

MICE in cruising

Cruise events can boost ESG scores

The new wave in MICE cruises

MSC brings streamlined MICE venue to SA

Demand grows for Asia cruises

Small ships bring big opportunities



MICE in cruising

Cruising is carving out a strong role in the MICE sector, offering corporates streamlined event experiences combining convenience and exclusivity in an immersive setting.



Scenic Eclipse in Antarctica. Photo: Scenic Group

MICE cruises can boost ESG scores

KIRAN MOLLOY

WITH South Africa's new national carbon budget regulations taking hold this year, corporates are under unprecedented pressure to account for their environmental impact, extending right down to their meetings, conferences and incentive trips.

To meet these stringent new reporting standards, corporates are actively seeking suppliers that can boost their Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) scores and cruise lines are proving to be just that.



Thaybz Khan

Advantage

According to cruising experts from the local cruise sector, the sector is emerging as an optimal supplier to solve the headache of accounting for every element of an event through separate suppliers, as they offer an all-in-one footprint that encompasses accommodation, venues, dining and entertainment.

"From a MICE perspective, cruising offers a unique

advantage in that accommodation, meeting facilities, dining, entertainment and transportation are all integrated into a single venue. This simplifies event logistics and reduces the complexity associated with coordinating multiple suppliers across different locations and, certainly, overall ESG scores for corporates," explains **Thaybz Khan**, Head of Commercial at Cruises International.

Pioneers

Cruise lines are continuously investing in new sustainability projects that moderate the environmental impact of cruising, from onboard initiatives to deploying advanced mechanical technology across their fleets.

"Sustainability is a significant focus area across the cruise industry, with cruise lines investing heavily in technologies and initiatives designed to reduce emissions and improve operational efficiency," said Khan. "This was a focus of the cruise industry long before it became a requirement."

Some of the common measures implemented by cruise lines include advanced wastewater treatment systems, shore power connectivity, improved fuel efficiency, waste reduction programmes, responsible sourcing practices and ongoing investment in cleaner technologies, said **Gaynor Neill**, CEO of Cruise Vacations.

"Cruise lines within the Cruise Vacations portfolio



Gaynor Neill

continue to invest in a range of sustainability initiatives aimed at reducing their environmental impact," said Neill.

"Silversea, through Royal Caribbean Group's sustainability programme, reports on emissions reduction, energy efficiency and environmental performance. The Scenic Group works with independent sustainability specialists to measure carbon footprints and support emissions reduction targets across its operations."

Neill added that smaller ships and yacht-style vessels could also contribute to sustainability scores as they offered access to less-congested ports and destinations, supporting more sustainable tourism experiences and offering ethical entertainment options for MICE attendees. The Scenic Group is represented in Cruise Vacation's portfolio by Emerald Cruises, Emerald Yacht Cruises, Scenic Cruises and Scenic Eclipse Discovery Yachts.

Design

Khan highlighted ship design elements that reduce emissions and improve overall ESG reporting.

"Royal Caribbean Group, for example, has committed to achieving net-zero emissions by 2050 through its Destination Net Zero strategy, which focuses on sustainability and community outreach, alongside technological innovation in ship-building," said Khan.

Technology to repurpose wasted heat, occupancy-based air-conditioning control systems, exhaust cleaning systems, the use of LED lighting across the vessel, demand-based ventilation systems in the galleys and optimised power plant management systems are just some design innovations.

Energy transition

In its 2025 Sustainability Report, MSC revealed significant developments in its sustainability projects, including the introduction to the fleet of a third LNG-powered vessel equipped with dual-fuel engine technology, enhanced collaboration with port authorities and local communities in the ports of call and the development of its marine conservation facility at Ocean Cay MSC Marine Reserve.

"MSC is advancing its energy transition while investing in people, strengthening relationships with communities and taking a more structured approach to biodiversity,"

said **Pierfrancesco Vago**, Executive Chairman of MSC Group's Cruise Division.

In the same report, the cruise line revealed advances to its greenhouse gas emission mapping, which now covers shipbuilding, dry-dock operations, employee travel, food and beverage procurement and logistics, and waste management.

