic destination close to home with strong facilities, a willing conference bureau and a taste of something that little bit different. □

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DID YOU KNOW...



Brightlife: new age and belle époque

● The **Snaefell electric mountain train** is the only one of its type in the British Isles. It also makes for an incentive with a twist as it snakes up 2,036 feet to the summit of Snaefell, where England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland are all visible on a clear day.

● Delegates can combine meetings with yoga and other routes to inner peace? **Brightlife** is a luxury hybrid of New Age centre and *belle époque* hotel that can take 20 delegates and offers treatments including flotation therapy, yoga and massage.

● Despite being located less than 20 miles from the coast, the Isle of Man is not part of the UK. It is, however, a **crown dependency**, which makes the Queen the official proprietor of the island, where she is known as 'The Queen, Lord of Mann'.

● Manx residents know the joys of a good meal, and culinary specialities include **queenies** (small sweet scallops served in garlic butter), kippers, lamb and **bonnag** – a spicy blend of scone and fruitcake.

● C&I visitors to the island can make the most of



Peak performer: the Snaefell train

special fares from both London City and Southampton airports. These include accommodation rates at the Rutland, Claremont and Hilton hotels.

● Recent entries in the Sefton Hotel's guestbook include deputy prime minister **John Prescott**, **Mickey Rourke** and **Prince Andrew**.

● **Peel**, on the island's west coast, is considered by many to be the most traditional of all its towns. Highlights include **Peel Castle**, the ruins of **St German's cathedral**, the £6m **House of Manannan museum** and a topical incentive option in the form of a **chocolate factory**.

● The island is dotted with **orchids** and **fuchsias**, while **grey seals** and **basking sharks** can both be regularly spotted offshore, so nature loving delegates will be ably catered for.

● **Joseph Pilates**, founder of the exercise fad of the same name, was interned on the island as a POW during the First World War. It is said that his exercise ideas were developed here.