



Capital cool

Canberra's fashion-forward hotels plus events in one-of-a-kind national monuments *By Lauren Arena*

Often overshadowed by Sydney and Melbourne, the capital of Australia is fast becoming a hub for meetings and events.

A flurry of fashionable new hotels has elevated Canberra's street cred and event planners are beginning to cotton on. Singapore Airlines recently launched its new Capital Express service, linking Singapore-Canberra-Wellington with a 266-seat aircraft servicing four flights per week. So before the secret is out, here are our insider tips on the coolest venues in Canberra for corporate events.

Hot hotels

A game-changer for Canberra's hotel scene, the

68-room Hotel Hotel is housed in one of Australia's most sustainable buildings. The building itself is an architectural marvel and the interiors are just as impressive, with polished concrete and raw timber finishes, and eclectic décor. Corporate buy-outs of the entire hotel (including its 45 serviced apartments) are also available.

The hotel's Monster Kitchen and Bar made a splash on the Australian food scene when it opened in 2014 and its inventive share-plate menu continues to attract diners from across the country. Monster can be booked exclusively for up to 100 dinner guests.

Nearby, QT Canberra is a former 1970s Rydges hotel that was recently reborn with a fresh, playful vibe, full of political caricatures and historic quotes. The 205-room property is home to Canberra's largest hotel ballroom, with capacity for up to 1,500 delegates.

It also features a New-York style speakeasy, Lucky's, which has a hidden entry through an operational barbershop. The member's-only QT Lounge on the 15th floor is the perfect place for private pow-wows hidden in its discreet alcoves or

Venue appeal The National Gallery (main); Amway China included a trip to Gold Creek Station (above right); QT is one of several stylish new hotels (below right)



swanky cocktail receptions for up to 60 people.

For extended stays, East Hotel is a contemporary and stylish option, with 60 suites, 80 one-bedroom and 40 two-bedroom apartments. Along with seven conference and function spaces, the hotel is dotted with thoughtful extras, such as retro-style bicycles that are free to borrow, a well-stocked “free range” newsagency of papers and magazines in the lobby, and lolly jars and water fountains where guests can help themselves.

New-look NCC

The National Convention Centre Canberra (NCC) is currently undergoing a major facelift. Stage one of the A\$5.4 million (US\$4.1 million) refurbishment is now complete, with new carpet, foyer furniture and upgrade of the reception area, conference office, washrooms and cloaking facilities. New seating will also be installed in the Royal Theatre and accompanying theatrettes, boosting capacity to more than 1,500 people, before the project’s completion, scheduled for June.

National icons

Canberra may be the seat of government in Australia, but it’s not all politics in the ‘Bush Capital’. Event planners have access to national monuments, including Parliament House and Australia’s National Gallery, for private events.

Planners can host cocktails and dinner under the wings of an authentic Lancaster Bomber at the Australian War Memorial, or run a mock debate in one of the original chambers at Old Parliament House, followed by cocktails in King’s Hall. Corporate groups can also embark on private tours at either the National Museum of Australia or National Portrait Gallery before an event in one of many indoor or outdoor spaces.

In 2016, jewellery brand Pandora held a gala dinner in the National Gallery’s majestic Gandel Hall for 200 delegates as part of its National Sales Conference, while Hewlett Packard put on an exclusive dinner event for 150 at the Australian War Memorial.

The Great Hall at Parliament House is also open for private banquets (650 people) and cocktail events (1,000), one of few such government buildings in the world available for private use.

For breakfast meetings with a view, the National Arboretum has a number of indoor and outdoor venues that take in the Arboretum’s vast collection of rare and endangered trees, sculptures and landscaped gardens.

Q&A... MICHAEL MATTHEWS



How has Canberra evolved as a business events destination?

The destination continues to enjoy core success coming from traditional markets like education, sciences and health and we’re seeing increased new business around defence, government and agriculture. The importance of access to federal decision-makers is a key driver for organisations looking to make an impact on policy and build relationships at a senior level.

Has SIA’s Capital Express service made any impact?

We’ve already seen delegate participation and interest grow from organisations with a strong New Zealand membership. Internationally we now have credibility to target Asia, and are also buoyed by the recent announcement from Qatar Airlines, which will provide Canberra-to-Europe access. In January, we hosted 1,500 Amway China delegates, with visits to Gold Creek Station, Australian War Memorial, Parliament House and Pialligo Estate.

Michael Matthews, CEO, Canberra Convention Bureau