

Historic icons are a hit



Dinner in the Forbidden City, a fashion show on the Great Wall, a cocktail party in the Great Hall of the People.

These – and many other novel options – are possible to organise in Beijing, a city that has a mind-blowing array of venues for anyone planning programmes for convention or incentive groups.

Take the Great Wall, an ancient structure open for contemporary business. Nowadays, any capable Mice organiser can secure permission for a private lunch, or dinner, on the ramparts of the largest engineering project the world has ever seen.

Several sections outside Beijing have been restored and are easily reached via the fast expressways. Fashion guru Karl Lagerfeld even staged a fashion show on part of the Great Wall.

Organisers of smaller-scale meetings and events can opt for booking a hotel located at the Great Wall. American entrepreneur Jim Spear, a long-time China resident, has just opened a boutique retreat.

The Brickyard Inn and Retreat Centre, located at the Mutianyu section of the Great Wall, is a luxury hideaway where all 16 rooms offer a view of China's most renowned ancient wonder. "Our

guests are looking for privacy, discretion and real hospitality," Spear says.

"It is located in a park-like setting with stunning views of the Great Wall and surrounding mountains, forests and orchards."

Groups looking for more strenuous outdoor adventure can book wall-walking weekends at the farmhouse of William Lindsay, an individual who once ran the length of the wall. The Briton also conducts tours for corporate groups.

The Forbidden City – the world's largest palace – can be rented out for private functions. Once home to the Ming and Qing emperors, it recently played host to a seated dinner for more than 700 guests of a financial company.

"This was one of the most exciting events ever

done in the Forbidden City and the largest sit-down dinner since the end of the imperial era," says Richard Rheindorf, country manager for events organiser Pacific World China.

Booking the main venues, such as the Beijing International Convention Centre, is as simple as any other city, but when fixing up functions in state-owned buildings such as the Great Hall of the People, in the heart of Tiananmen Square, it helps to have plenty of *guanxi*, or connections.

Although heritage sites in the city are unlikely to have international-level catering facilities, local hotels have become adept at setting up on-site kitchens.

"The popular places are different parts of the Great Wall, the Summer Palace, the Forbidden City, and many more historic sites," says Karen Chiang, Park Hyatt director of events.

Another popular spot is the 798 Art District, in an outer suburb, home to hundreds of tiny galleries, restaurants and bars. Corporate shindigs are held there regularly, particularly by organisations that want to highlight the modern, trendy side of Beijing. The Today Art Museum is also in demand for private events.

But it is the historical sites that capture the imagination of people from overseas.

Mark Graham



The Great Wall is a popular spot for special events and corporate functions.