

# Big gains in the Big Smoke

Venues in London are hosting more events than ever this year. Lorraine Francisco looks at why the city is so popular

It seems that the bright lights of the capital are as popular as ever, with London topping the recent UK Conference Market Survey (UKCMS) as the city of choice for event organisers.

The survey showed that 47% of association organisers and 65% of corporate organisers held an event in London during 2005, compared with 27% and 37% respectively in 2004.

Visit London commercial director David Hornby says: "London's excellent reputation and status as a global city means it attracts a real mix of business from all industry sectors. London has a large array of amazing venues and also offers good value for money. There is something for every budget and taste."

The chairman of trade body Eventia and executive director of agency P&MM, Nigel Cooper, says the key benefits are its location and travel links. "It was once said of Rome, but it is true in England – all roads, rail and airways lead to London," he says.

Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre marketing manager Fiona Duffin adds: "London, as a city, has a unique 'package' in terms of history, culture, diversity, infrastructure, ease of access, facilities and natural attractions, which appeal and are accessible to both those organising and those attending conferences and events."

The UKCMS also found that 17% of association organisers chose venues based on uniqueness, compared with 8% in 2005. When it comes to corporate buyers, 26% booked unique venues this year compared with 9% in 2005.



**Discoveries:** the Design Museum (above) and the Science Museum



**"In 2004 we turned away over £1m worth of business. Doubling the size of the venue was essential as there is so much corporate business out there"**

Unique Venues of London chairman and Somerset House director of events Charlotte Reeves lists the Dulwich Picture Gallery, Kew Bridge Steam Museum, the Foundling Museum, the Museum of Garden History and Southwark Cathedral as her top unique venues because "they are exquisite yet relatively unknown".

Within the Unique Venues of London portfolio, the top five increases in events bookings have been at the Design Museum, the Science Museum, the Churchill Museum and the Cabinet War Rooms, Tate Britain and Somerset House.

The Design Museum, by the Thames, attracted the highest increase in bookings with a 99.8% rise in 2005/06 compared with the previous financial year. Its events manager, Charles McKenzie, says: "We made £300,000 just for events in 2005/06 and are looking at more than a 30% increase for this year already."

He adds: "We have three different event areas that can be used independently or together. SABMiller lager Peroni Nastro Azzuro held an event here that utilised every area. That was one of

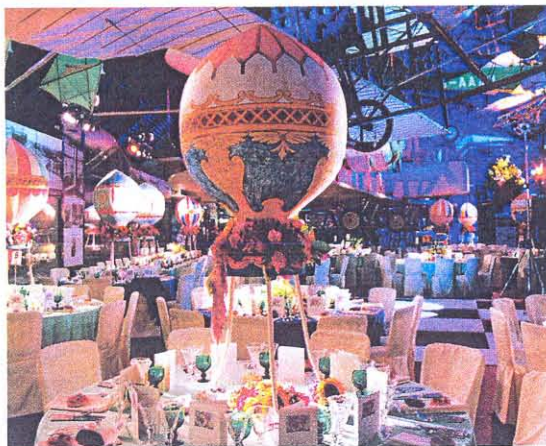
the highest profile events we have had here. We also held a Formula One exhibition launch that was attended by racing car driver Damon Hill and designer Terence Conran."

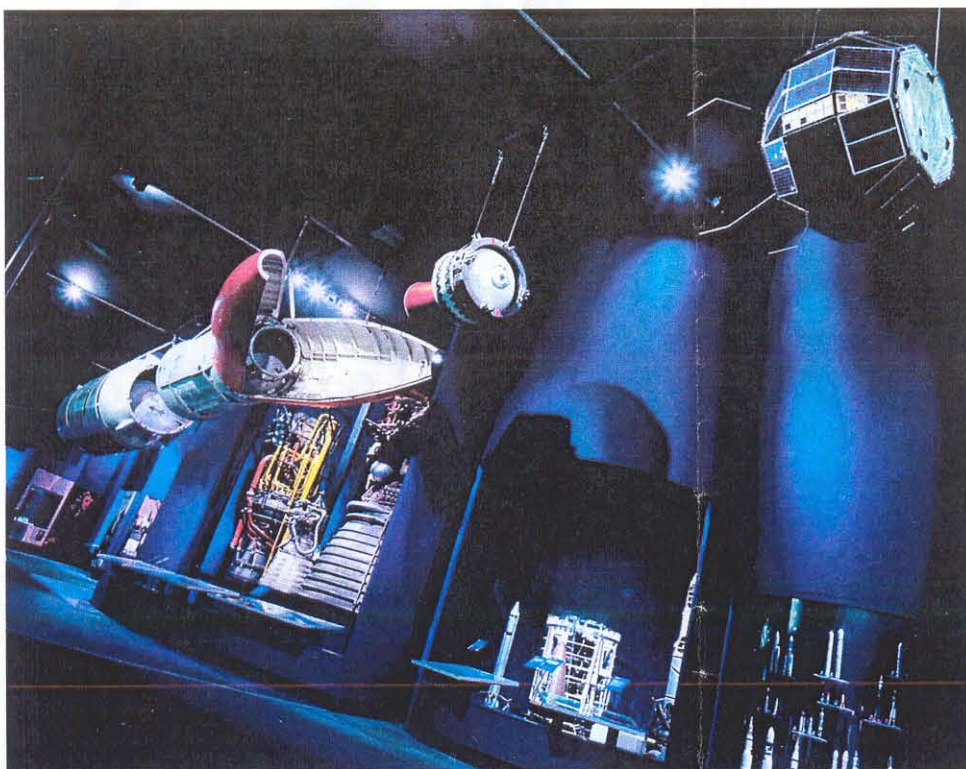
Agency Eventwise held a conference at the Design Museum for beauty products company Kao Brands, John Frieda, for 130 people on 9 February. Eventwise managing director Penny Ellis says: "The museum is a modern and contemporary space which appealed to our international client. We used the in-house caterer and the food was excellent. Location-wise, you couldn't have better value. We brought the guests in by boat and they really enjoyed the fact that they got a good view of London prior to the event."

