

# Conference industry set for growth

The conference industry is no longer the 'poor relation' of the tourism industry, said Environmental Affairs and Tourism Minister Marthinus van Schalkwyk, as he officially opened the annual national conference of the Southern African Association for the Conference Industry (SAACI) in Durban on Monday, 14 August, 2006.

According to the Minister, a number of initiatives are in place that will set the stage for sustained, significant growth in the conference sector which, together with exhibitions, special events and incentive travel, make up the business tourism industry.

"The release in September of the Department of Trade and Industry's NEDLAC-funded business tourism study commissioned by FRIDGE - the Fund for Research into Industrial Development Growth and Equity - is a crucial document that will empower the conference industry with a tool not only allowing it to benchmark its progress, but also to meaningfully inform and monitor future development," he stated.

Denise Kemp, national chairman of SAACI, welcomed Government's initiatives to facilitate a co-ordinated focus on business tourism and assured the Minister that SAACI would continue to take the lead in working cohesively with all stakeholders in the industry, supporting the national efforts of the business tourism industry.

## Effective growth strategy

Van Schalkwyk explained that the FRIDGE document would also inform the design of an effective business tourism growth strategy that places special emphasis on the supply chain and institutional support. South African Tourism and the South African Meetings Industry Federation (SAMIF) will use it as an input into a consolidated and comprehensive business tourism strategy for the country.

The FRIDGE study has been formulated from primary and secondary research provided by relevant stakeholders. It will highlight best practice case studies on the institutional management of business tourism activity in Ireland, Singapore and Australia.

"In addition, we are currently populating a tourism satellite account that will allow it to fully understand and disseminate detailed flow-through statistics to reveal tourism's full economic impact.

"Government, together with the public and private sectors," he said, "is working confidently towards ensuring that South Africa's business tourism flourishes."

South Africa currently attracts 63% of all conferences held in Africa, supports 12 000 jobs and contributes R2.6 billion a

year to the GDP. International conferences alone generate R951 million and are worth R42 million in foreign exchange.

## **Knows from experience**

Kemp said the industry now knows from experience that it is capable of successfully managing conferences and events in the country's cities and provinces.

"However, now we see a need to support a national strategy where companies, associations, cities and provinces support each other, and our national bodies, in a more strategic, coordinated long-term plan, thereby creating sustainable opportunities for creating jobs, increasing the length of stay of individuals and contributing to tourism spend."

SAACI's more than 800 members represent a variety of sectors within the conference industry, including conference venues, professional conference organisers and a large variety of services such as audio visual, entertainment, décor and catering.

Since 2000, SAACI has been affiliated to the International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA), which has more than 600 members in more than 76 countries.

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