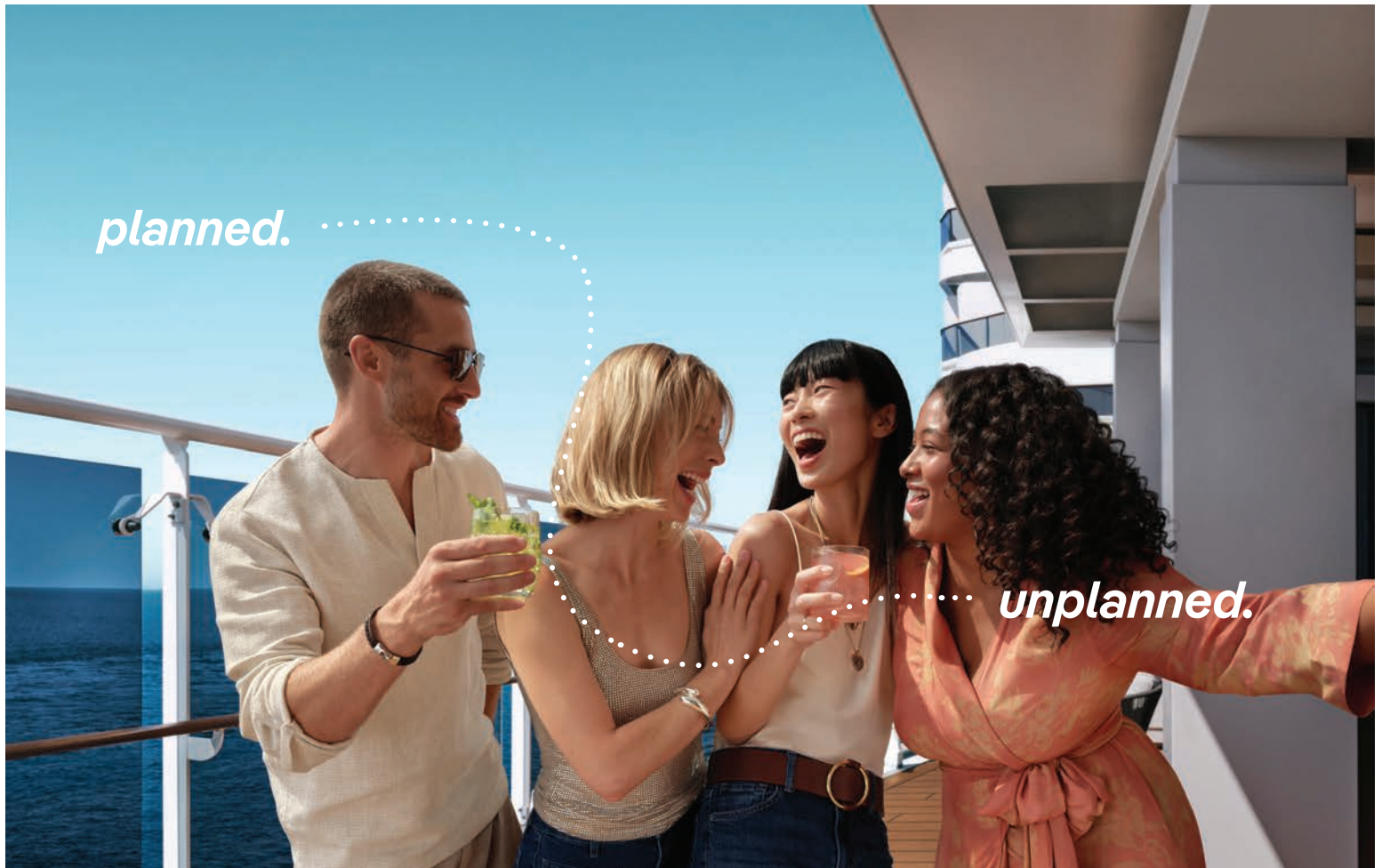
Reporting gap

While cruise lines were clearly advancing their sustainability initiatives and technology to reduce impact and emissions, and to track this progress on a fleet-wide scale, there was still a need for them to work closely with their suppliers to extract data that was specific to one event, revealed the experts.



Pierfrancesco Vago

"While dedicated event-specific carbon reporting for MICE groups is still evolving within the cruise industry, sustainability and ESG considerations are becoming increasingly important in cruise planning, operations and future product development," said Neill.



MSC Cruises offers a distinctive and versatile venue for group meetings, incentives, conferences, and corporate events. Whether you're hosting clients or rewarding employees, our ships provide the space, comfort, and functionality required to deliver an event that is both impactful and memorable.

