



THE BRIGHT FUTURE OF MEETINGS AND EVENTS IN THAILAND

Presented by

Skift.

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ABOUT SKIFT

Skift is the largest industry intelligence platform providing media, insights, and marketing to key sectors of travel. Skift deciphers and defines trends for global CEOs and CMOs across travel and wellness sectors through a combination of news, research, conferences, and marketing services.

ABOUT SKIFTX

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions (MICE) industry in Thailand is stronger now than ever before and is expected to continue growing. In a 2018 ranking by the [International Congress and Convention Association](#), Bangkok was listed as one of the world's top 10 cities for international association meetings for the first time. Today, Bangkok is one of Asia's most exciting cities and a major business hub for the region, especially after hosting the Association of Southeast Asian Nations summit in 2019.

This report examines the growing success of the destination and looks at how the Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau (TCEB) is working with the government to cast the spotlight on other designated MICE cities — Chiang Mai, Khon Kaen,

Pattaya, and Phuket — beyond Bangkok. It also analyzes how Thailand is duplicating the success of its top five MICE cities in other parts of the nation in a bid to grow the economy by diversifying and distributing income to various regions across the country.

Food tourism figures prominently in [the Thailand 4.0 economic development plan](#) that is transforming the country. With the rising popularity of food tourism, a significant force in the travel industry, few destinations are as primed to capitalize on the trend as Thailand. This report will look at how tour operators, hotels, and others in the travel sector are rapidly enhancing the ways in which visitors experience the country's culinary offerings — and how meeting planners are taking note.



EXECUTIVE LETTER

Bangkok was named the world's most visited city in [2018](#). This is just one example of a long list of accolades that reaffirm Thailand's prime position as a hub for both tourism and MICE. Not only is the nation blessed with diverse natural beauty, but it caters to all types of travelers with versatile venues and an impressive selection of hotels and vibrant dining and cultural scenes.

However, as the travel industry continues to evolve, every destination must redefine its image to meet changing consumer demands. The age of personalization is upon us, with travelers increasingly looking for engaging and memorable experiences.



Chiruit Isarangkun Na Ayuthaya,
President of TCEB

This has become imperative in the MICE sector, where curating personalized experiences is a top priority for many local and international organizers. The days of travelers experiencing Thailand on a surface level are over. Instead, visitors seek the unique features of a destination and look for things they can't find anywhere else.

The Thai government is taking travelers' increasing demands for local experiences seriously. As the official agency tasked with developing global and regional business events, the Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau (TCEB) offers stakeholders a dynamic support network they can use to execute successful events.

Further, a number of other innovative tools and comprehensive resources are being introduced to help planners create meaningful events. For example, the MICE Intelligence and Innovation Department helps planners optimize their events through intelligence dashboards and performance analysis, and campaigns like TCEB and Thai Airways' joint initiative, ASEAN MaxiMICE, shows how strategic partners can join forces to offer privileges customized for MICE travelers.

As the nature of business travel continues to change, TCEB gives international organizers a glimpse into what currently defines Thailand as a MICE destination as well as future developments to watch for.

Chiruit Isarangkun Na Ayuthaya,
President of TCEB

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Chiruit Isarangkun Na Ayuthaya". The signature is stylized and fluid.

INTRODUCTION: WHY THAILAND IS POISED FOR GROWTH



Thailand is already one of the world's most in-demand destinations for leisure travelers, with "38 million foreign arrivals spending \$65 billion in 2018," [Skift recently reported](#), and the "[Tourism Authority of Thailand] eyeing 40 million foreign arrivals in 2019." That's enough to make it one of the 10 most-visited countries in the world, according to the United Nations World Tourism Organization. This can be attributed in large part to buzzy, booming Bangkok and emerging cities like Phuket and Chiang Mai.

The Thai capital "was the world's most-visited city in 2018 for the fourth consecutive year, ahead of Paris

and London," [Bloomberg reported](#) in September 2019. The city "hosted more than 22 million international overnight travelers, Mastercard's latest Global Destination Cities Index shows. Paris and London followed in second and third with just over 19 million each." And Bangkok's airports are enjoying some of the hottest growth in APAC: From 2014-2019, Don Mueang International saw a 75 percent increase in available seats and Suvarnabhumi Airport had a 25 percent bump, according to data from [Cirium](#). Combined, the airports offered more than 64 million seats in 2018.

