



Green Meetings: Cancun

One of the world's premier resort destinations is also determined to become one of the world's premier destinations for sustainable events

THE SAND IS ALWAYS GREENER

Cancun has already pulled off one major-league reinvention in recent memory, transforming itself from a spring-break mecca into an upscale resort destination. Now, having weathered a year-long perfect storm of a down economy, fears about the swine flu, and a backlash against luxury venues, the heart of the Mexican Caribbean is pursuing another reinvention: sustainability.

Without much fanfare, Cancun's meetings infrastructure is getting greener, with hotels and other event venues expanding their environmentally friendly offerings as well as their corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs. "Nowadays, green initiatives are an important part not only of our everyday living, but also we see it in our jobs," said Fernando Cervantes, CASE, groups and conventions director for the Cancun Convention & Visitors Bureau. "Meeting planners have in their contracts green initiatives that the hotels have to meet, so we cannot afford to be out of the loop."

Planners seem to be noticing. In July, Cancun's Moon Palace Golf & Spa Resort hosted a high-level global summit on lessons learned from the H1N1 influenza crisis that was attended by officials and specialists from 40 countries, the World Health Organization (WHO), and the Pan American Health Organization. Moon Palace's owner, Palace Resorts, offers a variety of green and CSR initiatives at its 12 properties through the Palace Resorts Foundation — from recycling more than 124 tons of paper and plastic a year, to reusing water on resort plants (saving nearly 150 million gallons a year), to safeguarding native sea turtles.

During the H1N1 summit, WHO Director-General Margaret Chan gave the meeting's host venue a clean bill of health. "Our presence here

is an expression of confidence," Chan told attendees. "Mexico is a safe, as well as a beautiful and warmly gracious, place to visit."

Other prestigious organizations, by holding their events in Cancun, are giving the destination a green bill of health. This month, Le Blanc Spa Resort — also a Palace Resorts property — will host a meeting of the board of directors of the Green Meeting Industry Council (GMIC), of which the Cancun CVB is a member. "GMIC is committed to advancing sustainable meetings globally," said GMIC Executive Director Tamara Kennedy-Hill. "Cancun has demonstrated a commitment to our mission and expressed interest to take a leadership role in educating their destination on sustainable best practices. We selected Cancun for their partnership in this mission and commitment to make a difference in how meetings are conducted in Mexico."

GMIC's meeting in particular, Cervantes said, "will lay the first brick towards the goal of becoming a green destination." In February, Moon Palace will host Meeting Professionals International's MeetDifferent 2010 conference. And in 2011, the Convention Industry Council will bring its CMP Conclave to the Hilton Cancun Golf & Spa Resort. Not coincidentally, Hilton Hotels has pledged to reduce energy consumption, carbon-dioxide emissions, and waste output by 20 percent and water consumption by 10 percent in the next five years.

"I saw pictures of Cancun before I came," Chan said in a radio interview during the H1N1 summit, "but it's better to realize the beauty of Cancun in person." That natural beauty is being actively preserved — and the meetings industry is playing a major role. ■



NATURAL RESOURCES

Cancun's sustainability program draws on an abundance of ecological, cultural, and historical attractions, including:

► Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve, a UNESCO World Heritage Site that encompasses nearly 5,300 square miles of land and sea.

► Mayan archaeological sites on the Yucatan Peninsula, such as Chichen Itza, also a World Heritage Site, dominated by the pyramid of Kukulcan; the walled city of Tulum; and the jungle city of Coba.

► Xel-Ha, a water park centered around a natural inlet and lagoon that's been awarded Green Globe Silver certification, and Xcaret, an ecological park that has received the Mexican Center for Philanthropy's CSR award every year since 2003.

► Christopher Durso is executive editor of *Convene*.

ON THE WEB:

To learn more about Cancun's sustainable-meetings programs, visit www.cancun.travel/en/groups-and-conventions.