From planning to execution, our experienced Groups team provides expert support both ashore and onboard, ensuring every detail is managed with precision and care. The result is a professionally delivered event that engages delegates, strengthens connections, and leaves a lasting impression long after the voyage end.

The new wave in MICE cruises

DANIELA BOTHA

CONFERENCING in southern African waterways is gathering momentum in the MICE market, giving corporate groups a more intimate alternative to traditional meeting venues. Operators highlight privacy, exclusivity and meaningful destination experiences as key advantages for executive retreats and leadership gatherings.

“Being surrounded by nature encourages fresh perspectives, reduces distraction and fosters more productive discussions and decision-making,” said **Vashti van Bodegom**, Head of Sales and Marketing at Zambezi Cruise and Safaris.

New setting

For Zambezi Cruise and Safaris, which operates on Lake Kariba, houseboats and waterfront venues provide an opportunity to combine business objectives with destination experiences.

At the centre of its corporate offering is the *Zambezi Trader*, a 29-cabin houseboat designed to accommodate conferences, incentive groups, executive meetings, leadership retreats and strategic planning sessions.

“The vessel combines comfortable accommodation, meeting spaces and breathtaking views, creating an environment that encourages collaboration, networking and fresh thinking,” said Van Bodegom.

The company also offers private

houseboat charters as well as access to Crowned Eagle Boutique Hotel and Lake Kariba Safari Lodge, enabling the tailoring of programmes to different corporate requirements.

Delegates can combine meetings with activities such as fishing excursions, nature walks, cultural interactions, boating activities and sunset cruises while enjoying the tranquillity of a waterfront setting.

Exclusive use

Zambezi Queen Collection’s is a selection of houseboats, designed for high-value, high-impact gatherings where privacy, access, shared experiences and uninterrupted time together matter more than scale, **Chereé Thomson**, Marketing Manager at Zambezi Queen Collection told *Travel News*.

According to Thomson, the defining characteristic of river-based conferencing is its smaller scale.

“The *Chobe Princess I, II and III* houseboats offer highly focused, private-use environment for small executive retreats, leadership breakaways, board-level strategy sessions and incentive-led corporate travel.”

The *Chobe Princesses*, which operate along the Chobe River, accommodate up to 10 guests sharing or five guests on a single-occupancy basis, positioning them as an exclusive-use venue rather than a large-format conference product.



Zambezi Trader makes its way along the river. Photo: Zambezi Cruise and Safaris

“The format naturally lends itself to leadership alignment, annual planning, reward travel, client hosting and incentive programmes for smaller, top-tier groups,” she said.

“Discussions feel more personal, itineraries can be more fluid, and the setting allows for meaningful engagement between delegates, hosts and guides,” Thomson added.

Mobile safaris

Both operators believe water-based conferencing delivers more than a meeting space.

Thomson said the Chobe River offered a distinctive proposition within the broader MICE market.

“It’s not a beach resort, city hotel, bush lodge or ocean liner. It’s a moving safari environment that combines exclusivity, wildlife, water, privacy and regional access in one compelling product... For the right client, it offers something far more memorable than a meeting room. It’s time together, on the river, with Africa unfolding quietly around them.”

She added that river-based cruising could address corporate ESG priorities, as it incorporated support for conservation, sustainability and community-focused elements, allowing MICE programmes to move beyond reward and into responsible, purpose-led travel.

MICE planners – a great venue is coming to SA!

MSC Cruises is positioning its cruise product onboard *MSC Armonia* in the coming South Africa cruise season as a flexible alternative to traditional conference and event venues for local corporates.

Each ship in the fleet is designed with business events in mind, and *MSC Armonia*, like all MSC Cruises’ vessels, will offer corporates an integrated MICE solution that combines business infrastructure with a travel experience.

Rather than planners having to separately source accommodation, catering, venue hire and entertainment, the cruise model brings these elements into a single package. This reduces the number of moving parts and allows event budgets to be structured around an all-inclusive fare where key components are already built in.

Integrated

Central to MSC Cruises’ offering is a consolidated event management approach, where a dedicated specialist team support organisers throughout the process, from early planning stages through to onboard execution. The intention is to reduce logistical complexity while maintaining control over event quality and delivery.

