



This month, Donia O'Loughlin looks at Italy to see if its conference industry is as good as the food.

Italy is well known for its Mediterranean lifestyle: olive oil, salads and freshly prepared pasta and pizza. It is a country that also takes pride in its history and rich cultural and artistic heritage. It's a popular holiday destination, and one of the EU's largest markets.

According to Florence Convention Bureau, Italy represents 40 per cent of the world's historical and artistic treasures. While the Italian convention treasure chest does contain some venue jewels, they do seem rather small on an international scale, albeit perfectly formed.

The International Congress and Convention Association, ranked Italy number seven in 2004 in its country list for international conferences. That year it hosted 170 international meetings (which fell into the ICCA category for association meetings). The figures reflect a continuing economic uncertainty in Italy, but it is a situation that the Florence Convention Bureau believes is improving and, when corporate meetings are taken into account, the statistics are much rosier.

Rimini Convention Bureau and Ediman publishers are two of the key backers of *L'Osservatorio Congressuale Italiano*, a regular report produced by the University of Bologna's Master Programme in conjunction with meetings industry associations. It tracks the Italian convention market.

The report covering the first semester of 2005, shows that congress activity went up by 1.23 per cent, although there was a reduction in the number of overall delegates. Not so many years ago, conferences lasted three days on average, but now delegates are gathering for no more than a day, partly because of a general international economic trends and partly because airlines no longer require a Saturday night stay. The advent of low cost flights is also a factor to consider, the report adds and indicates tourism is set to swing back up again, with international congresses following this upward trend.

Meetings professionals emphasise the importance of Italy building its presence abroad, and the report criticises current efforts at

marketing the country as a conference destination.

Industry professionals recognise that they have to push the fact that Italy exists on the convention map and it is no secret that hoteliers are suffering. This pain, however, is not widely shared by conference venues that can host larger meetings and the trend here is buoyant.

Events business in Italy was worth over €22 billion in 2004, according to L'Osservatorio, of which 10.5 per cent involves foreign business. Italian private companies contributed 17.5 per cent, 22 per cent is from public organisations and 49 per cent is calculated as direct delegate spend. Hotel, travel and food are the top three items of expenditure, according to the report.

Florence, capital city of the province of Tuscany, is located in the heart of Italy. The city's convention bureau claims Florence holds 26 per cent of the Italy's artistic and historical treasures. This is not surprising considering many Renaissance painters were born or studied there. Michelangelo was born near Florence and his intricate decoration and painting adorns the ceiling of a most holy meeting place, the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican. Leonardo da Vinci was apprenticed in Florence.

Historical venues for your conference are in abundance, but don't forget there are also purpose-built venue options. Firenze Fiera is the company that manages the three main conference and exhibition facilities in Florence: Fortezza da Basso, Palazzo dei Congressi and Palazzo degli Affari. This makes up the Conference Citadel, as all are within walking distance from each other.

The Fortezza da Basso is a 16th century Medici fortress. The original building has been remodelled into congress rooms and exhibition space and it can seat up to 10,000 in all.

The Palazzo dei Congressi is a Renaissance style villa, which the tourist board purchased in 1964 from the Contini Bonacossi family,

in order to offer a conference centre in Florence. It can seat a maximum of 1,900 delegates.

The Palazzo degli Affari was built in 1774, and caters for both small and larger conferences. This spring, parts of it will be reconstructed. "We want to develop the corporate programme more," says marketing and sales manager of Florence Convention Bureau, Diana Cora Tenderini. According to the bureau, 2007 looks like it will be a better year for meetings than 2005 or 2006. "We have some big conferences confirmed, which will have a good economic impact on the region," adds Tenderini. "Europe as a whole is becoming far more competitive, and this proves that Florence is a very strong brand across the world."

Florence is a small city, but the bureau regards this as a plus point. "Seventy-nine per cent of the hotels are within walking distance of the congress centres, so delegates would save money on transportation," adds Tenderini.

The city is not cheap, but the bureau is doing its bit to make it cheaper for delegates by introducing a congress card later this year, giving a discount for delegates in restaurants, shops and transportation.

Next month the city's newest shopping centre opens opposite the Hotel Helvetia and Bristol.

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Turin

The late 17th century transformed Turin into one of the capitals of baroque art and the city has over 40 museums. Hosting the Winter Olympic Games certainly raised the city's profile for the meetings industry, with thousands of first time visitors, and the fruits of big infrastructure investment displayed for all to experience.

