

How German and international buyers view meetings and incentive travel options in Germany – a new poll by IMEX

German and international buyers of meetings and incentive travel have reported their current appraisal of Germany as an events destination in the latest annual poll conducted in July/August by the IMEX exhibition. The two surveys each involved approximately 100 respondents with the overseas research attracting opinions from 11 European countries plus Russia and the Ukraine. Participants typically are senior industry figures with characteristic job titles including managing director, congress manager, communications director, marketing manager, PCO, DMC, business travel consultant, association general secretary, and events co-ordinator.

German buyers for the third consecutive year selected Berlin both as their favoured destination for meetings and training courses as well as for incentive and corporate hospitality programmes. In the former category Frankfurt climbed above Munich and Hamburg to become the runner-up. For incentives Hamburg is again considered the number two destination followed by Munich and Dresden.

In contrast, international buyers have elevated Frankfurt to top spot above Berlin and Munich for meetings and training courses and have now promoted Munich above Berlin, Frankfurt and Cologne as their preferred location for incentives and corporate hospitality.

smaller destinations

Noticeable in this year's analysis is the extra emphasis now being given to smaller destinations. In their recommended top 10 the German buyers mention Bonn, Fulda, Bad Homburg, Leipzig, Erfurt, Potsdam, Oberhausen, Füssen, Heidelberg, and Trier. Those appealing to buyers from overseas additionally include Baden Baden, Freiburg, Aachen, Weimar and Essen, as well as favoured regions such as the Black Forest, Rhine and Moselle Valleys, and Bavaria. Further personal 'secret' destinations are Bad Godesburg, Rothenburg, and Markelsheim.

old-fashioned charm

There is a continuing polarisation in views between German and international buyers in response to the question: *what matters most when marketing Germany - should the emphasis be on the old-fashioned charm and hospitality, or the country's reputation for high-tech efficiency?*

A majority of German buyers (51%) now considers that a positive image for modern technology outweighs the benefits of traditional values, a proportion that has risen consecutively from 32% in 2005, and 41% in 2006. The percentage voting for the charm factor is down to 27%, from 41% and 36% respectively.

In contrast, nearly two-thirds of international buyers (62% - up from 54% in 2006) place the emphasis on hospitality and charm as mattering most. Their characteristic comments include:

'old-fashioned values make the most difference – high-tech can be developed anywhere' (Netherlands buyer)

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'the charm matters most because such old places now always have the technology as well' (Russian buyer)

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'people prefer the personality and charm because German efficiency and technology is a given and assumed' (UK buyer)

why Germany is superior

Both sets of buyers listed reasons why Germany is considered superior for business tourism compared with other European countries. Domestic organisers mention the reliability of hotels and professional agencies, extensive infrastructure, efficient and punctual transportation, and particularly the efficiency of the airport and exhibition complex in Frankfurt. Overseas planners concentrate more on macro-factors such as the country's centrality within Europe, the widespread use of English, and the businesslike approach of suppliers.

In identifying what Germany could learn from other countries in Europe there is more common ground. Typical suggestions include: increase the friendliness of

staff, be more flexible towards special requests, introduce more creative incentive ideas, and reduce the complexities of obtaining visas (where appropriate). The prevailing message is that Germany should do more to create a sense of fun in its marketing, and in the experience of its venues and destinations, and generally be more aggressive in its marketing.

Helping further to underpin Germany's success in the international meetings and incentive travel sector is the continuing 'halo' effect arising from the World Cup in 2006. Comments include:

'Suddenly the friendly and young-at-heart character of Germany became visible to the world' (UK buyer)

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'It was such a special and successful event that it achieved the same reputation for Germany as did the Olympics for Greece' (Swedish buyer)

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'The event was handled so positively and happily that people around the world warmed towards Germany' (Italian buyer)

continuing success

Finally the IMEX research posed the question as to whether Germany could look forward to continuing success in business tourism. Buyers within Germany think that climate change concerns will work in the country's favour because the new emphasis is to minimise travel-related pollution. Others suggest that strict tax regulations discourage more use of overseas destinations.

International buyers are also positive, but with one major reservation, that of perceived high cost. Many feel that because Germany is 'a quality experience' its relative expensiveness can be justified, but at the same time draw attention to the cheaper competition increasingly being offered in the Baltic States and former East European countries.

The main messages from the research may be summed up as: invest in technology, emphasise traditional hospitality, focus more on fun, and compete more aggressively.

Note:

* Of **German buyers**, 18% arrange under 10 events a year; 52% arrange from 11-50 events a year; and 30% arrange over 51 events a year. Typically around 80% of these events are staged within Germany

* Of **International buyers**, 22% arrange under 10 events a year; 61% arrange from 11-50 events a year; and 17% arrange over 51 events a year.

Typically

between 10% and 15% of these events are staged within Germany