Event spaces

For the 2026/2027 South African cruise season, *MSC Armonia* will be a key deployment for the local MICE market, offering multiple dedicated event spaces across different capacities to accommodate a range of group sizes and formats.

Onboard conference and event venues include Armonia Lounge & Library (130 delegates), MSC Business Centre (125 delegates), Starlight Disco (225 delegates) and Teatro La Fenice (550 delegates).

These spaces are supported by advanced sound and lighting systems, projection capabilities and integrated visual sharing technology, allowing presentations and content to be broadcast

across multiple areas of the ship. This enables organisers to run multi-space programmes or large-scale conferences with consistent delivery across venues.

Networking

Because delegates are accommodated on board, they have access to a wide range of included facilities such as dining venues, entertainment programmes, leisure spaces and fitness amenities.

The cruise environment is able to extend engagement beyond formal sessions. The blend of business and lifestyle elements is designed to encourage informal networking and stronger delegate interaction throughout the event programme, rather than limiting engagement to scheduled conference hours.

Incentives

The pricing model is structured to include accommodation, meals, entertainment and venue use within the cruise fare, reducing the need for separate line items typically associated with land-based venues. In addition, MSC Cruises offers incentives such as one complimentary cruise place for every 23 paying guests booked.

Event planners can also build additional components into their programme, including private functions, curated shore excursions, spa experiences and tailored transport arrangements, allowing for a high degree of customisation depending on the objectives of the event.

Support

While cruise-based events introduce operational considerations such as travel documentation and embarkation requirements, MSC Cruises provides dedicated guidance throughout the process. Specialist teams assist organisers in managing compliance and ensuring a smooth flow from booking through to disembarkation.

The result is a structured yet flexible MICE offering that positions cruising as a viable and competitive option for corporate events and conferences.



MSC Armonia. Photo: Pexels, Daniel Messina

The World's Most Memorable Incentives

Don't have a street address

Don't Change the Destination. Change the Experience

Reward top performers with journeys that transform familiar destinations into unforgettable incentive experiences. From luxury yachts and sailing ships to expedition vessels and river cruises, Cruise Vacations offers incentive and corporate travel experiences that go beyond the ordinary. Over 1000 destinations on all seven continents.

STAR CLIPPERS



Under 200 Guests.
The Mediterranean and beyond. Under Sail.

EMERALD YACHT CRUISES



100-128 Guests
Yacht-style experience.
Extraordinary Incentive.

SCENIC ECLIPSE



Up to 200 Guests
Luxury Beyond the Expected.

SILVERSEA EXPEDITIONS



100-200 Guests
Where Incentive Travel
Becomes Adventure.

SILVERSEA



Up to 728 Guests
Ultra-Luxury Cruising.
Globally.

EMERALD RIVER CRUISES



Up to 180 Guests
Europe's Rivers.
Reimagined.

SCENIC SPIRIT



Just 68 Guests
The Mekong.
Authentically.

Cruise Vacations®

Voted the World's and Africa's Best Cruise Travel Agency



Africa's
Best Cruise Travel
Agency



World's
Best Cruise Travel
Agency



Africa's
Best Cruise Travel
Agency



Africa's
Best Cruise Travel
Agency



Africa's
Best Cruise Travel
Agency

011 514 0564 | info@cruise-vacations.co.za | www.cruise-vacations.co.za

Demand grows for Asia MICE cruises

BUSINESSES are increasingly looking beyond traditional conference venues and hotel-based incentives in favour of cruise experiences that create lasting memories and meaningful connections.



Boipelo Cholo

“The way companies reward, motivate and connect with their people is evolving. At Cruises International, we’re seeing growing interest in cruise-based meetings, incentives and group travel, with Asia emerging as one of the most exciting destinations

for corporate groups,” **Boipelo Cholo**, Business Development Manager for MICE at Cruises International, told *Travel News*.

While Royal Caribbean remains one of Cruises International’s strongest products for large-scale incentive programmes, the GSA company says its portfolio of leading cruise brands offers a solution for virtually every type of incentive, group size and budget.

“From contemporary and premium experiences to luxury voyages, our cruise lines provide extensive itineraries throughout Asia, giving clients a wide range of options when considering the region for future incentive travel,” said Cholo.

Through Royal Caribbean’s Asia deployment, guests may experience destinations such as Japan, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam and Hong Kong within a single journey. “For incentive planners, this means multiple bucket-list destinations, diverse cultures and unforgettable experiences combined into one seamless itinerary.”