## Parachute jumping

The Science Museum – voted Film London's film location of the month in July – has had a lot of coverage in the media recently, having featured in the action movie *Stormbreaker*. The film's finale features several scenes in the museum, such as lead character Alex Rider parachute jumping through the roof of the Making the World gallery.

The revenue generated from hiring out the gallery for four days of filming, plus increased bookings for daytime events and more event bookings within the IMAX cinema, has contributed to the Science Museum's higher turnover





in 2005. It held 200 events in 2005 compared with 170 in 2004.

Science Museum head of events Victoria Grossmith says daytime events represent a new area of business. The venue is unable to use the main galleries during the day but has used other blank spaces within the museum to accommodate daytime bookings. Grossmith says: "Being able to utilise the IMAX cinema and be flexible in using blank spaces in the museum has enabled us to secure larger scale daytime events or events that require full day builds. On the back of the increase in revenue, we've been able to support a business plan that will allow us to take over a proportion of the museum as a dedicated event space from October 2007." The new 750sqm space will offer capacities for up to 400 theatre-style.

Ian Jones, head of sales at agency Zibrant, has been on a site visit to the venue and says: "The Science Museum has several very flexible spaces where you can drink or dine around the various exhibits. The exhibits provide a great

**The Science Museum (top), Tate Britain (below) and Tate Modern**



**"We have about 200 events a year on average. We work with 1940s period actors and can offer themed food and drink that Winston Churchill used to eat"**

backdrop for events, dining next to Stephenson's Rocket or underneath a cross-section of a 747."

Tate Britain had a 27% increase in event bookings, hosting 130 events in 2005/06 compared with 102 in 2004/05. Its head of corporate events, Christine Mathews-Sheen, says: "Tate Britain has recently become available to all corporate clients, having been exclusively available to sponsors and corporate members in previous years. It has therefore proved hugely attractive to a wide range of clients who are enjoying access to a new venue."

Aimee Carver, account manager at agency Penguins, organised an event in the restaurant and says: "It has floor-to-ceiling paintings and we offered our guests a champagne reception and a private tour of the gallery. We chose the Tate Britain as one of the partners of the company hosting the event is fond of art. The venue is of high quality and it's always nice to have an event somewhere else, rather than a hotel. The in-house caterer was good and accommodating. Overall, it was lovely to work there."

Tate Modern has added three event spaces that are available for hire: the Members Room on level six, which opened at the end of May, and the Tate

Modern Restaurant and the East Room on level seven, which opened in April.

Somerset House has nine event areas – ranging from art galleries to architectural spaces – and has seen a continued increase in bookings since the events department was introduced in 2001. Director of events Reeves says: "Somerset House Trust offers a comprehensive and varied programme of exciting new exhibitions throughout the year across three art galleries in addition to a varied public events programme."

#### Leadership qualities

The house's ice rink is always popular during the festive season and Reeves cites one corporate event last year that catered for 1,500 guests and featured skating performances, children's entertainment, live choirs and food stalls.

The diversity of events that can be held at Somerset House can be shown through its Film4 Summer Screen event that took place from 10-19 August. The event is in its second year and featured screenings in the courtyard of movies such as Francis Ford Coppola's *The Outsiders* and Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*.

Agency First Protocol's managing director Mark Riches has organised many events there and says: "Somerset House is iconic and integral to London. It offers the courtyard and the location is perfect. Its event management team make your life very easy as they are a very experienced and service-orientated team."

The Churchill Museum and the Cabinet War Rooms has run sessions that enable companies to link Winston Churchill's leadership qualities with a management training event. General manager Charles



Abraham says: "We have about 200 events a year on average, and we can tailor events. We work with 1940s period actors, and can offer themed food and drink that Winston Churchill used to eat." The venue has had a 50% increase in event bookings in the past year.

