

# WELCOME, STRANGER



Having been beleaguered by several years of economic turmoil, occasional social disquiet and a stream of seemingly intractable political dilemmas, it wouldn't be unreasonable to assume that the MICE and tourism industries of Greece might have taken a considerable pummelling. However, in its first full year of having a convention bureau in place, the northern city of Thessaloniki is proud to be able to relay that in fact the opposite is the case and the MICE scene in the city has not only remained healthy, but has been steadily growing and improving.

"Greece's national meeting industry, represented by the Hellenic Association of PCOs and the Athens and Thessaloniki convention bureaus, has moved to reassure international conference organisers that meetings will go ahead as planned, despite the huge uncertainty about the country's economic future, and overall there haven't been cancellations," said Efi Koudeli, General Manager of the Thessaloniki Convention Bureau (TCB). "We also continued with our strategy of participating in international MICE shows and representing Thessaloniki and its members and creating awareness at the national level of the importance of the development of MICE."

"As a result of all this Thessaloniki registered a remarkable rise in the 2014 ICCA rankings for city destinations, moving up from 209th to 108th place worldwide," she added. "The data also showed that Thessaloniki climbed 111 places with 22 international events (a 57 percent increase), whereas in 2013 Thessaloniki

hosted 14 events. In the European rankings, Thessaloniki experienced a leap of 51 places, from 111th to 60th position (with Frankfurt, Belfast and The Hague). The city's performance contributed to the overall position of the country in the rankings, as Greece climbed 18 places to 26th globally for hosting conferences and conventions, up from 100 conferences in 2013 to a total of 148."

Against a national backdrop of uncertainty, this positive trend in events being hosted in Thessaloniki has allowed TCB to hit the ground running from the get-go and start pulling together a tight web of industry players as part of its global outreach and to help strengthen their MICE allure.

"In its first full year of operations TCB has managed to respond successfully to the main challenges of building a strong network at the local, national and international level with the main stakeholders and hence further developing its membership programme, and at the same time gaining brand awareness in the MICE industry," said Koudeli. "Also through various initiatives we have created awareness among the local authorities and although the instability in a political context doesn't favour the decision making procedure in terms of bidding, at the same time we managed to boost brand awareness internationally and that has also affected Thessaloniki as a destination in a positive way."

"During this year alone we significantly increased our membership and we also managed to bring business to Thessaloniki - the 7th Urooncology Winter Congress (400 delegates) was

recently confirmed for January 2017 and also the Southeast Europe Economic Forum-SEEF (300 delegates)," said Koudeli. "In addition to this, the World Association of Chefs' Societies (WACS) Congress & Expo 2016 will be hosted in Thessaloniki and it will bring more than 2000 delegates to the city next September, which is something that couldn't have happened without the existence of TCB."

And so with a dynamic convention bureau in place and Thessaloniki's continued ability to attract and host headline events, this year's *PHILOXENIA* (meaning the famous Greek 'welcome for the stranger') trade show is set to take place at the city's HELEXPO venue in November. As one of the city and country's key windows showcasing the depth of its offer for both MICE and tourism, TCB is also preparing to use the stage to announce itself to the world in its first full year of operations, one that has seen tangible results already.

"HELEXPO, the organiser of *PHILOXENIA*, is one of TCB's main stakeholders and funding member, and *PHILOXENIA* will give us the opportunity to showcase to the tourism industry TCB's results so far after a year of operations and also meet selected hosted buyers from the region," said Koudeli. "This year the target is that the whole country with all of its regions will participate in the exhibition and, moreover, that more hotels and hotel chains are expected to participate. As far as the visitors are concerned an increase of 40% of traffic to the show was recorded in *PHILOXENIA* 2014 and this year the number of trade visitors is expected to be even bigger than that."

"In 2015 *PHILOXENIA* also aspires to promote its business character by running an extensive hosted buyers programme, with the organisers hosting more than 100 hosted buyers from more than 35 countries," she added. "The buyers are major tour operators from different sectors of the tourism industry and are ready to make appointments and deals with this year's exhibitors."

"Furthermore, TCB and HELEXPO will organise the second edition of the 'Destination Thessaloniki' Conference during *Philoxenia* and present Thessaloniki as gastronomic, educational and MICE destination," said Koudeli. "The first edition of the conference last year was successful and contributed significantly to creating awareness and underlining the importance of the MICE sector in the Greek tourism industry."

As *Philoxenia* once again sets out to bid a warm welcome to those wishing to visit and hold events in Greece, so TCB has already made itself very welcome in the fraternity of international convention bureaus. Welcome, stranger.