

# Brimming with confidence

MICE business into the capital city has long been hampered due to the lack of international links, but things are about to change. By **Rebecca Elliott**

In the year 2016, it's hard to imagine a capital city without an international airline service. But such is the case with Australia's capital city, Canberra. That is, until now.

In January, it was announced that Singapore Airlines will commence flights between Canberra and Singapore and Canberra and Wellington as of September 21, 2016, both of which will operate four times a week on a 266-seater retrofitted Boeing 777-200.

Not surprisingly, it's a move that's been applauded by the MICE industry, opening up the destination to the lucrative Asia and New Zealand markets.

CEO of the Canberra Convention Bureau, Michael Matthews, says that while China is the number one source market for leisure tourism, there has been little visitation from the market for business events.

"We haven't dabbled in that space because without direct flights you don't have the credibility to pursue that market," he explains. "Now we have that, that's definitely where we need to allocate some of our time."

While Matthews admits they have some work to do, he believes the products available in Canberra will be attractive to the incentive market, where much of their attention will be focused.

He said that Canberra has matured as a destination, particularly its culinary and shopping offering, and that it also presents, "a real sense of what it means to be Australian".

Matthews also believes Parliament House will be a major draw card for the Chinese market, given the unrivalled access to politicians and decision makers, adding to the prestige of being the nation's capital.

"Our proximity to Sydney is a real advantage because we can be included in some itineraries. We're right next door to the Sapphire Coast and right on the doorstep of the Snowy Mountains – there are elements we can add that can really complement our position.

"Awareness of how you get here and our place in the nation will be important. If we can start telling those stories I think that's going to resonate."

Matthews and the Convention Bureau Team will join Business Events Australia at Australia Week in China from April 11-15, 2016 to get the ball rolling. They

will also be meeting with the "traditional booking channels".

"We're looking at a Team Canberra approach," he said.

And the MICE industry is well and truly onboard.

Speaking to the *Daily* about the inception of international flights at the Asia-Pacific Incentives and Meetings Expo in February, director of sales of the new Vibe Hotel Canberra Airport, Shahnaz Bakhshay, said: "It's pretty exciting, we've been waiting for it for quite a few years.

"It opens up the Asian market, which is so close to our country. Canberra has

such great offerings as a MICE destination so hopefully business will improve and get even better."

CEO of Jamala Wildlife Lodge, Maurits de Graeff, said while he expects slow growth from the China market, he thinks they have a unique product that will be of interest.

Matthews said that while there is no magic switch, he's encouraged that the Chinese market is looking to explore beyond the traditional gateways.

"We think that's why Canberra will be that next destination to discover. Singapore Airlines is an aspirational airline for the Chinese and they have a great reputation, so I think we are really fortunate to have them."

Matthews is hopeful that the new flights will open the door to additional international carriers. While Canberra Airport currently has just two gates available for international flights, there's potential for that number to grow to 20.

"The first airline has done a lot of the heavy lifting."

## DEVELOPMENTS TO WATCH

### 1 Canberra Airport

The final phase of Canberra Airport's AU\$480 million (US\$359 million) redevelopment of the terminal precinct is underway, with additional F&B outlets, a business centre and a kids play area rounding out the large-scale project. The redevelopment also includes two international gates in preparation for Canberra's first international flight between Australia's capital city, Singapore and Wellington commencing in September.

### 2 Australia Forum

A new convention centre has been earmarked for Canberra to cater for major local, national and international events. While the proposed Australia Forum has yet to receive the official nod of approval, architect Massimiliano Fuksas (in association with local firm Guida Moseley Brown) released the reference design in June 2015, which states that the ambitious project will "reinforce Canberra's identity as an international city".

### 3 National Convention Centre Canberra

The city's National Convention Centre is currently undergoing a major facelift, the first in almost a decade. The AU\$2.7 million project is currently halfway through stage one. Renovations include the installation of digital signage, a bathroom upgrade, and a new carpet and furniture in the foyer, all scheduled for completion by June 30. Stage two will be finalised in a year's time.



More international flights will help to open Canberra up to the larger Asian market; pictured is the Parliament House

## WHAT'S NEW!



### Jamala Wildlife Lodge

Jamala Wildlife Lodge offers an African escape right in the middle of Canberra. Located in the city's National Zoo and Aquarium, the five-star luxury accommodation has to be seen to be believed, with Jungle Bungalows adjoining a variety of enclosures where the only thing separating guests from a pride of lions, cheetahs and tigers is a glass wall! This is definitely the ultimate incentive experience.

### Canberra Helicopters

There's nothing quite like seeing a destination from the air, made possible in Canberra thanks to Canberra Helicopters.

Experienced pilots conduct scenic flights on a daily basis ranging from a Lap of the Lake tour around Lake Burley Griffin in 12 minutes, taking in the Parliament House and Australian War Memorial, to a Premium Food and Wine tour of the region.

### Pialligo Estate

Just a 15-minute drive from the centre of Canberra is Pialligo Estate – a vineyard, market garden, olive grove, orchard and more. What's more, it's home to an award-winning restaurant, Farmhouse Restaurant, opened to the public in February 2015. The Glasshouse and Garden Pavilions, surrounded by a captivating landscape, are suitable for a variety of functions.

### Little National Hotel

Minimalist, yet oh so stylish, the Little National Hotel is the latest instalment from the Doma Group.

With wall-to-wall windows and Nespresso coffee machines in all 120 rooms, the hotel that opened in September 2015 is in good company with Parliament House right next door.



### Vibe Hotel Canberra Airport

Just 50 metres from the Canberra Airport terminal is Vibe Hotel Canberra Airport. Featuring 191 guest rooms including 12 First Class rooms, and nine one- and two-bedroom apartments, the hotel is just 10 minutes from the city centre and boasts views of Parliament House. Six conference and event spaces offer capacity for 140 delegates.

## TALKING NUMBERS

**13** The percentage of international visitors arriving in Canberra for business as of September 2015

**10** The percentage increase of visitors from China to Canberra in September 2015 from the previous year

**20** The capacity for international gates at Canberra Airport