Agency RTH Group held its post-Farnborough Air Show and 25-year anniversary party at the Churchill Museum and the Cabinet War Rooms in July. Its global development director, Claire ▶

Menzies, says: "The layout of the Churchill Museum and the Cabinet War Rooms is perfect for inquisitive guests, who can grab a drink and wander freely around the museum at their own pace. Information headsets and tour guides were available to guests too. Being underground, the temperature in the venue was perfect for what turned out to be one of the hottest and most humid evenings in July. The staff were most attentive and service was impeccable."

Other London venues have seen an increase in event bookings and are enjoying rejuvenated success just a year on from the 7 July terrorist atrocities. Bateaux London and Catamaran Cruises sales and marketing director Ian Fyfe says: "We've seen a rapid growth in our business in the last 16 months on the corporate side, although we must admit our corporate clients were the least knocked by the events in July last year." Bateaux London's two restaurant vessels, the *Naticia* and the *Symphony*, attracted 54 events from January to June 2006, compared with 27 in the same period during 2005.

The Commonwealth Club on Northumberland Avenue has also seen more event bookings since its £4m refurbishment and expansion in January. So far this year, its bookings are up 24% on 2005. In fact, in the first seven months of 2006, it had secured 1,175 event bookings compared with 653 in the same period last year.

Its business development manager Rob Jordan says: "The refurbishment is something we've done to stay competitive and facilitate events. In 2004 we turned away over £1m worth of business. Doubling the size was essential as there is so much corporate business out there."

It seems event revenue in the capital is on a steady incline and – if indications are right – this looks set to continue. ■



Churchill's domain: the Cabinet War Rooms



Landmarks: Big Ben, Westminster Abbey, the London Eye and the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre

## LONDON'S BRILLIANT PARADE

**Charlotte Reeves, chairman of Unique Venues of London and director of events at Somerset House, highlights some of London's more unusual venues.**

### Royal Opera House

The Royal Opera House transforms its ballet studios into reception and dinner venues with capacities for receptions of up to 1,000. Backstage tours give guests a glimpse behind the scenes.

**Tel: 020 7212 9150**

**e-mail: [commercialevents@roh.org.uk](mailto:commercialevents@roh.org.uk)**

### The Natural History Museum

The museum can accommodate 150–650 guests for dinner in the Central Hall with dancing in the North Hall. Tours can also be arranged, and the Earth Galleries atrium features 60-foot slate walls engraved with images of the solar system.

**Tel: 020 7942 5434**

**e-mail: [functions@nhm.ac.uk](mailto:functions@nhm.ac.uk)**



### Vinopolis

Vinopolis is a wine tasting venue that can cater for up to 1,250 guests within the vaulted arches of its Great Halls and the spacious Mezzanine.

**Tel: 020 7940 8322**

**e-mail: [events@vinopolis.co.uk](mailto:events@vinopolis.co.uk)**

### Southwark Cathedral

The cathedral offers unrestricted views of the Thames and the City. The Gary Weston Library offers capacities for up to 120 and the Millennium Courtyard can be used for a marquee reception.

**Tel: 020 7367 6722**

**e-mail: [conferences@southwark.anglican.org](mailto:conferences@southwark.anglican.org)**

### bfi London IMAX Cinema

The 470-seat auditorium features a 20 x 26m screen, the largest in the UK, and is insulated from outside noise.

**Tel: 0870 780 2988**

**e-mail: [lucy.jennings@bfi.org.uk](mailto:lucy.jennings@bfi.org.uk)**



### London Zoo

Based in Regents Park, the venue offers visitors a chance to mingle with more than 650 species of animals. It can offer guests unique spaces to hold pre-reception drinks such as its reptile house or Bear Mountain. The venue can cater for up to 350 for a reception.

**Tel: 020 7449 6260**

**e-mail: [functions@zsl.org](mailto:functions@zsl.org)**



### The Tower of London

A venue steeped in history, the Tower of London offers spaces such as the White Tower, the Throne Room of Edward I's medieval palace or the New Armouries. Caters for up to 300 for a reception.

**Tel: 0870 751 5183**

**e-mail: [events@hrp.org.uk](mailto:events@hrp.org.uk)**

### Victoria and Albert Museum

This museum offers period rooms and galleries for corporate or private entertaining. The garden can also be floodlit. Caters for up to 700 for a reception.

**Tel: 020 7942 2646**

**e-mail: [p.dacunha@vam.ac.uk](mailto:p.dacunha@vam.ac.uk)**



### Foundling Museum

Based in Bloomsbury, the museum provides a mix of historic interiors and contemporary spaces. The Court Room can accommodate dinners for up to 30 people and the Picture Gallery can accommodate up to 100.

**Tel: 020 7841 3600**

**e-mail: [events@foundlingmuseum.org.uk](mailto:events@foundlingmuseum.org.uk)**

### National Army Museum

This museum houses some of Britain's finest military treasures and offers 10 unique spaces. Guests can sip cocktails next to Zulu warriors or dine in the dramatic art gallery. It can cater for up to 600 for a reception.

**Tel: 020 7730 0717**

**e-mail: [events@national-army-museum.ac.uk](mailto:events@national-army-museum.ac.uk)**