

Hong Kong's unique fusion of East and West impressed UK buyers on a recent trip. Belinda Cole reports



Hong Kong amazes its visitors with a range of surprising sights and activities

The latest promotional video by Meetings and Exhibitions Hong Kong (MEHK) will tell you that the destination is 'one of the safest and most sophisticated in the world'.

It is one thing making claims, but MEHK decided to put its money where its mouth is and teamed up with Virgin Atlantic to invite seven high profile corporate and agency buyers to experience it first hand. The group included representatives from HSBC, Prudential, World Events and Carlson Wagonlit and their arrival was timed to coincide with the launch of MEHK's marketing initiatives for 2010 and the launch of the new 'Hong Kong Motivates' website.

MEHK hopes its privilege package 'Hong Kong REWARDS!' will incentivise those seeking added value. The scheme offers groups of at least 20 overseas participants a complimentary welcome package ranging in extravagance from a souvenir and coupon book to an airport chaperone service and fluorescent dragon dance.

"If you're on an incentive," says Gilly Wong, MICE general manager, MEHK, "You want a memorable experience, so for different groups we offer different add-ons like calligraphy or name carving onto chopsticks. If you have 700 people or more, we will tailor the privileges to your requirements."

The itinerary put together by The DMC Hong Kong and MEHK was full of memorable experiences, which kicked off with check-in at the InterContinental Hong Kong in Kowloon, which offers spectacular views of the harbour and its neon-lit skyscrapers. The 495-room

Fun with a business edge

hotel is a mecca for the 'Tai Tai' – rich housewives who come for afternoon tea after a busy morning shopping in the neighbouring designer stores. It also has the largest ballroom in the city at 885sqm and 11 harbour view function rooms.

A short walk away is the famous The Peninsula Hong Kong – another glamorous spot for afternoon tea – and the former Marine Police Headquarters, which is now Hullett House, a boutique hotel with a collection of restaurants.

The Crown Wine Cellars, another historically important building, is located in Aberdeen. The cellars were previously a munitions depot constructed during WWII, known as Little Hong Kong and the last position to fall to the Japanese in the Battle of Hong Kong. Today it's a chic members club and wine store, where groups can enjoy private dining.

The buyers took lunch at colonial gem The Repulse Bay, formerly a hotel and now a residential community and restaurant, The Verandah, which was refurbished last summer.

Afterwards they snapped up bargains at Stanley Market before heading back to Kowloon on the Star Ferry – quite possibly the world's cheapest form of

transport at the equivalent of just 23p per journey.

It was back on the water in the evening to take a cocktail cruise on the Aqua Luna (a traditional Chinese junk), which can be chartered exclusively and offers breathtaking night time views. This was followed by a belly-busting eight courses of delicious sushi and sashimi in the InterConti's Nobu restaurant.

After an invigorating tai chi session the following morning, the group took part in Chinese cake-making and tea appreciation at the Wing Wah Cake Shop.

The extra calories were walked off via an inspection of the recently extended Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre. The huge 92,000sqm venue is where the 1997 handover ceremony took place and is the location of most major exhibitions and conferences.

Says Wong: "The architectural design and engineering technology is world class. Many of the exhibitions which take place here are top in the world and we have a number of shows which have grown really fast, trebling their floor size. The Asia Pacific Dental Congress was held in May when swine flu broke out and they feared poor

Continued on page 41

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Continued from page 39

attendance but they actually saw an increase of 20 per cent and attracted 1,400 delegates."

The group heard about other new developments including expansion at the Ocean Park and Disneyland theme parks; refurbishment of the Mira Hotel, new hotels The Upper House and the Leaning Tower of Pisa-inspired Harbour Plaza 8 Degrees; the opening of 'the tallest hotel in the world' The Ritz Carlton at the International Commerce Centre in November and the construction of a new cruise terminal. "By 2016 hotel room capacity will have gone up from 57,000 to 65,000," says Wong.

In addition, hotel accommodation tax has been abolished and duty waived on imported wines, boosting Hong Kong's burgeoning reputation as a food and wine hotspot (it's in the Michelin Guide for the second year).

Wong describes the unique fusion of Eastern and Western cultures in Hong Kong as being like 'shiraz mixed with cabernet sauvignon', and the group enjoyed both when they took part in chocolate and wine pairing at artisan chocolatier Vero.

The next meal was to be a sky high one - 396m above sea level at the Peak Tower. The popular tourist attraction is reached by an historic tram, which can be hired exclusively for up to 120.

The buyers kept their heads in the clouds by taking a glass-bottomed cable car at Ngong Ping 360 on Lantau Island, a 45-minute journey from downtown. A giant Buddah awaited them at the top and a Chinese style village, where gala dinners can be staged. Back on the ground, at the delightful Discovery Bay, is meeting venue Club Siena, oceanfront alfresco dining venue D Deck and The Bounty - a replica of the famous tall ship and an unusual team-building or incentive venue for up to 60 people.

Another great island day trip is to former Portuguese colony Macau. Gambling is illegal in China but permitted in Macau and it has become the Las Vegas of the east, with mega casinos ideal for large conferences or gala dinners.

That there's fun to be had in Hong Kong is clear but as Adrienne Lynch of The DMC Hong Kong says, it's still a perfect place to do business: "Hong Kong is in a very fortunate position; it's not seen to be such a jolly because there are so many headquarters of multinational companies there - it has a business edge." ■



The InterContinental Hong Kong offers spectacular harbour views

What they thought



Renata Wood, Prudential: "Hong Kong is exciting, fun and sophisticated. The Peak tram was quite unique; I haven't seen that anywhere else. I liked the InterConti a lot and if I was putting senior groups up, I'd put them there."



Susan Eggleston, HSBC: "HSBC usually puts on incentives around sporting or cultural events so Rugby Sevens or the dragon boat festival would be ideal. There's a push towards the east because the group's centre of operations that was at Canary Wharf has moved to Hong Kong."



Adam Russell, Inconnection UK: "The mix of the Chinese and the Western is really interesting. I'd use the destination for incentives. I think dragon boat racing and tai chi with swords would be great for team-building and the Bounty would be a great way to sail into the harbour and see the light show."



Ruth Bond, Incentive & Event Planners: "When I first came to Hong Kong they would serve dim sum on metal trolleys like school dinners, now it's completely different. The destination fell off the radar in 1997 because you didn't know what was going to happen but now I'll be proposing it again."



Luke Flett, WorldEvents: "Hong Kong's highly developed infrastructure, business friendly environment and excellent service levels make it a great location for meetings and incentive business, in particular Asia-Pacific regional conferences."

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