

01 Beijing



Capital attractions

Beijing boasts many superb modern meeting venues set against a historical backdrop

By Gabrielle Jaffe

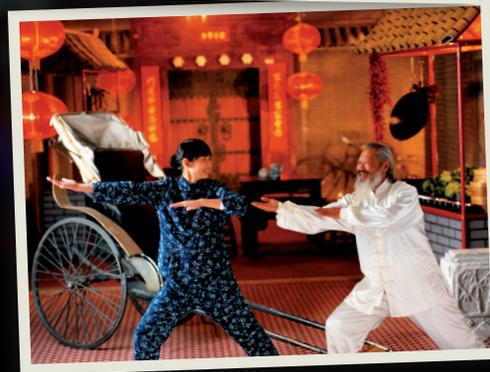
The **China World Hotel** is located at a prime address in Beijing's central business district. One of the first five-star hotels in the area, it has recently renovated its Arcade Level meeting rooms. "The rooms now serve modern meeting requirements, with in-built WiFi, projectors and separate, attached pantries so you can make coffee without disturbing others," says Gina Ho, director of sales and marketing.

Aside from the size of its meeting facilities (its 21 rooms offer capacities ranging from 20 to 1,200 people) and its ability to offer eco-friendly services, the hotel is an attractive option for large, international get-togethers thanks to its links with the neighbouring **China World Summit Wing**, **Traders** and **Kerry** hotels, which, like the China World, all belong to the Shangri-La group.

"Many conferences are too big for one hotel to host all the delegates overnight. Combined, our four hotels have over 2,000 guest rooms," says Ho. "When Baker & McKenzie's partners came to Beijing, they booked out 1,000 rooms. The beauty of our connected hotels is that there are rooms for every level. You put the executives in the Summit Wing; Traders is the more affordable option.

"We work as one team, which makes it easier for the event planner," she adds.

Down the road, the St. Regis Beijing upgraded some of its smaller meeting rooms in September last year. "We increased capacity and installed a control board system which allows the meeting organiser to control the audio-visual



China charm A foyer at St. Regis Beijing (top); a performance at the China World Hotel's 'Food Street' (above)

"Combined, our four hotels have over 2,000 guest rooms"
Gina Ho, China World

equipment from his seat," says Juliana Yeo, director of sales and marketing. The hotel boasts 11 meeting rooms, with capacities ranging from eight to 350, and a large garden that can seat 360 banquet style.

Elsewhere in the CBD, the **Regent Beijing** has now opened a second ballroom, the 288 sqm Celestial room, bringing the number of meeting rooms at the hotel to eight, with capacities ranging between 12 and 600.

"We are not chasing large conventions," says George Benney, managing director. "Instead of big ballrooms with ancillary facilities all around, our spaces are separate and intimate. The Celestial room has been used for everything from a meeting for Louis Vuitton's Asia Pacific department heads to an Omega Pharmaceuticals product launch."

Fairmont Beijing has also enlarged one of its meetings rooms and now offers two spaces that can host 150 people standing and 90 seated. Reto Borer, executive committee member overseeing banqueting and events at the hotel, points to the unique team-building activities that the property offers corporate clients. "We work with the Beijing Cultural Heritage Protection Centre to create special tours of Beijing's historic areas."

Another example of the hotel's commitment to CSR is its collaboration with Special Commune, an organisation that helps the mentally challenged find employment. "We send clients to pick their own vegetables at Commune's farm. They bring the produce back to the hotel and we use it to make dinner for them."

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Bright start All meeting rooms at Langham Place have natural light



Set for takeoff The Hilton Beijing Capital Airport hotel can host up to 1,660 guests in its two ballrooms



Fit option Sheraton Dongcheng offers a healthy meetings programme

Airport advantage

Beijing is a sprawling city so if you have delegates flying in from different cities and countries, choosing a venue near the airport helps save time.

Langham Place is adjacent to the airport and has begun construction on a second 1,800 sqm ballroom, which will be completed in the third quarter of this year. The hotel currently has one 800 sqm ballroom and 21 meeting rooms, offering 2,700 sqm of total space. Nan Li, director of sales and marketing, says: "Unlike traditional airport hotels, MICE activities are very important for us, from hosting training sessions for Estée Lauder to company meetings for Bayer HealthCare. We are expanding our facilities to keep up with demand. Aside from location, our facilities are popular because all the rooms have natural daylight."

The **Hilton Beijing Capital Airport** has two ballrooms, which can accommodate up to 920 and 720 guests. The hotel recently introduced a series of themed coffee breaks. "Our 'Sichuan Masks' theme is particularly enjoyed by foreign clients," says Maine

Lin, director of sales. "A traditional face-changing performer entertains them during the break."

Both hotels have drive-in access to their ballrooms, making them attractive options for high-end car shows. Both are also a 10-minute drive from the 431,000 sqm new China International Exhibition Centre.

A little further into town, just a 20-minute drive down the Jingcheng expressway from the airport, is **Sheraton Dongcheng**. The hotel, which opened in October 2011, has 13 function spaces, including the 1,100 sqm Grand Ballroom and the 380 sqm Cedar Ballroom, positioned on separate floors. The Grand Ballroom is pillar-less and boasts state-of-the-art, built-in LED screens and LCD projectors.