Of course, not all of those arrivals are coming for meetings and events — but many are. TCEB's latest [statistics](#) show approximately 1.3 million international business travelers in 2019, with 1.6 million projected for 2020. These numbers are up significantly compared to years past, according to TCEB, as companies around the world embrace flexible working arrangements, “bleisure” trips, and more inventive and creative incentive travel. In their quest to find destinations that provide rich cultural experiences, cost-effective facilities, and meaningful attendee interactions, [planners are looking beyond the usual places for their events](#) — and they're finding success in Thailand.

TCEB helped foster that growth by hosting its own industry-facing event, the Thailand MICE Forum 2019. The day-long conference gathered an influential audience of hospitality executives from brands like Dusit Thani and Thai Airways and government officials for panel discussions, seminars, and networking. “The convention will accelerate business opportunities from 550 delegates from 50 countries worldwide, which can generate more than 44 million baht (\$1.4 million) of revenue for Thai economy,” said a TCEB spokesperson [in a release](#). “Even better, the world will learn about the readiness of Bangkok, in terms of the capabilities to host global events.”

Attendees were bullish on the future of the country's meeting and event sector. “Thailand's global profile as a hub for international exhibitions has grown significantly in recent years, and our latest UFI research data shows that the market is well-positioned for additional growth in the years to come,” said Kai Hattendorf, the managing director and CEO of UFI, The Global Association of the Exhibition Industry.

Thailand is also a terrific value, said Sam Lay, senior director, Asia Pacific, at CWT Meetings & Events. “Availability of quality tourism and hospitality infrastructure provides a strong catalyst for more



global and regional meetings and events,” [Lay said in a recent report](#). The report also highlights the forthcoming Bangkok convention center, due to be completed by 2022, which will triple the amount of space presently available at the Queen Sirikit National Convention Center.

The push to win more meeting business is just one part of a major economic revitalization underway in the country. The government of Thailand’s major policy blueprint, known as [Thailand 4.0](#), emphasizes the power of tourism — and in particular meetings and events — to drive growth. Other pillars of the economic platform include strengthening environmental protection and developing “networks of innovation-driven enterprise.”

The country has also seen considerable investment in luxury hotels in recent years, many of which offer meeting space or the potential for buyouts. The Rosewood Bangkok, which opened in 2019, has “hotel meeting spaces that cater to small- and medium-size events that are very upscale and exclusive,” said Thomas Harlander, the property’s managing director. “After being open for just four months, we have now an average of 20 events per month.” At the Park Hyatt Bangkok, “we average a healthy number of meetings and high-profile event

bookings per month,” said Lalidaphun Chavananand, the property’s director of events.

“The country has so much to offer all in one, including a distinct culture, the mountains in the north, a metropolitan city, and some of the best islands and beaches in the world in the south,” Chavananand said. “There’s world-class shopping, a vibrant nightlife, medical treatment, and of course we’re a global food destination, especially now with the support and recognition from the Michelin Guide.”

On the horizon, the ultra-luxury brand Aman will open a new hotel in Bangkok in 2022. “Nestled in the century-old tropical gardens of Nai Lert Park, Aman Nai Lert Bangkok will offer a unique connection to the rich heritage and history of Bangkok enhanced by the gracious traditions of Thailand,” said Vladislav Doronin, chairman and CEO of Aman, in a release.

The destination has also benefited from the rise of food tourism, a significant force in the travel industry more broadly, according to data from Skift Research. “About one in four recent travelers have taken a trip motivated by a [specific] food and/or drink experience,” [wrote Meghan Carty in a recent report](#). When it comes to Thailand specifically, the food is a major draw for both leisure and business travelers, said Andrea Ross, the director of Wild Frontiers US and a specialist in Southeast Asia travel. “While some people choose a full culinary tour, almost all of our travelers have at least some culinary elements as part of their trip, whether it’s a local street market tour or a cooking class.”

All these developments should keep Thailand top of mind for planners in the future. In fact, the country is already on the top 10 list for meeting and event destinations, according to Global DMC Partners, a trade group. “Identifying destinations for this list helps us present secondary markets and those intriguing destinations that our clients will soon discover are also perfect for meetings and



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Millennials are playing an important role in the evolution of the MICE industry, as they make up a substantial number of organizers and an average of almost 40 percent of attendee groups. What sets this specific generation apart from the rest is that the experience is viewed as the key product.

— Supawan Teerarat, senior vice president, TCEB

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incentives. Flight patterns, cost-effective local options, and a wide range of unique activities are just a few of the reasons why these destinations are already showing popularity,” said Global DMC Partners president Catherine Chaulet [in a 2019 release](#).

