A walk over the bund at night is always an adventure.

This is my seventh time attending IT&CM China in Shanghai. Every time I return to the city, it seems to keep fewer secrets. Sometimes I wonder how many are still left for me to discover. This said, taking that annual first walk along Nanjing Road all the way from People’s Square to the Bund never gets old. Nothing is more of a testament to the lightning speed of China’s transformation in the last 25 years, than looking out over the sprawling forest of neon-lit skyscrapers on the other side of the river.

If I was standing on this very same spot in the early nineties, all I’d see across the water would be a couple of rusty old warehouses. In the time it took Antwerp to decide on what to do with its puny ring road, the Chinese built a brand new modern business city the size of Paris – and they did it about a dozen times over in the rest of the country.

The always entertaining pre-show city tour on the first day of the event took us to both the old and the new Shanghai. A visit to the bird and insect market – a stuffy maze of little stalls where you can buy anything from fluffy bunnies to chirping crickets and fighting beetles – was followed by a very ‘traditional’ Starbucks Coffee at Xintiandi – an upscale shopping and dining area modelled on classic Chinese homes.

Final stop for the day was the awesome M50 art district: a collection of old industrial warehouses turned into modern art galleries of all types and sizes. After this short walkabout, it was time for more serious business: the official press conference kicking off IT&CM China 2018. Facts and figures for all!

A Chinese show for the Chinese market
IT&CM China is traditionally presented as a bridge between the Chinese market and the rest of the world, and while this is still true, it’s more and more becoming a domestic/regional show where Chinese buyers meet exhibitors from their own country and its neighbours. According to TTG Asia’s Managing Director and show organiser Darren Ng, more than 500 hosted buyers were present for this edition, but only 18% of them came from outside of China. Seven years ago, one the first edition I attended, 50% of buyers were international. This could mean two things: waning interest from the rest of the world or a growing interest in MICE on the Chinese market. There’s no way to prove the former, but the latter is definitely true.

Jason Ng, Executive Director of MP International, explained that IT&CM China – started in 2007 – witnessed the boom of the Chinese MICE industry. From little to no interest in anything outside of leisure 10 years ago, China is now one of the world’s biggest spenders on all things MICE. According to a study by the Global Business Travel Association, MICE activities are worth 110 billion USD in China, which is 42% of the country’s total domestic and 45% of its international business travel spending. A far cry from a decade ago where the term MICE was a new concept for many. Ng was very optimistic about the further rapid growth of the industry in the region, and said it was to rise to a worth of 200 billion USD in Asia-Pacific by the end of this year.

Although the show focuses more on the regional market – for example: Argentina was the only non-Asian exhibitor as far as destinations go – this doesn’t mean it’s getting any smaller. 289 different organisations were present as suppliers, and the collaboration with Corporate Travel World 2018 – an event aimed at raising the sophistication level of Chinese corporate travel professionals – attracted new buyers from a different market segment. In addition...
to these new corporate planners, more than 60 association buyers attended the event – probably the most important and difficult crowd to attract. A special association day forum would keep them occupied.

As explained above, IT&CM China is mostly a Chinese show, but as it is the country’s leading MICE show, but it’s still interesting for European buyers to attend. Other events in China are primarily focused on leisure. For MICE and associations there is no match. Most major Chinese cities are present as exhibitors and bring their convention bureaus, DMCs and hotel partners. Some of these are destinations you barely knew existed, but present MICE facilities that might rival some of the best European alternatives. Lots of neighbouring countries like Korea and most of Southeast Asia are present with a large contingent of partners as well, as are several high-end hotel chains.

Sadly, the city of Shanghai itself doesn’t seem to take full advantage of the buyers present. Sixty major association buyers were present, but Shanghai did close to nothing to sell itself as a destination to them. There are so many surprising places for these people to see, and great venues for them to discover and possibly book, but they got to see none of them first-hand unless the ones used for the show. Maybe Shanghai thinks it doesn’t need to make an extra effort because people are coming anyways. Maybe they simply don’t care. Who knows?

**Destinations to consider**

As a media delegate on fairs like these, you need to sit through a lot of obligated destination presentations. Lots of these are quite bland, some of the speakers’ English is rudimentary at best, and some of them don’t even seem to realise they’re talking to MICE media instead of tourists. Several of the Chinese journalists seemed to have the same problem. One of them asked the show organiser to explain him the difference between MICE and leisure travel – go figure.

A couple of presentations were very professional though, and succeeded in highlighting the destination in all the right ways. Xiamen, Hainan and the Philippines stood out from the rest, and this is why we...
will only cover them – as a reward for the effort made so to speak.

Xiamen is a Chinese coastal city close to Taiwan sporting a deep natural harbour and warm temperatures all year round. It’s one of the most energetic cities on the south eastern shore and one of the most competitive in the country. It’s a major aviation hub and one of the top MICE destinations in China.

It offers 17 huge exhibition venues of over 200,000m2, 100 meeting venues, 26 four star and 40+ high end hotels. Guanlang Island is a Unesco world heritage site full of historic buildings and Xiamen University is one of the country’s best and its beautiful campus attracts lots of conferences. Worth checking out. www.xmce.org

Hainan is a tropical island in the South China Sea and is China’s smallest and southernmost province. It’s a well-established tourist destination and has invested a lot of resources in building its MICE industry in the past few years. Lots of high-class business hotels, three airports, a high speed railroad loop around the island, visa on arrival and state of the art conference and exhibition centres make it a top destination for MICE and business, while the tropical forests, sandy beaches and rich ethnic culture do the rest. www.explorehainan.com

The Philippines is obviously a more known destination, and offers a staggering variety of venues and possibilities across its many islands. Manila is a thriving and well-known MICE and business hub, but most of its other destinations like Cebu, Palawan and Bohol offer modern venues capable of hosting 1000+ people events as well. The video shown during the presentation covered all of the major islands in a splendid and completely MICE focused way. This is how it should be done and lots of other countries in the region could take a lesson or two from the Filipino tourism board. www.tpb.gov.ph

China doesn’t need you

We managed to speak to Darren Ng personally near the end of the show, and he was kind enough to share some of his views and experiences on China and the evolution of MICE in the region.

‘When we started IT&CMA 25 years ago and we talked about MICE, no one understood what we meant. Same thing happened with IT&C&M China in 2007. We faced lots of challenges but we pushed on. Today we see people here are starting to understand the
value of B2B, one-on-one meetings, conferences and education. We’re still in a development process, but we’re getting there. ’

‘China has a difficult structure. Lots of things need to start top down. As the country opens up, it will become more aware of MICE and the different market sections. China is changing very, very fast. When I first came here in 1990, most people were still wearing the Mao suits, the city was full of bicycles and there was nearly a car to be found. Both Beijing and Shanghai were far behind the rest of the developed world. But look at them now: two modern, first world cities and economic powerhouses. Some think the Chinese are slow to evolve, but they will catch up with us all on everything very fast. The next big step is clamping down on corruption – which is being done as we speak. ’

‘China has reached a stage where it is big enough to do things by itself and thus keep control. The attitude is that they don’t need anybody else in this world. There are 1.3 billion people living here, and the domestic economy is massive. They feel completely self-sufficient and they probably are. This is why organising events and selling them new ideas from outside the country can still prove difficult. But difficult does not mean impossible. ’

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