Turin has four main conference centres. The Congress Centre Lingotto was the first Fiat car factory, built between 1917 and 1920. At the end of the 1980s, the building was modified and became a multi-functional centre. Work to transform it into a conference centre was finished in 1994. The auditorium has a maximum capacity of 2,090 people. The venue has a Fair Centre attached with exhibition space of over 60,000 square metres, as well as a Hotel Le Meridien. There is also the 8Gallery shopping centre and car parking for 5,000 vehicles.

The Festival Hall of Bardonecchia is an art nouveau building designed by the architect Carlo Angela Ceresa. It has two



Stupinigi Hunting Lodge in Turin

meeting rooms with a capacity for 700 delegates. In addition, there is 322 square metres of exhibition space.

Torino Incontra is the conference centre of the Chamber of Commerce. This 'container of ideas', as it has been called by its founders, is located in the heart of Turin. It has 300 square metres of exhibition space, and the venue can seat a maximum of 700.

The fourth main conference venue is the Industrial Union Conference Centre. It can seat 800 and has 300 square metres of exhibition space.

As well as purpose built venues, there are also many historical and unusual venues including the Castle of Rivoli and Museum of Contemporary Art. The Manica Lunga houses the conference hall and the theatre can also be used for meetings and conferences.

Work is currently in progress at the Museo Nazionale dell'Automobile, designed to increase the size of the museum by 7,000 square metres. Meanwhile, the conference centre will be closed until 2007.

In 2004, Turin hosted 95 meetings and congresses for a total of 50,880 delegates. In 2005, 68 conferences took place involving 52,500 delegates. The city's convention bureau believes the conference industry will contribute €40 million between 2005 and 2008 to the local economy.

A Meet in Turin card offers discounts for museum entrance, guided tours, sport, restaurants, flights and car hire.

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Fiera Milano Congressi is part of the Fiera Milano Group and encompasses the PalaConvention and the FMC Centre.

The PalaConvention, built in 1923 in the heart of Milan, can hold both exhibitions and conferences and can seat 5,000 delegates theatre-style, and offers 11,000 square metres of exhibiting space.

The FMC Centre is one of the largest venues in Italy and seats 10,000 delegates with 31,500 square metres of exhibition space available. While Fiera Milano is set to be the biggest exhibition centre in the world.

Today and Incentive Travel, published in Milan is a big source of information on the meetings industry in Italy.

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South Tyrol

South Tyrol is made up of Bolzano, Merano, Bressanone, Brunico and Vipiteno. The region borders on Austria and Switzerland. Altogether there are 476,023 inhabitants in total and 70 per cent have German as their first language.

There are four main conference centres "A

in South Tyrol. Eurac Convention Centre is situated in the heart of Bolzano and houses the region's largest research institute. The venue boasts 1,250 square metres of flexible space as well as an auditorium for a maximum of 320 delegates, theatre-style. The conference hall can seat 120.

The Forum Bressanone is the newest congress centre in South Tyrol. It has 2,000 square metres of exhibition space and can seat a maximum of 369 delegates, theatre-style.

The Four Points Conference Centre Sheraton is located in Bolzano, and can seat a maximum of 360 people, theatre-style. In addition, it has 13 facility rooms available.

Kurhaus is up in the Alps and is a rare Italian large venue, able to accommodate 1,000 delegates theatre-style.

There are numerous hotels and historical venues available for small meetings. Castle Katzenzungen is a typical Renaissance building situated between Merano and Bolzano. The largest and oldest vine in Europe grows beside the castle.

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Rimini

There are six main areas in Rimini province: Riccione, Cattolica, Misano, Bellaria Igea Marina and Repubblica di San Marino.

There are five main congress centres and another under construction.

The conference centre of the Grand Hotel Rimini is ideally located near San Marino

Federico Fellini International Airport, and Rimini train station. Seven rooms are available, catering for a maximum of 350 delegates in one room.

The Europeo Convention Centre is located in Bellaria Igea Marina. The auditorium can seat up to 1,285 delegates, and there are also several smaller rooms with a capacity in one room for 400 delegates. Kursaal San Marino Conference Centre can hold 380 delegates, theatre style.