Meanwhile “more than 80 international association meetings [have] been booked for Thailand,” according to data from the International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA). Thailand is already the fifth most popular meeting destination in Asia, according to ICCA, with 193 large events held in 2018, ahead of destinations including India, Hong Kong, and Singapore. While Bangkok is far and away the most popular site for large events, Chiang Mai and Pattaya also hosted a number of mega-meetings in 2018, ICCA said.

One target group of particular interest is millennials, said Supawan Teerarat, TCEB’s senior vice president. “Millennials are playing an important role in the evolution of the MICE industry, as they make up a substantial number of organizers and an average of almost 40 percent of attendee groups. What sets this specific generation apart from the rest is that the experience is viewed as the key product,” Teerarat said.

The destination’s unique attributes and growing infrastructure make it an ideal choice for the future, said Phumin Meetawornkul, senior executive for MICE intelligence and innovation at TCEB. “There’s so

much culture, and there are so many things that our emerging destinations can offer beyond Bangkok,” Meetawornkul said. And Nichapa Yoswee, senior vice president of business at TCEB, said: “While we enjoy great success in our major cities, we’re keen to promote alternative locations that are not as widely known to global business event planners. There’s plenty for planners to discover in these ‘off the beaten track’ destinations — from sea cruises to luxury spas to indigenous textiles — Thailand has something for everyone.” ♦



Supawan Teerarat, senior vice president of TCEB

New Venues Capture Meeting Planners' Attention

Thailand has numerous conference facilities, and event planners can go beyond the typical four walls with unique meeting and event venues like these newcomers.

ChangChui Creative Park, Bangkok

This mixed-used development inspires visitors through art, design, and ideas. Organizers can choose from eight different event spaces of varying size and functionality. The creative park also caters to all food and beverage needs with a food pavilion, cafes, tea houses, and bars. Be sure to explore the full-sized decommissioned airplane.

Kao Mai Estate 1955, Chiang Mai

Kao Mai Estate 1955 has transformed a tobacco drying factory into a picturesque venue that includes restaurants, hotels, meeting rooms, and museums. This venue offers a look into Chiang Mai's fascinating history and culture amid lush greenery and architecture. The Estate has won many awards, including the UNESCO Asia-Pacific Award 2018 for Cultural Heritage Conservation in New Design in Heritage Contexts and the Golden Pin Design Award 2018.

Mae Fah Luang Art & Cultural Park, Chiang Rai

This is an art and cultural park like no other. It offers meeting rooms and a unique venue suitable for hosting authentic local events and food markets. Guests can learn about the local Lanna culture through a number of attractions such as the Haw Kham pavilion, an example of traditional architecture and home to a permanent exhibition of teak artefacts, religious objects, and traditional household utensils.

Supanniga Home, Khon Kaen

This boutique hotel is set on the edge of town on vast grounds strewn with exotic flowers and ponds. Events, seminars, and workshops can be hosted in a lavish setting for up to 600 guests, taking them out of the city and into a beautiful private garden with ethereal landscapes and ambience.

Kathu Old Liquor Factory, Phuket

Phuket's old liquor factory has been renovated and now features an outdoor garden, while the interior hosts the city's museum. The location can also serve as a meeting venue for 100 people or a space for welcome parties in a retro atmosphere. ♦

MAKING OF A MICE CITY: WHY THAILAND'S FUTURE LOOKS BRIGHT



Photo by Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau

The MICE industry in Thailand is stronger now than ever before and is expected to continue growing. Thailand is expected to attract more than 1.3 million MICE travelers and generate nearly \$4 billion USD in revenue by 2022, [according to a September 2019 forecast report by Kenneth Research](#).

THE FIVE TOP PRIORITY MICE CITIES IN THAILAND

TCEB plans to capitalize on its [recent success](#) by doubling down on the five designated MICE cities

— Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Khon Kaen, Pattaya, and Phuket. These cities will continue to receive major infrastructure investments as part of the government's [Thailand 4.0 policy](#). TCEB is carrying out the government's policy to grow the economy by diversifying and distributing income to various regions across the country, said the bureau [in a release](#). These cities, which have been identified based on their MICE potential, are eligible for the bureau's support as well as for inclusion in the bureau's promotional initiatives. Improvements in areas like transportation and facilities will ensure that these cities are well-equipped to welcome business travelers.

Mega projects include a new submarine communication cable that connects Thailand to Hong Kong and China, an electric rail system in Bangkok, and expansion of major airports such as Suvarnabhumi Airport, Don Mueang International Airport, and Chiang Mai International Airport.

The bureau has identified “[Thailand Seven MICE Magnificent Themes](#)” to help support the itineraries for [25 “routes.”](#) These routes (five built in each of the five MICE cities) have been designed to highlight experiences of interest to MICE visitors.

