

## Eat your way round Europe



A new organisation which aims to raise the profile of coach tourism on the European stage was inaugurated at this year's RDA Workshop in Cologne. The new body ECTA, European Coach Tourism Alliance, brings together trade bodies to enhance the lobbying on behalf of the sector and provide a forum for sharing best practice and innovation.

*Steve Rooney reports from Cologne on the 2012 RDA Workshop.*

The UK is represented by both the Coach Tourism Council and CPT who have joined together with colleagues from Germany, France, Sweden, Switzerland, Belgium and Italy to create ECTA.

Coach Tourism Council chairman Sean Taggart says that the new body should complement the lobbying work of the IRU. "It's about bringing together the special interests in coach tourism and bringing a clear vision and more coherent view that supports the IRU while raising the profile of coach tourism.

"Equally we should see it as a group to exchange best practice, particularly in the marketing and image of coach tourism."

Taggart believes that the new international cooperation mirrors the successful partnership that has been forged by CTC and CPT in the UK. "CPT are experts in transport and CTC brings the tourism marketing from our consumer travel perspective. We are both ECTA members and CPT can lead on regulatory matters and CTC will play a more prominent role in PR and marketing."

He is particularly keen on the opportunities for the sector to learn from the best examples amongst the new European grouping. "There is no need to reinvent the wheel all the time. This should be beneficial to all of us in pooling good ideas as we all face the same challenge in attracting passengers."

This year's RDA Workshop once again attracted the cream of international tourism with more than 1,000 exhibitors targeting the coach and groups market. The UK was represented with the regular group of Kentish exhibitors, taking time off from pre-Olympic preparations to promote 2013 and beyond. The Kent-based hotels, attractions and destinations have demonstrated the value of taking the German-speaking markets seriously by being regular RDA exhibitors and are now well known and widely represented in the itineraries from wholesalers; something that is crucial here, given the pre-eminence of the wholesale option. For coach tourism operators the RDA Workshop is an extraordinary resource, offering a show on the scale of a World Travel Market, but with the focus definitely on coach and group travel. I've said it before and I'll say it again, UK operators looking for new ideas and inspiration should take the short flight to Cologne to make the most of this first class show.

The theme for the 2012 show was regional food and drink which gave visitors a chance to eat their way around Europe in the Cologne exhibition centre's two halls.

Italy is renowned for its food and tour wholesaler Italweg presented a range of culinary-inspired exhibits including a masterclass at the Italian Food Culinary Institute based in the historic castle of Piobesi near Turin. The institute has been established since 2006 and offers a range of courses for professional cooks, including an impressively-titled master in food design. But tourist groups can also take advantage of the facilities with special courses for food lovers over one or two days.



Nuremberg is a popular destination for visitors from the UK with a strong reputation for Christmas markets and lebkuchen, the gingerbread-style Christmas treat. Being Germany, of course, it also has its own sausage - a small, thumb-shaped parcel that was apparently sized so that it could be passed through the gates of the city's walls in medieval times. Described as Nuremberg's answer to fast food, it is served with a blend of horseradish and mustard and can be washed down with locally-brewed Tucher beer.

In addition to the traditional sausage in a roll, Nuremberg also hosts a major organic food fair every year. But the city is not just about food. Germany's oldest railway museum, the DB Museum, first opened its doors in 1899 as the Royal Bavarian Railway Museum and today includes about 40 historic rail vehicles including the renowned Adler (Eagle) locomotive.

And toys are another claim to fame for the city. There is an impressive toy museum in the old town which has attracted more than four million visitors since opening in 1971. The city is also the home of toy manufacturer Playmobil, as well as global pencil brands Staedtler and Faber Castell. The latter is still a family-owned business and its former castle at Stein was used by the international press during the Nuremberg trials. The city doesn't shy away from its darker past however, and there is a permanent exhibition in the world famous Court Room 600 in the Palace of Justice, as well as one at the infamous rally grounds, with the city now heralding itself as a centre for human rights.

Berlin is another city which has been transformed in recent years. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1999, there has been an extraordinary rebuilding effort to create a new centre in the area between Potsdamer Platz and the Reichstag which had been almost completely destroyed during world war two. Potsdamer Platz had been one of the city's most popular squares before the war and the wasteland created by German separation has now been replaced by a new centre that aims to recall its glamour during the heyday of the 1920s. Stunning views of the area are available from the two-storey 360-degree viewing platform at the Panorama Punkt.





From the grandeur of rebuilt-Berlin, the richness of Germany - and the reason that so many German's favourite holiday destination is their own country - is demonstrated in the charm of the cooperative cheesemakers of the Ammergau Alps in southern Bavaria. Thirty seven local farmers, many with only a handful of cows, take their milk to the cheese factory in Ettal and the area, which features the largest nature reserve

in the country, welcomes coach groups with attractive places to stay including the former Benedictine monastery Klosterhotel Ludwig of Bavaria.

Another area that may be less well known for UK groups, but well worth a visit is the Sudtiroal region on the Italian-German border. Among the highlights are the world heritage site of the Dolomite mountains and accommodation options include the Hotel Wieser which has been in the same family ownership for 400 years and produces cheese and speck (ham) on its own farm.

And in Austria, Hirschen Hotels offers a complete package service for groups who can use it as a base for the surrounding Tirol region. Run by RDA board member and Tirolean MP, Hannes Staggl, the 110-room family-owned hotel also boasts its own sommelier in Hannes' son. "We can prepare the whole programme, including all tour guides and excursions, tolls and lifts," says Staggl. "It gives the operator one partner and one fixed price." Unlike many exhibitors at the RDA Workshop, Staggl sells to operators and not through wholesalers, preferring to have a direct relationship with his clients.

For groups looking further east, Polish incoming operator Akadem has a range of tours on offer for 2013 including five days in the Gdansk and Kashubian Lakes area, a four-day cultural tour in Warsaw, and a seven-day tour to highlight Polish cuisine including Papal cream cake and dumplings, stuffed cabbage rolls and of course local beers and vodka.

Closer to home, Touren Service is a specialist wholesaler promoting the Alsace region and other areas of France including the Midi Pyrenees in the south east of the country. Based in Alsace, the company celebrates its 25th anniversary this year and claims to offer a unique blend of 'German organisation and French charm'. The company's president and founder Joachim Schwada is using gourmet food as a key theme for 2013. Among the company's programme for next year is a stay at the Chateau d'Ygrande which boasts a Michelin-starred restaurant. "You never used to see coach at four-star hotel, we want it to be the same with Michelin restaurants now," says Schwada.

Of course the coach group market is very diverse and the age-profile of today's groups is often a matter of concern for operators. Describing itself as a 'boutique wholesaler', Munich-based Appina Travel believes that the answer lies in planning the programme carefully. The company no longer produces a brochure, instead offering detailed information and ideas which can be built into bespoke programmes. But the pace of a tour is critical, according to Appina. It has found that packing less into a tour makes it more attractive to younger age coach groups, who prefer to have time on their own to explore. 'Slow travel' perhaps, to echo the values of the 'slow food' movement and capture the next generation of coach tour customers.

Next year's RDA Workshop takes place on 23-25 July. Put it in your diary now and don't miss it.

Source: <http://www.busandcoach.com/featurepage.aspx?id=7025&categoryid=6>