

Castletown harbour



Easily-accessible, priced-in-sterling, multi-venue, hospitable, non-EU, low-cost, unpolluted Isle of Man

ITCM and a group of UK buyers wonder why on earth they hadn't thought of the Isle of Man before this Fam Trip. Sydney Paulden reports

The dining room looked out through tall windows onto the promenade. The tide was out and the seagulls were crying above the exposed sandbanks. Chandeliers hung from the ceiling, the walls displayed a generous number of oil paintings, each illuminated with its own light. The carpet was tartan and there were Manx kippers on the menu. Each guest was individually served. There was no buffet.

This is the setting for luxury and comfort in the old style we found at the Regency Hotel in Douglas. But the bedroom was spacious, had the warmest bathroom I've yet come across and had a separate study corner, brightly lit with a large seafront window making it easy to use the computer that was provid-



ed in every room. There was permanent free access to the internet.

This is typical of the Isle of Man. Up to the post-war years it was accustomed to playing host to up to 900,000 summer visitors. As the rest of the world became more accessible to the British, the figures dropped to about 300,000.

Fortunately, there wasn't the money to demolish the

traditional attractions and replace them with modern structures and delights.

But now, what the Isle of Man had to offer has come back into fashion. And it is available for pounds sterling, it is accessible with astonishing ease from 15 different UK airports at a modest price and within one or two hours flight.

It has the cleanest air in the British isles. You notice that with the first intake of breath as you land.

The Isle of Man is larger than Singapore, but whereas Singapore has a population of about 3 million, there are only 80,000 people living on the Isle of Man. Except for the two weeks of the annual TT motorcycle races, it is a tranquil retreat from not only the UK, but also the EU, of which it is not a member.

The island has no motorways, but neither has it any traffic congestion, except



Seal and bird watching at Calf Sound



Seal at The Gaiety



Roy Tilleard at Callows Yard

in the minds of the locals. If they have to wait two or three minutes for traffic to clear a red light they wonder why there is a hold-up.

This is a country that is like a giant theme park. It not only has its own government, but it has the oldest continuous parliament in the world. The Tynwald dates from 979. It has the House of Keys and the Legislative Council, similar to our House of Commons and House of Lords, but, uniquely, both these bodies meet in a third gathering, the Tynwald, where they sit in the same chamber and speakers address both at the same time.

The Isle of Man is very conscious of and respectful of its long history and preserves all its traditions. Once a year, for example, in all their glorious robes, the members of the Tynwald meet on a hill outdoors, without shelter regardless of the weather. During that sitting members of the public can hand in private petitions

for their parliament to consider.

Members of the Tynwald are very approachable and that can be an asset for event organisers. Martyn Quayle, the Minister of Tourism of the Isle of Man, illustrated his point when he hosted our small Fam Trip group to a dinner on our first evening on the island. 'We are always ready to assist in any way', he explained. 'If a conference has connections with any particular department, such as Tourism or Transport for example, then we would always consider making some kind of contribution to its success, such as laying on a welcome cocktail party or getting the Minister to do the official opening.'

No shortage of ideas to keep the Isle of Man on the map

The annual Manx motorcycle TT race has been bringing tens of thousands of enthusiasts to the island since



1907. The Manx Grand Prix, also for motorcycles, has been held since 1923. Now, this year, the island will be the venue for what is probably the world's first electric motorcycle race.

The island is unquestionably the world capital for motorcycle racing and is determined to maintain this reputation, in spite of the fact that for the rest of each year it is renowned for peace and quiet.

The Isle of Man was instrumental in setting up the International Island Games. There are now 25 members from all over the globe, from Menorca, the Channel Islands, Gibraltar, the Caymans, Bermuda, Rhodes and so on. They gather every two years in different host venues and compete in as many as 14 different sports.

Sports and youth are

a theme of many of the Isle of Man's activities, so it is no surprise to learn that the island has been chosen as the location for the Commonwealth Youth Games in 2011.

The island lends itself to conferences with special themes of many kinds. Transport is an obvious one, as there is still an array of vintage transport modes in everyday use. Groups can travel south from Douglas on a steam train or northwards on a vintage electric train service.

Our Fam Trip group boarded the steam train at Port Erin station and rode the 15 miles to Douglas. There are three special group coaches that can be added to the normal train. These have a walk-through facility so that a larger group can intermingle en route. We had a single one

Commendable service

A commendable service on the part of our hosts, the Isle of Man Department of Tourism, was that each of the visiting buyers could choose the most convenient airport from which to fly. Accordingly, we flew in from London City Airport, Gatwick, Birmingham and Manchester and all arrived within a short time of each other. This has to be a major benefit when gathering delegates from different sources.



This Wurlitzer is being installed in The Arcade



St Johns Mill



Snacks on the train



Isle of Man University Centre

of these coaches and it was very special in that there were two young ladies on board to serve us champagne and delicious canapés.