Those seven magnificent themes are: fascinating history and culture, exhilarating adventures, treasured team building, corporate social responsibility and green meetings, beach bill, lavish luxury, and culinary journeys. Drawing from the attributes and offerings of each of these themes, each route is devised to deliver a unique experience that is relevant to the host city and attractive to meeting attendees.

Highlight experiences include participating in the restoration of marine life in Pattaya and learning about the production of organic coffee from a local community in Chiang Mai. MICE travelers can also enjoy varied gastronomic offerings, ranging from Michelin-starred restaurants to innovative street vendors. The country now has 27 restaurants with Michelin stars and 72 restaurants with a [Bib Gourmand](#) rating. Other new attractions are being developed for small groups as well. For example, Bangkok has a new ultra-luxury shopping complex along the river as well as the King Power Mahanakhon Observation Deck, which is the highest point in Bangkok.

Developments are also underway in Pattaya, [which is the third largest city](#) after Bangkok and Phuket for MICE traffic. While Pattaya has traditionally been a popular destination for visitors seeking beachside relaxation and water activities, another major draw is the wide selection of restaurants serving some of Thailand’s freshest seafood.



Several projects are ongoing, such as the expansion of U-Tapao airport and infrastructure developments to link ground, sea, and air transport systems throughout the provinces of Rayong, Chachoengsao, and Chon Buri. “These movements are the main supporting factors for leveraging the development of MICE businesses in Pattaya,” Chiruit Isarangkun Na Ayuthaya, TCEB’s president, said [in a release. A plan](#) to build a new convention center in one of the three provinces is under review and is expected to be finalized in the first half of 2020.

In the northern region, TCEB is developing Chiang Mai by collaborating with local communities and stakeholders to introduce activities for corporate travelers showcasing the region’s local culture. The bureau also worked with the province to showcase “[MICE Events in the Rain](#),” promoting its array of creative attractions, unique cultural assets, and modern facilities during Thailand’s annual rainy season. Under the vision “Chiang Mai the Splendid City of Culture and Destination for MICE in Asia,” TCEB also identified [six post-tour programs](#) to reflect Chiang Mai’s local lifestyle, with one of the events showcasing local gastronomy.

Thailand's growth as a popular meeting destination is the result of a deliberate and proactive strategy deployed by TCEB. For example, every effort is being employed to make Phuket a preferred meeting destination by increasing Phuket International Airport's passenger capacity from 12.5 million to 18 million. There is also a plan to construct a light-rail system from the airport to the city center.

[Khon Kaen](#), in northeast Thailand, is expected to grow as a MICE destination, as this region is the primary focus of the government's East-West Economic Corridor (EWEC) scheme. The scheme intends to link Thailand with the neighboring countries of China, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam through improved transport connections. China remains the top source market for MICE travelers to Thailand, according to TCEB May 2019 data, and this direct connection will further fuel growth in inbound travelers from China. Khon Kaen is now home to the third largest convention center in the country, with around 15,000 square meters (161,459 square feet) of space.

HOW THAILAND IS DUPLICATING THE SUCCESS OF ITS TOP FIVE MICE CITIES

Thailand's rapid MICE growth doesn't end with its top five MICE cities. In fact, [nine other MICE cities](#) are being developed throughout Thailand — Chiam, Chiang Rai, Hua Hin, Nakhon Ratchasima, Phitsanulok, Rayong, Songkhla, Surat Thani, and Udon Thani. According to Nooch Homrossukhon, director of TCEB's meetings and incentives department, the goal is to grow interest in areas outside Bangkok, which remains the top meeting

destination in the country today. "Repeat visitors especially will want to try an alternative city other than Bangkok, and we are trying to drive business into these other cities," she said.

As the meeting industry in Asia Pacific grows even more, "Meeting planners are looking for different places that cannot be found in their own countries today, and we have many off-site venues to offer," Homrossukhon said. "They don't want to fly into another country and sit in another square room." Research surveying meeting planners in Australia and Asia Pacific from the International Association of Conference Centers supports Homrossukhon's understanding of what meeting planners are looking for. In fact, 66 percent of planners surveyed agreed with the statement: "My current role in planning meetings involves more experience creation for delegates compared to my role planning meetings five years ago." ♦

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Meeting planners are looking for different places that cannot be found in their own countries today and we have many offsite venues to offer.

