

Unique Event Venues Boost Tokyo's Appeal

How would you like to hold your next convention at an art museum? Or in the green expanse of a traditional Japanese garden? Tokyo offers both... and more.

by Martin Foster

The Tokyo travel industry is very interested in MICE—an acronym for Meetings, Incentives, Conventions and Exhibitions/Events—which is an increasingly important sector of the inbound travel business. Some estimates peg the value of the global MICE market between \$280 and \$300 billion, with the Asian market seeing growth of nearly 40 percent to \$60 billion in the 10-year period leading up to 2016.

Now the Tokyo Metropolitan Government (TMG), in cooperation with private sector MICE-related companies, is taking the initiative in this business-to-business market with a number of inventive plans, including a choice of “unique venues,” sites that offer special experiences to visitors.

The year 2016 saw the total number of overseas visitors to Tokyo reach 13.1 million, and the TMG has set an ambitious target of 25 million visitors in 2020 in its action plan, “PRIME Tourist Destination City Tokyo.” In particular, Tokyo is aiming for an economic ripple effect from the business travelers likely to participate in MICE activities, who spend as much as 20 or 30 percent more than general tourists, and is looking to boost the number of repeat visitors.

At present, for example, the business area stretching roughly from Otemachi through Marunouchi to Yurakucho, and the Roppongi area of Tokyo offer the elements—such as conference centers, hotels and cultural facilities—necessary to host MICE events. In addition to providing focused support for these areas, the



The traditional layout of the Hama-rikyu Gardens offers a picturesque contrast with the nearby business district.

TMG is promoting efforts to use historic and cultural landmarks as unique venues.

The challenge for Tokyo, as it boosts the number of such unique venues, is to provide the type of hospitality that only the Japanese capital can provide, and avoid playing copy-cat with other cities overseas, such as Singapore and Seoul, each with their own agendas and claims to uniqueness. “Our sales pitch is that Tokyo is a location where tradition and innovation coexist,” a TMG spokesperson says.

The Hama-rikyu Gardens, for example, are located on the site of a villa formerly owned by the Tokugawa family, who long ruled as the Shoguns of Japan. Located where the Sumida River meets Tokyo Bay, this facility was used for a MICE event on an evening in October 2017. Some visitors arrived by boat at the seafront pier to take advantage of its location. The juxtaposition of the 400-year-old gardens against the backdrop of the modernistic 21st-century business development of Shiodome worked to succinctly illustrate one of the underlying themes of a recent TMG strategy targeting overseas visitors—Tokyo Tokyo Old meets New.

“Hama-rikyu is a unique venue,” said one of the organizers of the event. “The guests found the night lights were very impressive, creating a special spacious sensation different from the daytime atmosphere. I think they were very happy.” At present, other unique venues in the program include the Tokyo Metropolitan Teien Art Museum, the Edo-Tokyo Open Air Architectural Museum and Tokyo Sea Life Park.

There was an element of trial and error in selecting and utilizing unique venues, such as convincing the managers of the venues to host meetings or receptions. But the TMG staff successfully created a win-win situation by persuading venue managers that visitors using the venue at a MICE event would deepen their understanding about its existence and original purpose. The resultant PR effect and heightened name value could persuade some to return as repeat visitors. After a few hiccups, more venues have gradually come to better understand the MICE project.

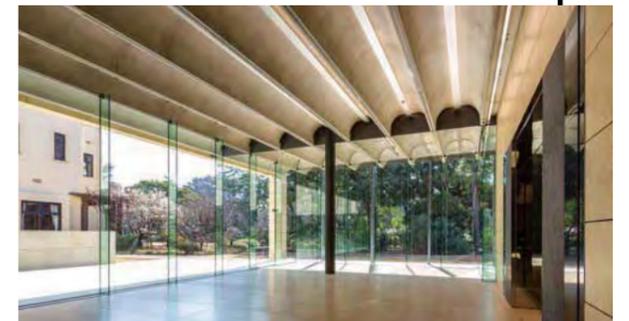
Private sector MICE organizing companies have been impressed by the efforts made by Tokyo’s government. “I think it is really significant that the TMG is taking advantage of such unique venues,” the CEO of a pioneering MICE agent in Japan says. “It is a chance to convey the great points about Japan and Tokyo, and have visitors not just read about these sites, but feel them up close and personal in a live format.”

Input or feedback from such visitors is viewed as important in the selection and operation of unique venues. “We want to make an appeal based on a Japanese or unique Tokyo style,” the TMG spokesperson says. “It is hard for the TMG to know the needs of the visitors, so we are collaborating with MICE organizers to identify those needs.”

Tokyo is also looking to expand its outreach activities. Exposure to date has largely been restricted to specialist publications overseas, but the TMG recently produced a handsome pamphlet with detailed information on the unique venues. The commitment to this important industry sector is to help attract more overseas MICE planners and organizers.

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The Tokyo Metropolitan Teien Art Museum, a reception at the Teien Art Museum, and the traditional interior of a tea house at the Hama-rikyu Gardens.



Tokyo Sea Life Park is one of the unique venues.

