

The 1st Penang International “MICE” (Meetings, Incentives, Conventions and Exhibitions) Conference
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Panel Discussion “Promoting ‘MICE’ in Penang “

The Penang Scenario by : Ong Ban Seang
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“Amongst the ‘**Meetings, Incentives, Conventions and Exhibitions (MICE)**’ sectors, it is the ‘E’ or exhibition sector which is the weak link of Penang. For the Meetings, Incentives, & Conventions sectors, Penang’s natural attributes as a port city, tourist destination and its ambiance of beach, hill and heritage resorts makes it a choice venue and gives it a cutting edge in any bidding exercise and well in contention in terms of attendance building for the functions. In short, a strong contender to be a destination of choice for M,I & C. However the exhibition business is decided purely on the promotional value and sales prospects of the products & services be it consumer or trade expo, & to a lesser extent, the suitability of the venue. Thus, Penang in terms of International level exhibitions or expo especially in the trade sector does have a long way to go.

Under the circumstances, it is critical to do a SWAT analysis of Penang’s standing before a ‘strategic road map’ can be devised to take Penang on the road to be a destination of choice for international level trade expo or exhibitions.

Penang’s strengths lies in its history as an entreport in the 60s and progressing to be the ‘silicon island’ of the East from the 70s onward. Today it is a thriving port city well linked in trade, commerce the services and the cyber world.

In term of weaknesses, the lack of purpose built facilities and adequate support services are glaring. The lack of industrial expertise, particularly in the organization of international trade events is also a factor.

As for opportunities, especially opportunities for further growth & development, there are plenty. In terms of infrastructure, Penang is well served by an international airport and sea port & linked by road and rail to all parts of the country and the region. It has at its doorstep a large gathering of world renown MNC’s and a larger no of SME’s cutting across a wide section of industries. For years, Penang has been home to a wide array of trade associations with some of them in recent years taken on the role of exhibition organizers. Amongst them are REHDA, MATTA, PIKOM, Furniture Dealers Associations and more.

As for the threats to Penang, one must understand that the expo business is fiercely competitive with new venues and destinations cropping up all the time. Outside of Klang Valley, there is Sarawak, Malacca & Johor with their new venues well backed by their respective state machineries giving a good run for the money to Penang as regional centres.

Strategic Road Map

What then are the prerequisites for Penang to put in place a strategic road map for it to claim a stake in the international exhibitions business and be a destination of choice for such events? Very briefly they are:

- (a) Strong political will
- (b) Well placed administrative structure and mechanism
- (c) The necessary experience and expertise of its personnel and companies involved in the business
- (d) Critical role to be played by its trade associations, NGO's, chamber of commerce and the like
- (e) Adequate venue facilities with the necessary support services

To put all these elements in place, Penang needs nothing less than a Convention Bureau eventually (such as the one in Sarawak). The convention Bureau should of course have strong public back up's and fundings and concurrently the industry players contributing substantially in expertise, management and advises. This is not dissimilar to the PSDC (Penang Skills Development Centre) set-up. While planning ahead, the State Trade committee could immediately incorporate a MICE Advisory Council to support and steer the current efforts.

Penang should not fail as a destination of choice for exhibitions and expos. It has the pedigree for trade & commerce. In fact, way back in the 60's or half a century ago it had incorporated a thriving & exciting "Penang Trade & Industrial Fair" which is presently known as Pesta Pulau Pinang. In 1972 or 40 years ago it already hosted the PATA workshop which signified its entry as an international tourism player and as a destination of choice for international tourists. From the 70s, it has turned into the silicon island of the East with practically all the renowned MNC'S parked at its doorstep.

Thus it would be a travesty of history if Penang could not get it right to be a destination of choice for international level expos or trade shows