— Nooch Homrossukhon, director of meetings and incentives, TCEB

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Q&A: CHIRUIT ISARANGKUN NA AYUTHAYA, PRESIDENT OF TCEB



TCEB has been working toward establishing Thailand as Asia's premier business event destination since 2004. Chiruit Isarangkun Na Ayuthaya, president of TCEB, provides a deeper look at meetings in Thailand and what the bureau is currently doing to keep Thailand on top of its game.

SkiftX: Firstly, can you give us an update on the state of business events in Thailand?

Chiruit: Thailand's MICE industry continues to grow consistently, both domestically and internationally. At the end of 2019, the nation welcomed close to 1.3 million international business travelers. It is the fourth consecutive year that the country attracted over a million overseas travelers and around 30

million recorded for domestic travelers, and both generated \$6.5 billion USD in revenue to the economy.

Being among the most visited countries in terms of tourism has helped promote Thailand as a preferred destination for meetings and incentives, and this sector contributes to more than 50 percent of the overall MICE revenue.

What are some of the hottest inbound markets?

Asia has been Thailand's biggest source market. The top three are China, India, and Malaysia. In 2019, travelers from China and India exceeded 200,000 for the first time. Another impressive growth market is the CLMV region, covering Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam. Travelers from CLMV have exceeded 100,000 for two consecutive years after a mere 50,000 in 2017.

What makes MICE visitors critical to the country, and what kind of social impact do they carry?

The MICE industry's expenditure in Thailand totals around \$17.6 billion USD, contributing three percent to GDP and generating \$1,130 million in tax revenue. The industry also creates 340,595 jobs. The MICE industry is identified as one of the key engines of national economic growth and transformation in the country's 20-year strategic development plan.

The growth and potential of the industry meanwhile has stimulated new investments in all major MICE cities with the opening of new hotels and convention centers.

What role does TCEB play in growing the overall MICE sector?

As a government agency, we aim to use MICE as a tool to match with the Thailand 4.0 economic transformation model, where we have four roles. Firstly, it is to co-create business opportunities by attracting business events or winning bids to the country.

Secondly, TCEB forms partnerships with the private sector to co-design and co-develop schemes and incentives that can generate better return on investment for business events. The partnerships also apply to joint marketing activities in overseas markets during road shows and trade shows.

Third is collaboration. We collaborate with related government agencies in facilitating business events

to enable them to reap better return on time if they hold events in Thailand. And of course thought leadership is our final role, where we drive innovation with new initiatives that will grow the industry on a sustainable basis.

TCEB introduced the Thailand MICE Venue Standards, or TMVS, certification in 2014 as part of efforts to enhance the image and confidence of the country's MICE sector for both service providers and users. TMVS was created to help venue owners develop or improve their facilities and services to meet global requirements.

Other initiatives include the launch of two mobile applications, Smart Biz Event and Smart Biz Organizer, to support MICE organizers in introducing new technology platforms. ♦



TRENDS IN MEETINGS AND INCENTIVES: WHY FOOD IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER



In the global travel industry, food and culinary experiences are more important than ever. “Culinary travel has transcended ‘trend’ to become its own niche, with amazing food and drink now considered essential to any trip,” according to the luxury travel consortium Virtuoso.

“Cooking classes, eating in private homes, Michelin-starred restaurants, farm-to-table visits, truffle hunting — culinary experiences are as varied as travelers themselves, and allow foodies to go beyond a seat at the table. Dining has become such a focus that some travelers are requesting

restaurant reservations at the same time they book their flights — sometimes even before,” Virtuoso said in [a report released on October 17](#).

That same obsession with culinary tourism is confirmed by Skift’s own research. In a recent survey, Skift found that four in five consumers specifically seek out local food while on a trip. More than half visit food shops or markets to experience local flavors. And almost half of all recent travelers have “gone on vacation with a food and/or drink related travel experience as the main purpose of the trip,” according to [data from Skift Research](#).

In other words, consumers travel for food — and dining experiences are now driving the destination choices of people worldwide. Countless localities have tried to step up their culinary offerings in recent years, Skift has reported, and many destination marketing organizations have made highlighting food and drink offerings a key part of their messaging strategy.

The classics still (often) reign supreme. For iconic food-centric places like France, Italy, and Thailand, culinary experiences remain a key driver for visitation — both by leisure and business travelers. And as today's meeting planners look to deliver more engaging programming, attendees are seeking out those events that similarly deliver food and drink experiences that can't be found anywhere else.

To leverage on this obsession with food, TCEB is promoting [culinary journeys](#) as part of the incentive experience for business travelers. These offerings include cooking classes and market and organic farm visits, which invite travelers to taste and explore Thailand's rich heritage.

