

## Overseas Meetings: A Trip Too Far?

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**I am energized** by the campaign being conducted by our alliance of meeting and travel associations to “Keep America Meeting.” It’s a wonderful show of pan-industry solidarity, and the message about the true value of meetings will have a hugely positive impact now and in the future.

But the question remains: Can corporations realistically continue to stage meetings and events abroad? Isn’t it an extravagance in times when workers all over are losing their jobs? The G20 Summit in London in March illustrated that politicians themselves understand the value of a well-planned meeting and the personal connections that are fostered therein. (Incidentally, they all stayed in

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high-end hotels and brought their spouses along!) I firmly believe that U.S. companies need to continue meeting overseas, but according to a new paradigm, one that starts with a clear business case. Meeting planners have not sufficiently engaged with the ROO and ROI processes. The language we use routinely in speaking about meetings ignores and often negates the real business by focusing on tactical delivery rather than strategic purpose.

So what’s the strategic purpose for meeting in Rome or Buenos Aires? Why not Charlotte or Little Rock?

The responses to this question range from the sublime to the ridiculous, from reasons that please your HR director to reasons that gratify your CFO. But all are compelling in so far as they create conditions that allow for real, verifiable performance improvement.

The Greek tragedian Euripides stated, “Experience, travel—these are as education in themselves.” Traveling from the U.S. to Italy or Argentina where the language, culture, and society are drastically different is informative, formative, and potentially transformative. We must confront diversity and learn to adapt to it. We must move out of our comfort zones. Ultimately it makes us better people, better workers, better citizens. Thus companies that use motivational travel experiences are actively engaging in valid corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives that provide priceless educational benefits for their employees.

Such travel experiences also, potentially, provide priceless economic advantages for the communities in which they take place. The rise of CSR projects in the itineraries of overseas meetings highlights the obligation that companies feel to “give something back.” So now the HR director is convinced but what about the bean-counter? Can it make economic sense to stage an overseas event?

Again the response is a resounding “yes.” Overseas travel is not as expensive as it may seem. Air travel within the U.S.—say from New York to San Francisco—is on par with travel from U.S. hubs to Latin America or Europe. Likewise, air travel within the U.S. can be far more expensive than flights within Europe or Asia, with their many low-cost carriers.

Four- and five-star hotel accommodation in Shanghai, Sao Paulo, or Stockholm is significantly cheaper than in New York or Chicago when you strip out such “extras” as local taxes and mandatory gratuities.

And when you add peerless cultural experiences—dining at the Palace of Versailles near Paris, scaling the heights of Macchu Pichu in Peru, or ambling along the Great Wall of China—where the impact on the individual lasts way beyond the experience itself, then the true return on investment becomes clear.