The Shells Conference Centre is part of a larger complex including a hotel, a beach and swimming pools. It is located five minutes from Rimini International Airport. Ten rooms are available to hold a conference for a maximum of 1,200 delegates.

Rimini is also home to one of the largest convention centres in Italy, The Palacongressi della Riviera di Rimini. The auditorium can be divided into five rooms, seating a maximum of 6,000. Another pavilion can be divided into three rooms to accommodate 4,000 delegates. A third pavilion offers 4,800 square metres of exhibition space. Other rooms are available, seating up to 300.

A new conference centre is due to open on 31 March 2008, the Rimini Conference Centre. It will be able to seat 1,400 delegates and will offer 1,800 square metres of exhibition space. The complex will also include underground car parks and a shopping centre.

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Italy's capital is crammed full of landmarks and monuments. The Colosseum is one meeting place with no little history. Commissioned in 72 AD by Emperor Vespasian, it hosted games and events for over 100 years and held 50,000 spectators. The Pantheon, built in 27 BC, is an example of classical architecture. The city also boasts the spectacular Villa Borghesi and ruins of a Roman baths. Many weighty tomes have been written about places of ancient cultural significance in Rome.

The Sheraton Roma Hotel and Conference Centre lies between the city centre and the airport. The largest of its 24 meetings rooms seats 1,800, while the Hotel Villa Pamphili has 16 meeting rooms which can cater for up to 550. The Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore is one academic venue to consider for conferences.

Rome Convention Centre is also close to both airport and city centre and covers 3,000 square metres of space, while offering an auditorium seating 400, as well as a sound-proofed 200-seat conference hall.

PromoRoma is the Rome convention and visitors bureau, a consortium of hotels and tour operators founded in 1992.

Five members of ICCA are based in Rome, including Ega, a partner of The Incon Group; the DMC Fiorentino Travel Service; organiser Idea Congress; MSC Italian Cruises and The Triumph Group.

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Venice

Take a gondola to your meeting by canal. Venice Tourism describes the region as a meeting of east and west and doesn't have to try too hard to attract visitors.

Lido di Venezia and Congressi Spa manage Venice Convention Centre, located in the lagoon island of Lido. The centre is made up of three aspects. The Palazzo del Cinema and the nearby Palazzo del Casino offers space for 3,000 delegates. The PalaGalileo completes the conference facilities on the Lido, and can accommodate up to 1,300 delegates in its largest room.

There are many hotels with conference rooms, but big space is, like elsewhere, at a premium.

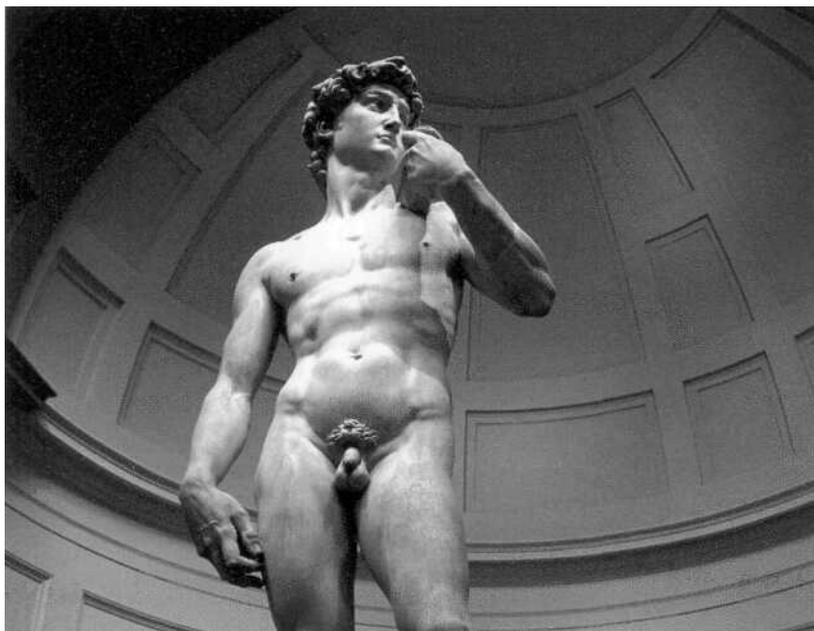
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Wherever you choose for your Italian meeting or event, delegates won't go hungry for food or history.



The Statue of David in Florence

Small and perfectly formed

EIS's Nicola Chater has long experience in promoting Italy as a meetings destination. She shares some of her insights here.