When it comes to Thailand, food is more than just an area of interest — it's an essential part of the destination, [according to the Tourism Authority of Thailand](#). "Thai food can be an experience itself, an adventure that teaches visitors about the local people and culture," the agency said.

American travelers, in particular, are clued in to the flavors of Thai food, thanks in part to a multi-year government initiative to export the national cuisine to the United States that began around the turn of the 21st century. The campaign has been highly effective, with more than 5,000 Thai restaurants operating in the U.S. That may be one reason that, since 2009, Google searches for "Thai food" have more than quadrupled, according to the search giant. And as Americans have become more familiar with Thai flavors, they've also grown more curious about [unique regional dishes](#) and distinctive regional styles of cooking like Isan (from the northeast) or Lannaese (from the area around Chiang Mai).



“Thai food is so popular in the U.S. that it’s a major draw for travelers,” said Andrea Ross, director of [Wild Frontiers US](#) and a specialist in Southeast Asia travel. “It’s as big a draw for many people as are the islands and beaches.”

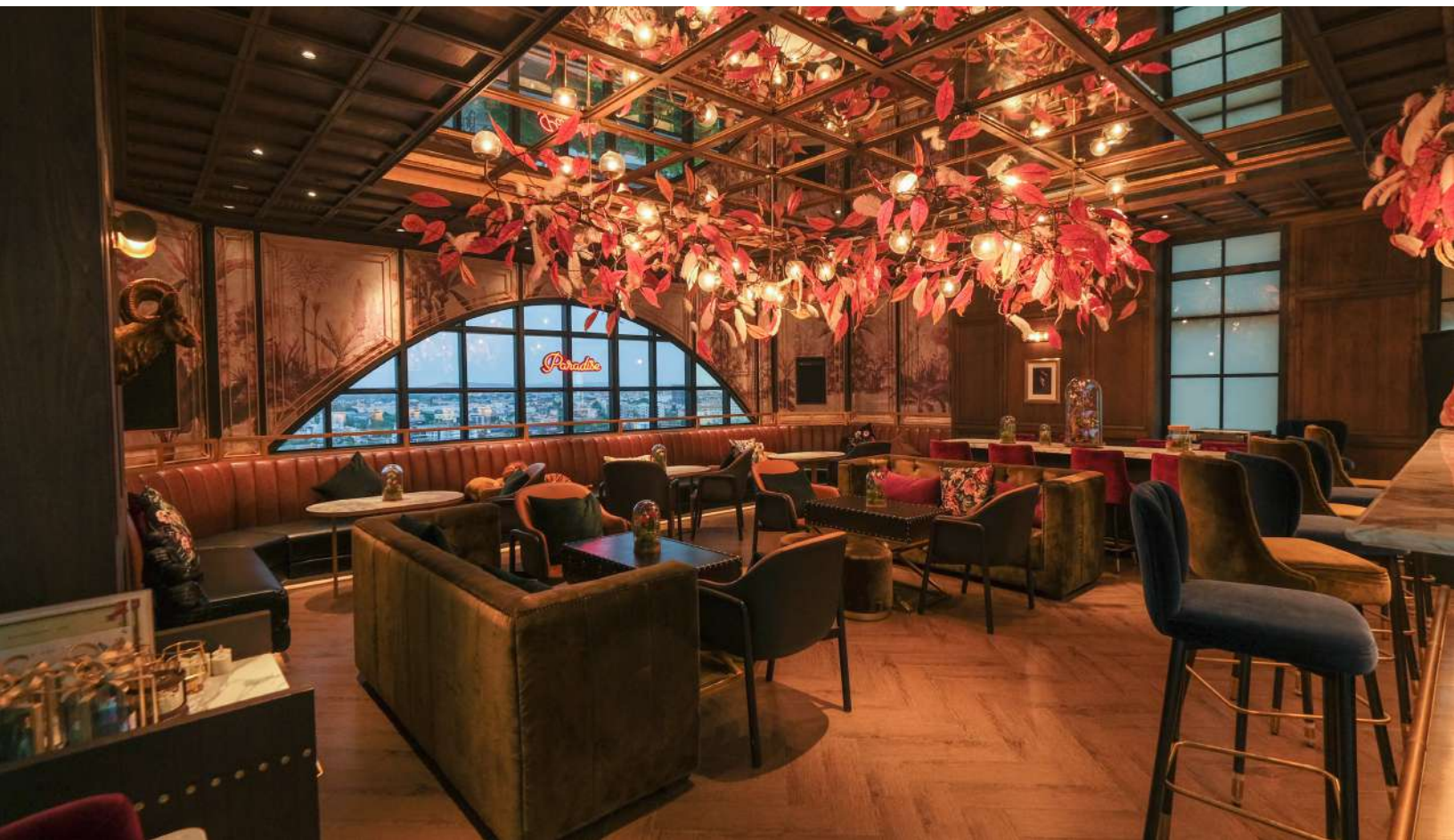
Now those consumers are going to Thailand to try the authentic cuisine, said [Phumin Meetawornkul](#), senior executive for MICE intelligence and innovation at TCEB. In recent years, the focus on high-quality food has really taken off, thanks in part to international attention, he said. “There’s been a big change for the food industry in Thailand. We now have so many restaurants trying to get Michelin stars. And that means at many of the restaurants in Thailand, they’re trying to develop themselves, in terms of service, the experience, the flavors, and the presentation. And that’s been a big change.”