The seats were comfortable leather armchairs and it was a memorable way to travel, chat, eat and drink whilst taking in the superb Manx countryside and its flora and fauna. We saw pheasants, rabbits, hares, sheep, cattle – all against a background of luscious grassland hills fringed with brilliant yellow gorse.

The Manx Electric Railway runs along the coast to Laxey. These tiny railways are not just there for the ride. Groups can build the journeys into excursions to places of interest. The Great Laxey Wheel, for example, never fails to amaze visitors and it can be the starting point for a Mines Trail that takes you under-

ground to get a taste of what life was like for the miners not that long ago. The wheel was used to compress air into the shafts, some of which ran under the sea, helping to keep out the water.

From Laxey another vintage transport experience is the Snaefell Mountain Railway that is the easy way to reach the top of the island's mountain peak.

The past is an important aspect of the Isle of Man, but it also is investing in the future. There is always a fascinating mix of the two. A great example is an 18thC estate (including an old nunnery) that is now called the Isle of Man University Centre and forms part of Liverpool's John Moore University. This beautiful old building is actually home, also, to the International Institute of Space Commerce and you

don't get much more futuristic than that.

The facility was opened in September 2008 and is the first of its kind in the world. It was the result of a winning bid against competitors in Tokyo, Paris, LA and Toronto. It helped that the island was already home to space companies such as SES, Inmarsat, Telesat, ManSat and Sea Launch.

Wide choice of contrasting venues

The ITCM group of buyers were on the Isle of Man for just two nights over a weekend, but their whistle-stop tour took in site inspections of more than a dozen venues and a variety of visitor attractions. The range would be impressive even in a big country, but was remarkable in a self-governing 80,000-

population territory measuring 35 by 11 miles at its widest.

The hotels we saw included Regency, Mount Murray, Claremont, Empress and Sefton. They are all different with different plus points to suit events and organisers. What they have in common is an extreme desire to please corporate clients, excellent cuisine consisting overwhelmingly of locally produced fresh food and very reasonable prices. There was no doubt, according to all the members of the Fam Trip group, that it was possible to find just the right venue for every kind of event.

Most properties are clustered, of course, in the capital Douglas. Interestingly, it gets its name from the confluence of two rivers, the Dhoo and the Glas.

Close to each other on the

promenade in Douglas, all with sea views, were Regency Hotel (where we stayed), the Claremont, the Empress, the Hilton and the Sefton.

All have meetings facilities in a range of sizes. The Claremont, for example, can seat 200 in The Sanderson Suite and has the private Library for boardroom gatherings. Its spacious Executive double bedrooms have a rack rate of only £95.

The Hilton, which has a Casino, offers 136 guest-rooms and 7 function rooms. It is part of the Sefton Group and is alongside the very stylish Sefton Hotel that has a dominant location in town. It has 100 bedrooms and three conferencing rooms and it is a property that has lots of evidence of imagi-

nation. Its Lecture Theatre, for example, is a completely equipped tiered room for just 25 delegates with access to the Atrium Water Garden. This in earlier days had been a car park, but has been re-created as a glass-roofed garden setting with several floors of balconied guest-rooms. Guests can sit on their balconies, in any weather, and look out onto a tropical garden.

Just out of town, in Santon, is the Mount Murray Hotel & Country Club, an AA 4-star property and virtually a self-contained resort. It is set in 200 acres of beautiful countryside.

Space is not a problem in this large, low-rise building and its 90 bedrooms are all spacious. There is a

choice of function rooms, the largest able to seat up to 300 delegates. There is a 5,000 sqft sports hall that can double as an exhibition area. The 18-hole golf course and the extensive Health and Fitness Centre make sure that delegates have plenty on offer during any free time.

Unusual venues

There is no shortage of fascinating special venues. Villa Marina, convenient to all the hotels on the seafront promenade at Douglas, alongside the Gaiety Theatre and the new Arcade must be the envy of most other destinations. The Gaiety is a delightfully authentic theatre built in 1900, restored even to the point of having the seat numbers embroidered in the

upholstery. The stunning white Villa Marina can seat up to 1200 people in its Royal Hall, whilst its Colonnade Suite can cater for 140, giving them views over Douglas Bay.

St John's Mill was a water-wheel-driven woollen textile mill that has been restored and is now a tranquil haven in the wooded countryside. Run by a charity, it has meeting rooms that benefit from the natural light that used to be required to match dyes. The dedicated staff who love nothing more than to serve you with home-made cakes and scones for tea.

Coming up fast on the horizon is Callows Yard. In the former capital of Castletown there are two streets of shops and houses that form a wedge shape in the centre of town. They have been bought by millionaire entrepreneur (from London's East End) Roy Tilleard. The accommodation, all re-faced with local stone, is to be short term accommodation, mainly for business visitors and delegates, whilst the space enclosed between the streets is being covered to form a very novel function centre.



In the Water Garden Atrium, The Sefton



The water wheel is working at St John's Mill



The Great Laxey Wheel

Further information

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