

Ironing out international meeting wrinkles

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Geopolitical trends, changing tastes in venues and an increasingly diverse global business world are adding new wrinkles to the business of throwing a successful international meeting.

The safety of various destinations around the globe is a main concern of international meeting planners and their clients these days, according to Denise Peterson, events manager for customer services processes, work-force performance software and services provider **Witness Systems Inc.**

"There have always been places where you wouldn't do a meeting," Peterson said. And recent high-profile incidences of terrorism "have made people a lot more conscious about where they are going," she said.

These concerns don't entirely revolve around the Middle East. "There is quite a bit of unrest in Brazil now, in terms of gangs targeting tourists," said Peterson, "as well as some talk now of unrest in India."

"Dealing with terrorism has been a way of life for most international business people for years — but much less so for Americans," said Kate Demarest, vice president of event marketing for **SunTrust Banks Inc.**

Planners of international meetings need to visit government Web sites such as the State Department's (<http://travel.state.gov>) to access the latest travel



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Global perspective: Sheraton Atlanta Hotel's Josh Baker and ConferenceDirect's Loriann White.

warnings, Demarest said; and get in contact with the appropriate U.S. embassies and consulates "to get the real picture of what is going on [in a country]."

International meeting planners also need to keep in mind that, as of Jan. 1, "there's no more going to the Caribbean with just a driver's license and a birth certificate," Peterson said. Americans traveling by air or sea to destinations like the Caribbean, Mexico and Canada on or after that date will require a

passport, thanks to terrorism-fighting legislation passed by Congress in 2005.

The right space

In tracking down the right venue for your international meeting, a good first source of information is one of the major hotel chains, Peterson said. "Or, I'll use contacts made through MPI (Meeting Professionals International), and/or check through the MPI directory to see if there is a member located at the destination I have in mind."

Replace the tons of sales brochures, packets, kits and other venue promotion materials you have stashed in your closet with digital photos and brief notes, said Loriann White, regional vice president for Conference Direct, a Los Angeles-based meeting planning firm. "If you must have collateral from a property, ask for the fact sheet — a one-page document that contains all the facts on a property," White said.

In the catering department, meanwhile, getting the right food and beverage service for an international meeting requires planners to utilize a combination of the Internet, professional contacts and in-person assessment, Demarest said.

"'Google' everybody, and contact other planners in the vicinity" when checking out a caterer, Demarest said. "Whenever you are selecting food, request a meeting with the chef."

Getting the cuisine right in today's increasingly diverse international

business world can be an especially tricky proposition for meetings held in Asia-Pacific region destinations. At meetings held in India, for example, "you have to keep in mind that the dietary requirements of Hindi vegetarians are different from those of 'regular' vegetarians," Peterson said, "and that you may have requests for special meals for Muslims."

A few tips

When dealing with the management of a venue that may be hosting your meeting, remember that everything is negotiable, advises White. "Make sure you prepare a 'wish list' of concessions," she said. "These concessions will help your bottom line and, if used effectively, can make you look so good to your VIPs, upper management and principals."

On the other side of the same coin, remember that the management of an international venue is as invested in the success of your meeting as their U.S. counterparts.

"Service is a worldwide concept," Peterson said, "and I have never been to where a property or the people working there weren't as interested in the success of my program as I was."

At the end of the day, successfully throwing an international meeting takes knowledge and hard work.

"Know your market and know your location," Demarest said. "And have enough staff on hand to work 24 hours a day." ★