It seems to be working: Michelin continues to rate the destination highly, with additional accolades going to numerous restaurants across the country

in the 2019 edition of the influential guidebook. “This year’s guide is a reflection of the growing talent in Thailand’s culinary scene with many new restaurants added to the selection, including now 14 specializing in Thai food, reinforcing Thailand’s reputation as a go-to destination for gastronomy,” said Gwendal Poullennec, international director of the Michelin Guides, [in a release](#).

At the Siam Kempinski Hotel Bangkok, many events request local food during the sessions or even cooking classes that allow attendees to learn more about Thai cuisine, said Khwunduan Boonkijrungsaisan, director of groups and events at the property.

“Thailand offers lots of immersive experiences that have been part of our travel programs for quite some time, including cooking lessons,” said Patranuch Sudasna, a project manager at CDM, an event production and destination management company.



Getting out of the boardroom and into a local market is also increasing in popularity, said Chavatvit Muangkeo, who's developing a trade group of MICE stakeholders in Northwestern Thailand known as Visit Lanna. "In Lanna culture, we have the 'kaad mua' (literally 'messy market'), where you can find seasonal produce and local goodies. Lately, it's become a super hit for events — much more popular than a traditional buffet or cocktail banquet," he said.

For some venues, the process of developing culinary programs is still ongoing. "Food tours are not something we offer at the moment, but with Park Hyatt's passion for food, it's something we would certainly consider providing guests — that unique look into the local food scene," said Lalidaphun Chavananand, director of events at the Park Hyatt Bangkok.

Event professionals can also tap tour operators beyond event venues to help attendees experience Thai food. Intrepid Travel, for one, offers an eight-day "[real food adventure](#)" that takes visitors to "explore bustling markets spread out over land and water, and taste exotic fruits and aromatic dishes whipped up in front of your eyes," according to the company. Travelers on the guided departure "learn the trick behind making palm sugar, experience the thrill of a passing train in the Mae Glong railway market, slurp noodles alongside the locals in Bangkok, whip up a jungle curry in Kanchanaburi, enjoy home cooking with a family in Chiang Mai, sit down to a Khantohk feast, and tour all the must-see sights of Thailand in one incredible culinary journey," according to Intrepid. In an ideal scenario, meeting and incentive travelers would combine work with a pre- or post-event tour, focused on gastronomy because food

tourism "[encourages] exploration outside of main areas and attractions in a destination," according to Meghan Carty, writing for Skift Research.

Some travel experts are keen for Thailand to use consumer interest in food as a way to leverage the country's many other positive attributes. "Thai food is incredible, so I can understand why some people might want to go there for foodie tourism," said Catherine Heald, the co-founder and CEO of [Remote Lands](#), a tour operator. "But it would be superficial to go only for the food and to miss out on the culture. Food is an important element, but it's only part of the reason to travel to Thailand," she said. "With wonderful culture and history, stunning architecture and temples, fascinating religion, fantastic adventure sports (zip lining, whitewater rafting, diving, hiking), a plethora of five-star hotels, and gorgeous beaches, Thailand is in many ways the perfect destination. And it's ideal for couples and families participating in MICE events." ♦



Making the Authentic Accessible for Meeting Attendees

According to [TripAdvisor](#), food-related experiences are dominating traveler booking growth today. Food tours are the fastest-growing experience category based on traveler spend, which increased a whopping 61 percent from 2016 to 2017 — a trend that continues to grow.

No surprise then that tour operators in Thailand are offering an increasing number of ways for groups to experience local flavors. Cookly is one such Bangkok-based online booking platform for cooking classes and culinary experiences. According to Cookly's CEO and co-founder, Benjamin Ozsana, there are more travelers today seeking "true Thai flavors" who are searching for classes or experiences that teach more regional or traditional dishes.

