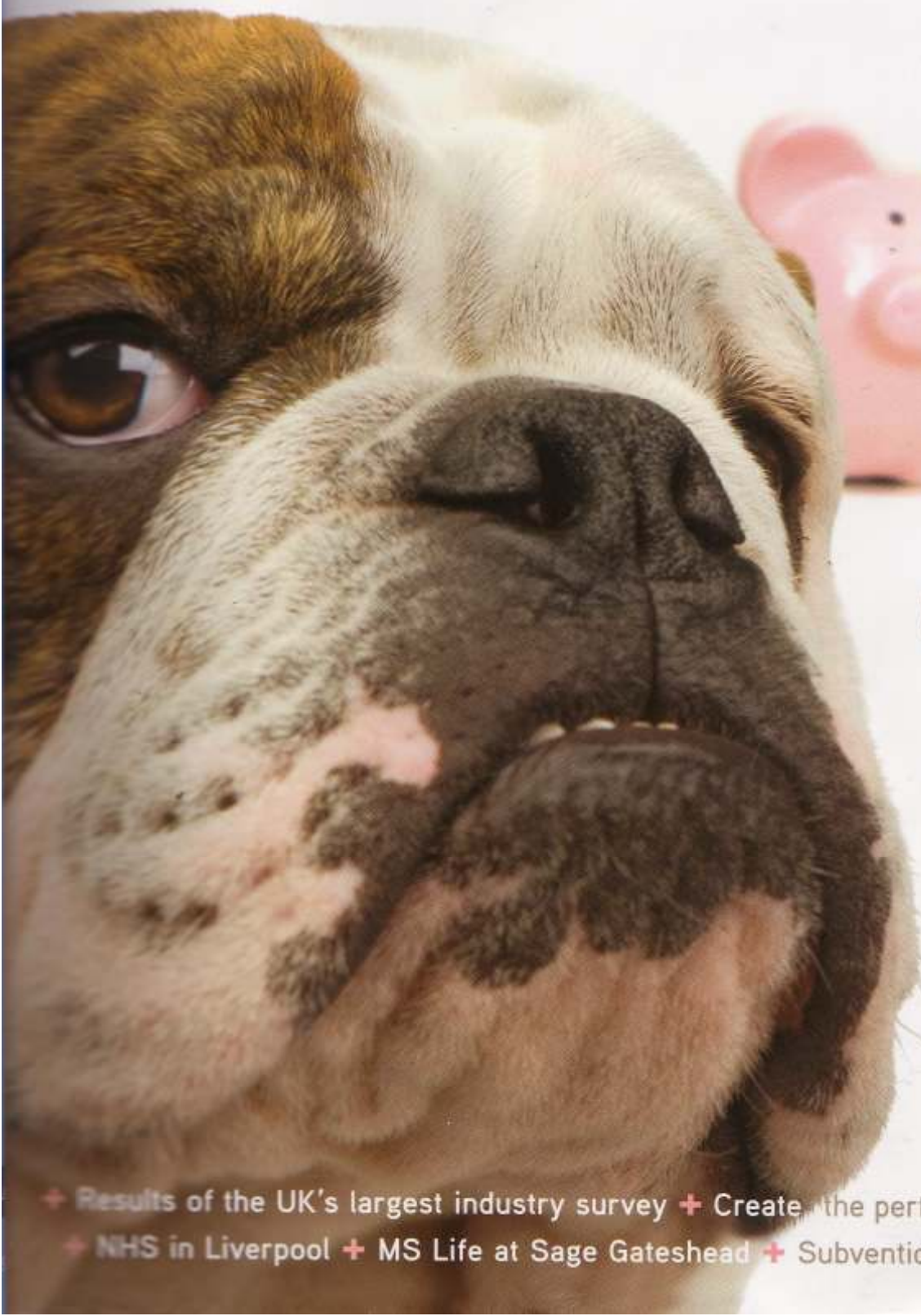


October 2009

# m&it

meetings & incentive travel



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## Robin Anderson takes a look at what Maastricht and the Hague have to offer event organisers

**T**he Hague is the 'unofficial' capital of the Netherlands: it is home to the Dutch royal family, the Government, all manner of historic palaces and more than 100 embassies and multi-national institutions. It's also the fourth UN city and, thanks to the World Forum, is one of Europe's leading congress centres. As the setting for the Peace Palace and the International Court of Justice, The Hague can claim to be the city of peace and justice.

Cosmopolitan and genial Maastricht, set on the banks of the River Maas and wedged in between Belgium and Germany in the south of the country, played an important role as the setting for the 1991 Maastricht Treaty, which created the new Europe including the euro. It is one of the oldest cities in the Netherlands, with lots of evidence from Roman times onwards.

The Hague Convention Bureau's UK account manager Paul Swain says: "Recent fam trips have included the likes of American Express, Barclays Capital, Cisco Systems, HBI, Informa, Grass Roots, MCI and World Events. They have all been very positive about our 'green' credentials.

"The Hague can offer organisers a refreshingly different perspective on events in Holland by heading south from Schiphol, just 40 minutes by road and even less by train. And while The Hague opens up uniquely different experiences, it is perceived as a no-nonsense business destination, collectively offering a safe pair of hands and good value for money."

The self-styled Royal City by the Sea combines global grandeur and almost 800 years of heritage with the seaside delights of the resorts of Scheveningen, full of nightclubs and restaurants, a casino, a yachting marina and the landmark Steigenberger Kurhaus Hotel, dating from 1885, along with the more relaxed resort of Kijkduin.