One of the hotel's unique selling points is its 'FIT meetings' programme. "If clients choose this option, we serve healthy snacks such as yoghurts, vegetables and fresh juices. We provide squeeze balls and tips on how to use them to give your back and legs a massage and re-energise during the coffee break," says Dirk Prigol, director of MICE.

Executive retreats Refreshing options

Sometimes businessmen need more than just a coffee break to feel refreshed. "Recently, JP Morgan held a big conference at a business hotel downtown. Afterwards, the CEOs stayed on for a couple of nights at our resort," says Louisa Sun, director of sales at the high-end Aman at Summer Palace resort. The 43-room hotel has two eight-person conference rooms, a 14-person imperial suite and a Qing-dynasty building that houses up to 40, making it best suited to small-scale executive meetings. "We offer complete seclusion. We are next to the Summer

Palace and can arrange after-hours access. Our grounds themselves feel imperial with *pipa* players and calligraphy masters. In these peaceful surrounds, the bosses forget other stresses and can really put their heads together."

In a similar vein are the Brickyard and Schoolhouse eco-retreats in the village of Mutianyu near the Great Wall. Jim Spear, the founder and director of both, says: "We are just an hour from the airport. With the traffic in Beijing's centre, it can take just as long to reach downtown.

"But we offer a very different



Constructive site A meeting room at the Brickyard eco-retreat

atmosphere. We can cater for intimate executive overnight experiences or larger day-trip events for up to 160 people. Our past clients include Coca-Cola,

NBC, Visa, Marriott, Hilton and General Motors."

A typical day-trip here will start with a walk on the Great Wall (private VIP access can be arranged), a meal at the Brickyard or Schoolhouse, followed by a talk by the boss to conclude the day. Board meetings often see directors arrive a day early, then taking advantage of one of the nine meeting rooms, which range from 15 to 200 sqm. "We can also arrange yoga and martial arts classes on our outside platform that has views of the Great Wall, or noodle-making demonstrations," adds Spear.



Something different

For creative venues within the city centre, a great example is the recently opened **Temple complex** near the Forbidden City. For 400 years it was an important Buddhist temple, the premises became the site of China's first black-and-white television factory in 1949, and later fell into disrepair. After careful restoration, the complex now has a high-end restaurant and five 77 to 336 sqm additional buildings and oriental gardens available for private events. An eight-suite boutique hotel will also open later this summer.

Ignace Lecleir, restaurant manager, says, "We've been careful to preserve the different layers of history, from the Sanskrit paintings to the Cultural Revolution era slogans. The result is a unique venue showcasing the evolution of China's history."

Since its opening, events here have ranged from a dinner party for the international executives of a large global investment firm, to a top Chinese computer company taking over the entire compound for a day of meetings for its mid-level managers, followed by a cocktail-making class. Lecleir says, "We work hard to customise the experience for each company, whether it is with traditional Chinese opera or acrobatic performances, we find out the culture of each company and brainstorm ideas with their event planners."

Another historic location is the **Ch'ienmen 23** complex, which was formerly the American Embassy during the Qing Dynasty period and later served as a venue for secret meetings between Henry Kissinger and Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai in 1971.

Located just east of Tiananmen Square, the complex consists of five historic buildings arranged in a quadrant. The 16,000 sqm lawn in the centre of this quadrant can be rented for events ranging from fashion shows to receptions and dinners, as can the individual restaurants located within the complex. The stand-out



option here is **Maison Boulud**, by three-star Michelin chef Daniel Boulud, which has hosted events for diplomats and high-profile names such as Francis Ford Coppola. The entire restaurant can be rented out for a 300-person cocktail reception or for a 150-person dinner. There are also six private spaces, including

the terrace, with capacities ranging from eight to 75 seated guests.

For delegates to sample some of Beijing's best Peking Duck, there is **Duck de Chine**, which has a striking, modern décor and has catered for the likes of Deutsche Bank, Forbes and Aston Martin. At both locations – the original in the 1949 Hidden City complex and the newer branch at 19492, Jinbao Jie – half the restaurant can be closed off for private events of up to 100 people and clients can also enjoy the **Bollinger Champagne Bar and Lounge**.

For a unique after-hours venue, event planners should consider employing the help of **Wild China**, an award-winning travel company that can arrange secluded access to public monuments not regularly available for private rental, such as the **White Pagoda Temple** and **Prince Gong's Mansion**. Eleanor Connolly, sales and marketing manager, says: "After Prince Gong's Mansion is open to the public during the day, we have sealed it off at night and hosted clients ranging from a Fortune 50 company to one of Britain's top art galleries. We typically start with cocktails in the outdoor courtyard, followed by a private tour, a sit-down dinner, and perhaps a Peking Opera performance."

Other exclusive events Wild China has helped organise include a champagne barbecue on a rarely visited section of the **Great Wall** for spouses of the partners of a top international consulting firm, as well as a treasure hunt teambuilding exercise for a leading South African investment bank on the grounds of the Forbidden City. ■

Cultural backdrops

Teambuilding events at the Great Wall (above left); Duck de Chine restaurant (top right); Maison Boulud (above)