

CONFERENCE / CITY BREAK TOURISM

by Giannis Ikonomou

General Secretary for Consumer Affairs



Tourism is one of the most dynamically developing sectors of the Greek economy. This has been acknowledged in the past few years by both Government and society. Tourism today represents around 18% of GDP, contributing around 12 billion euros a year to Government revenues. It is impressive that for every euro spent by visitors, the economy creates another two. The reason for this is that tourism is not an economic sector that operates autonomously and independently of others. The growth of tourism is directly connected to the rest of the economy and interacts with sectors such as trade, construction, processing and transport.

As a result, investment in tourism is a strategic choice of increasing importance for Greece, with a central role and numerous results in the economy, in particular in today's era of globalization. It is precisely through this international perspective that the importance of tourism can be highlighted all the more. Prospects related to the future of the travel industry, tourism and leisure are particularly impressive. Tourism is one of the strongest and fastest-growing sectors of the global economy. In fact, according to the forecasts of the World Travel & Tourist Council, the number of arrivals worldwide is set to double in the next 15 years, reaching 1.5 billion.

Greece has much to gain from this international trend. With tourism as its vehicle, the country can respond meaningfully and effectively to the new challenges and great opportunities of the present and the future. In the era of globalization, those countries that have a dynamic presence in the growth of tourism are favored. Moreover, tourism is one of the few sectors of the economy which are identified with the place where the services are created and offered. Whatever is built in Greece as a brand name is the basis and springboard for the future. Many services and industries shift borders; a country's tourism, however, has unique characteristics and cannot be replaced. Holidays cannot be outsourced to another country and still remain the same.

The Athens 2004 Olympic Games re-situated Greece on the global tourism map. They gave billions of people around the world the opportunity to watch and admire a small country organize the most successful Olympic

Games in the institution's history. Greece was able to promote its history and traditions in a contemporary and attractive way. It also showed that it is a modern country with high-quality infrastructure and a safe country, something of special importance in today's global environment.

The Olympic Games are a reference point for tourism development, for two reasons. First of all, they served as the best advertisement for Greece, placing it at the center of global media and international public opinion. They also left a material legacy of infrastructure and facilities, which is invaluable for the modernization not only of Athens but also of the country's other large cities. It became clear to all that Greece is not simply a country for vacations, but a place that is open and hospitable for many other activities too, whether business or pleasure.

Travel culture is changing. Increasing numbers of people are traveling several times a year, not for holidays but for professional reasons. Over the past few years a new form of tourism has been occupying an increasing chunk of global reality: conference tourism. Taking into account the emerging economies of Asia, China, Russia and India, one can see the massive potential that conference tourism has globally. Greece can exploit this trend dynamically for three important reasons:

Firstly, after 9/11, the question of security has become one of the main issues in the tourism sector. It is clear that conference tourism is one of the most sensitive to security issues. Greece, as one of the safest countries in the world, can guarantee the



Tae-Kwon-Do Stadium / Conference Center

smooth organization of conventions, conferences and business meetings.

Secondly, Greece today has the infrastructure to hold the most demanding of conferences, and is working further towards this goal. The Government, through the development law, funds the creation of independent conference centers by up to 50%. In the two-year period 2005-06, plans for the creation of 22 conference centers were approved. Today there are conference centers throughout Greece, and over 30 hotels with conference facilities with a capacity of over 700, and over 15 hotels with a capacity of over 1,000, a particularly significant figure if we consider that the average participation for 83% of conferences worldwide does not exceed 1,000 people. Furthermore, with the completion for the transformation of the Tae-Kwon-Do Stadium into a metropolitan conference center, Greece will have the infrastructure in which to hold conferences for many thousands of participants. The inheritance of the Olympic Games, Olympic Properties, is contributing to showcasing Greece as a suitable destination for holding conferences.

Thirdly, but equally important, is the fact that holding conferences in Greece offers the organizers and participants unique comparative advantages. International conferences held in Greece have the highest participation rate, as they combine other types of activity as well. The advantages operate cumulatively, as far as choice goes. Greece is a modern country, with a rich culture, a mild climate all year round, a country that offers the visitor varied and diverse possibilities. A conference can be combined with a few days' holiday, cultural excursions to monuments and museums, entertainment and nightlife in the city, and brief domestic trips to a well-known tourist resort on the islands or the mainland.

As a result, conference tourism is a special thematic unit within Greece's new advertising campaign, "Explore your Senses," with separate coverage, aiming to strengthen and promote it to all the countries of the world.

Conference tourism can be one of the most best possible occasions for what is known in the industry as city break or long weekend tourism. The city break concept is becoming in-

BRAND GREECE

creasingly important throughout the world, and is a particularly competitive form of tourism, although not a new product, in the European markets at least. Over the past few years, Greece has oriented itself to the development of city breaks, primarily for Athens and Thessaloniki, but also for other cities, such as Patra, Heraklion, Volos and others.

Urban tourism is directed towards high-income visitors from the international community, and harmoniously combines some of the most important tourism activities: conference, cultural, gastronomic and luxury tourism.

The new face of post-Olympics Athens, with its upgraded urban environment and enriched tourism product showcases the city as a global tourism, cultural and business destination. At the same time, Athens, as Europe's oldest city, attracts a significant number of visitors who want to feel the sensation offered by being able to see, up close, the best-known monument of antiquity, the Parthenon.

Athens saw a great deal of private investment on account of the Olympic Games. By 2004, over 500 million euros had been invested in modernizing hotels in the Attica region. The capital now has some of Europe's most modern and advanced hotels. Moreover, in the past few years, Athens has emerged as one of the most interesting cities in terms of gastronomy, offering a great range of restaurants with international distinctions. The above, in combination with the new public infrastructure, such as museum renovations, new roads, and the new Athens International Airport, provide

those guarantees of quality that are necessary for showcasing a city as a first-choice destination.

These changes are not limited to Athens. Thessaloniki is a prime example of a city ideal for city breaks, as it combines history, cultural heritage and natural beauty with the modern infrastructure of museums, conference centers, hotels, restaurants and nightlife.

Moreover, both Athens and Thessaloniki have – for many years now – been hubs for the arts, hosting and organizing two important art festivals, the Athens Festival and the Thessaloniki International Film Festival as well as the international Documentary Festival. Soon Athens will hold its first biennale of contemporary art.

Artistic events help to make cities known to specific audiences, who in real figures, however, constitute a large part of the tourism market.

Athens, capitalizing on this confluence of factors, competed for and won the right to organize the international tourism exhibition City Break Expo 2007, as well as the annual conference of the European network of tourism organizations, European Cities Tourism, in June 2007. This is a great achievement, as it is only the second conference of this new institution and reflects the future of professional and specialized exhibitions in the tourism sector.

Greece has shifted gear. In this context, tourism is on a path of rapid growth and is strengthening its image as a country that is modern, with a strong economy and on an equal footing with its partners in the European Union.