Spearheading The Hague's conventions offer, The World Forum recently hosted the UN's international



Café-society thriving in bustling Maastricht

# Double Dutch

conference on the future of Afghanistan, with 72 delegations (700 delegates) from all over the world and keynote speakers including UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai.

The venue's annual calendar includes conferences for the International Criminal Court and the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. The complex has now introduced a hotel bookings service, the last link in its full-service concept.

And, inevitably, the city is well represented by global hotel names including Steigenberger, Crowne Plaza, Starwood (Luxury Collection), Novotel, NH-Hotels and, from spring next year, a new five-star Hilton. In total there are more than 4,000 rooms across all price categories.

Despite its global profile, The Hague is quintessentially Dutch. Maastricht, meanwhile, offers a different ambience, more relaxed, more southern European. Its location cheek-by-jowl with Belgium and Germany is part of the explanation, along with its southerly riverside setting. It also offers a thriving café

society, large multi-national student population, great shopping and dining plus green hilly surroundings.

Many of the city's leading conference hotels have undergone refurbishment and expansion programmes or have plans in the pipeline, including the Crowne Plaza, the Eden Designhotel Maastricht, the Apart Hotel Randwyck and Novotel Maastricht.

New Maastricht Convention Bureau members include the city-centre Thiessen Winery and a couple of elegant meeting and banqueting complexes set just across the Belgian border: Landgoed Altembrouck, an 18th century estate set in the hills and forests of the Voerstreek, and Slot Pietersheim at Lanaken, a ten-minute drive from Maastricht. Restaurant Beluga and Hotel Van der Valk Maastricht joined the bureau in July.

Local special events planners play a similarly active role. M-Event's newly expanded fleet of vehicles now includes ten Volkswagen Beetles and 25 super-trendy Italian Vespas. Treat has launched a highly inventive team-building programme and ZIN recently became the Bureau's newest PCO member.

*Continued on page 68*

## WHO to contact

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Recent beat-the-recession campaigning led to an ambitious three-week sales drive which took the Bureau team and 14 organisations from the area to visit more than 75 Belgian, German and Dutch planners of corporate meetings and conventions. "Everyone welcomed us with open arms," said the MCB's Tamara Weide. "They thought it was special to see so many key suppliers working together as one team."

It's not surprising, then, to learn that in the International Congress & Convention Association's global league table of international non-corporate conventions, Maastricht rocketed from 150th place in 2007 to 81st in 2008.

One of the biggest challenges faced by the MCB is that the city does not have its own international airport, but as Weide explained: "We have four international airports within a



At the water's edge in the Hague

one-hour drive – Brussels, Cologne, Dusseldorf and Eindhoven. We also encourage delegates to take the low-carbon option of rail travel, being about an hour from Brussels, under three-hours from Paris and less than four hours from London."

Maastricht's meetings and events venues include historic castles, designer hotels, caves, a fortress and all sorts of ships. But jewel in the convention crown is the Maastricht Exhibition & Congress Centre (MECC), which features almost 30 meeting rooms (largest for 2,500 theatre-style) including two auditoria, plus two on-site hotels and 30,000 sqm of exhibition space in four venues.

The 10th Biennial Conference of the European Society for Therapeutic Radiology and Oncology took place at the MECC recently with 2,500 delegates. ■

## ASK the expert

Rene Buyink, director of ITBHolland, recommends:

### Gala dinner for 100

The Hague's monumental Grote Kerk ('Big Church') is one of the largest reception halls in the city, capable of hosting 900 guests beneath its Gothic arched ceiling and atmospheric lighting. Price €185 (£163) pp.

### High-level team-building for 10

A literally high-level world first features gastronomic cookery and fine dining aboard a massive hot-air balloon, which now operates as a restaurant soaring over Dutch cities and historic landscapes. Approx €900 (£792) pp.

### Conference venue for 500

The World Forum has more than 40 meeting rooms and can seat more than 2,000 theatre-style. Price for 500 delegates, from €10,000 (£8,807).



## Suppliersoundsoff

In a new regular series, suppliers are invited to address a subject that really gets on their nerves. This month a venue argues that the news of the death of four and five-star hotels has been grossly exaggerated

## Don't bury us yet

There is a rumour that four and five-star hotels are all on their deathbeds due to a decrease in events business. We are plagued by agencies, normally looking for a free room in London, seemingly amazed that we on the suppliers' side still have jobs, let alone any business.

Well the reason we are still here is quite simple: hotels are, for the most part, quite diverse businesses. In turnover terms events are a small percentage of our overall business. And whilst you think the spa, our Michelin-starred chef and our lounge are all there for the amusement of conference delegates, you'd be mistaken.

The spa is doing fantastically, thank you. We never had any of your so-called high spending conference delegates in there anyway as they couldn't put it through expenses. You see, the spa and the fine dining restaurant are aimed at totally different clientele. And the reason, much to your chagrin, that we don't allow you to use the lounge as one of your breakout rooms is that we take more than £5,000 a day from afternoon tea.

So whilst you 'leading' agencies have remained one dimensional and desperate for T Mobile's next event, we on the supplier side have continued to be diverse. We have all sorts of business from all sorts of industries; we don't just do car launches, nor brag that we have BT as our client - who doesn't? We don't



£5,000 a day on afternoon teas

just do weddings or bar mitzvahs, nor do we just do corporate and government meetings, or Christmas parties. We do them all. And we'd prefer not to. I'll let you in to a small trade secret: we only have meeting rooms because nobody will pay for a ground floor bedroom. Yet.

So the next time you are looking for a free room, don't be surprised that the hotel can't help you. They just might be full of other business. It's just that it isn't yours.

'We are plagued by agencies... amazed we still have jobs'

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