Italy is a perfect destination for conferences for up to 150 people. It offers a very pleasant climate, beautiful venues, stunning scenery, exceptional food and wine, and charming people. Italy has some excellent four- and five-star hotels in every city, and gorgeous villas and palazzi in the countryside.

However, when you are looking at holding a large conference in Italy (say, 300-plus), there are only so many places you can go.

Let's start with the cities which are home to the two major international airports, Rome and Milan.

In Rome you have the Cavalieri Hilton, which is situated on one of the seven hills surrounding Rome; you also have the Sheraton Roma which is located on the way out to Fiumicino Airport, and soon, hopefully, the new Rome Marriott Park Hotel, with conference facilities for up to 3,000 and nearly 600 bedrooms.

In Milan itself there is very little. The Milan Marriott Hotel would be the best bet. But, look north of Milan to the Lakes and you have an enormous choice of hotels suitable for conferences.

On Lake Maggiore there is the Dino Hotel, which has 375 rooms and conference facilities for up to 1,000 delegates, and it is only a 40 minute transfer from Malpensa Airport. There are also many slightly smaller hotels on this lake which have great conference facilities, and all offer better value for money than Milan itself. In addition, there is Lake Como, which does not offer any really large hotels, but, again, several hotels for meetings for up to 120 delegates; it is just 40 minutes from Linate Airport. With both lakes you have the bonus of wonderful scenery — the mountains and the lakes - fresh air, and some charming venues for dinners.

There are only two more hotels which offer large conference facilities. One is the Hilton Sorrento, which has now been completely refurbished, and the other hasn't opened yet. It is another Hilton Hotel, which is due to open up in Venice in 2007 with 380 rooms, and excellent meeting space. We are very excited by this opening, because the hotels in Venice tend to be on the small side, and, let's face it, everyone wants to go to Venice at



The Jolly Hotel in Naples

some time in their lives.

When you need to organise a conference or meeting in Italy, you need a first class Destination Management Company with in-depth knowledge of the destination; you want to be able to trust someone to tell you exactly what will work and what won't work, and who will add value to your event with their attention to detail, and their creativity.

EIS operates from Milan, Venice and The Lakes in the North, to Tuscany and Rome, and to Naples, Sorrento and the Amalfi Coast in the South, as well as on the islands of Capri, Sicily and Sardinia. Nicola Chater can be contacted on +44 (0)20 8998 2667, or e-mail Nicola@global-marketing-solutions.com website: www.eistours.com

A Jolly time

Jolly Hotels is a hotel chain in Italy specialising in meetings, with 38 properties and a presence in Paris, Brussels, Amsterdam, Berlin, Cologne, London and New York.

The company has renovated some of its properties in the past five years, with particular attention to the meetings facilities.

Jolly's head of sales and marketing, Dorella Lazzarotto, tells CMW: "The Italian conference and incentives market is growing, 2005 figures illustrated that the number of meetings and participants were increasing slightly over 2004, and projections for 2006 indicate that Italy is one of the favourite destinations in terms of conferences. The future looks bright."

We asked Lazzarotto what new trends can be observed among suppliers to the industry?

"The major trend concerns the lead time for meetings requests, which is now much shorter. Jolly has organised its departments in

order to respond to every last minute request with prompt and tailor-made proposals."

Lazzarotto foresees a future where mergers and takeovers will accelerate and, as a consequence, the need of meeting facilities is likely to increase.

"The market is consolidating," Lazzarotto explains. "Today 20 per cent of the Italian conference and incentives business takes place in hotels. Events are normally small or medium (50-300 participants) and they are generally held in cities famous for their history and art. However, only five per cent of the Italian hotel supply can be traced back to a brand, thus reducing clients' overall awareness of the Italian meetings product and service."

In the past, Lazzarotto believes, Italy has, maybe, relied too much on its reputation for culture and cuisine, without planning an overall improvement of its facilities.

"Now that Europe has become more and more competitive, with cities like Barcelona and Paris leading the way, a new and more effective strategy is to be expected from government officials to address issues such as infrastructure development, improvement of the transport network and to focus more on the promotion of Italy as a key destination," he adds.

Meanwhile, Lazzarotto says that Jolly Hotels intends to enlarge its international meetings market share. And its recent workshop in London at the Jolly Hotel, St Ermins, provided an introduction to the chain in the UK market.

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