"For traveling foodies, Thailand provides a wide range of dining options, from humble delicious street food to Michelin fine dining, at relatively cheap prices," Ozsana said. Apart from imparting cooking skills, Cookly also offers programs that include market and garden tours.

Explaining the growing surge in interest in Thai food, he said: "Thai food has been heavily promoted in recent years by famous culinary authorities, so many [of Cookly's] users are looking to follow the footsteps of these tastemakers and embark on their own culinary adventure in Thailand."

Max Boontawee Jantasuwana, founder and CEO of Events Travel Asia Group, said: "Travelers today are looking for interesting programs that have a story inside to make it more meaningful for them." Food is "definitely one of the key" factors meeting planners consider when selecting their incentive activity, he said.

Another example of a creative operator is Taste of Thailand Food Tours, which offers private guided trips across the country. "Eating is almost a national sport here, and meals are not only thrice daily but are numerous and spaced out from early morning until very late," said Sarah Davis, Taste of Thailand's chief of operations. "The mere fact that food is so important here makes Thailand a true foodie destination." As part of their efforts to boost culinary tourism, they launched Bangkok's first self-guided food tour app in 2018 to invite foodies to explore and eat their way through Bangkok using their smartphones.

"We realize that some travelers prefer a DIY approach to their itineraries, but they do still appreciate a local's recommendations and a bit of history behind their culinary adventures, so the self-guided tour idea came about to fill that specific niche," Davis said.

Meanwhile Thai Bus Food Tour, a double-decker bus that provides a ride-and-dine journey, offers a different type of gourmet experience. Newly rolled out in May 2019, the two-hour bus tour allows passengers to enjoy six-course meals in style while going past the iconic landmarks of Bangkok. The menu includes Michelin-recommended items from some of the most famous local and authentic restaurants like Thipsamai's signature tasty noodles pad Thai and shrimp dumplings from Jok Kitchen. ◆

CONCLUSION



Food and food tourism figure prominently in [the Thailand 4.0 economic development plan](#) that is transforming the country. The government is backing a series of projects driving innovation in the space, including [the National Food Institute](#), to promote functional, medical, organic, and novel foods. [Foodinnopolis](#) is a research and development lab focused on culinary creativity. And tourism authorities are staging [food festivals](#), producing [maps and guides](#) to local flavors in Bangkok, and helping various localities organize better and more varied food tourism offerings, [according to Pacific Asia Travel Association](#), the Asia-focused trade group.

For meeting planners, this all translates to a dynamic destination with world-class culinary experiences that will entice attendees. Event organizers can now create their own food tours and work with partner venues to integrate Thai flavors boosting the destination's reputation as a hub for memorable meeting and culinary experiences.

Moreover TCEB's recent bid wins of 13 international conferences, 17 new trade shows, and 12 mega-sized meeting and incentive programmes which will be

welcoming more than 100,000 delegates, has brought much cheer to the destination.

Such outstanding performance is a result of the bureau's continued hard work through the five main pillars:

1. Aligning itself to Thailand 4.0, the country's new economic model
2. Creating and distributing income to other parts of Thailand
3. Enhancing the image of MICE and establishing TCEB as the leader in driving the MICE industry
4. Encouraging innovative development and competitiveness
5. Adopting fair and transparent administration

TCEB has been working towards establishing Thailand as Asia's premier business events destination since 2004. And their efforts are clearly paying off as it looks set to achieve this ambitious goal. ♦

ABOUT SKIFT

Skift is the largest intelligence platform in travel, providing media, insights, marketing to key sectors of the industry. Through daily news, research, podcasts, and Skift Global Forum conferences, Skift deciphers and defines the trends that matter to the marketers, strategists, and technologists shaping the industry.

SkiftX is Skift's in-house content marketing studio, working collaboratively with partners like Adobe, Airbnb, Hyatt, Lyft, Mastercard, and many more on custom projects to engage the world's largest audience of travel influencers and decision makers.

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ABOUT THAILAND CONVENTION & EXHIBITION BUREAU

Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau (TCEB) is a public organization established by Royal Decree in 2002 to promote and develop the business tourism sector in Thailand. Since 2004, TCEB has successfully established the country as one of Asia's largest business event hubs, reflecting Thailand's growing reputation as a destination of choice for international meetings, incentive travel, conventions, and exhibitions.

The government of Thailand has identified the key industries that will spur economic growth under the Thailand 4.0 plan, and TCEB has aligned its strategies accordingly to support the national policy, elevating standards and supporting positive transformation.

For more information, please visit businesseventsthailand.com.