The iconic Rainbow Bridge and the bright lights of Tokyo make an impressive sight. Photo: Cruises International

Japan

She said Japan continued to be a standout destination, offering a fascinating blend of tradition and innovation.

“From the bright lights of Tokyo and the historic charm of Kyoto to world-class cuisine and iconic landmarks, it’s easy to see why the destination continues to capture the imagination of South African travellers. Recent enhancements to Japan’s visa application process have also made travel planning more convenient for South Africans.”

Cholo believes that what makes cruise-based incentives particularly appealing is that the journey becomes part of the reward.

“Royal Caribbean’s ships are destinations in their own right, offering world-class dining, entertainment, accommodation and event facilities. Guests can spend the day exploring Asia’s most exciting destinations before returning to spectacular shows, private celebrations and premium onboard experiences.”

This year also marks the

much-anticipated launch of *Legend of the Seas*, the newest addition to Royal Caribbean’s Icon Class. As one of the largest and most innovative cruise ships ever built, it further reinforces Royal Caribbean’s position as a leader in experiential travel for groups.

“Of course, some of the most memorable moments happen in the simplest ways. Imagine enjoying sundowners on deck as the sun sets over the ocean, celebrating success with colleagues against a backdrop of endless sea views or sharing stories over dinner after a day of exploration ashore. These are the experiences that transform a trip from a reward into a lasting memory.

“For travel agents, incentive houses and corporate planners looking for fresh ways to engage and reward their people, cruising offers a unique opportunity to combine business, leisure and unforgettable experiences in one remarkable journey,” said Cholo.

Small ships bring big opportunities

AS THE MICE travel sector continues to evolve, South African corporates are increasingly seeking experiences that are more meaningful, exclusive and memorable than traditional land-based programmes.

According to **Gaynor Neill**, CEO of Cruise Vacations, this shift is creating exciting opportunities within the cruise sector, particularly among small-ship, yacht and expedition cruise products.

“One of the strongest trends we are seeing is demand for unique, high-value experiences rather than simply larger group numbers. Companies are looking to reward top performers with journeys that offer exclusivity, exceptional service and access to destinations that would be difficult to replicate through conventional travel programmes,” she told *Travel News*.

Smaller vessels

Smaller vessels are proving especially attractive in this space. Products such as Emerald Cruises’ luxury yachts, carrying 100-128 guests, offer an intimate

environment and can deliver a premium experience on a full or partial charter basis. Expedition ships and luxury river vessels are increasingly being considered for incentive programmes and executive retreats.

“Interestingly, many cruise itineraries allow agents to offer familiar destinations in completely new ways. The Mediterranean remains popular due to relatively easy air access and visa requirements, but cruise travel enables guests to experience lesser-known ports and authentic local communities that are often missed on traditional itineraries,” Neill added.

Star Clippers, for example, offers unique sailings through destinations such as the Northern Cyclades and Sporades Islands, providing an unforgettable sailing experience far removed from the standard Mediterranean itinerary.

Expectations

Traveller expectations are also changing. “Today’s incentive traveller values immersive experiences, authenticity and memorable

storytelling over purely luxury accommodation. The onboard experience itself has become a major differentiator, transforming even familiar destinations into extraordinary journeys,” said Neill.

Another important consideration is value. “While cruise products may initially appear more expensive than land-based alternatives, agents should evaluate the total programme cost. Many cruise fares include accommodation, dining, entertainment and, often, other elements like gratuities, selected beverages and shore excursions. When these inclusions are factored into the overall budget, the value proposition can be extremely compelling.”

For travel agents looking to grow their MICE business, forward planning is essential.

“Unlike large resorts, many luxury cruise ships and expedition vessels have limited capacity and charter opportunities can sell out years in advance. The most successful incentive



Working side by side with the crew, guests on Star Clippers help raise the ship’s towering sails. This memorable team-building activity combines nautical tradition and a lesson in knot-tying. Photo: Star Clippers

programmes are often planned 18 to 24 months ahead, allowing access to the best dates and inventory,” said Neill.

There are also opportunities within the river cruise sector, particularly during seasonal shoulder periods when operators may offer attractive charter arrangements.

“For South African travellers, these departures can coincide with local winter months and festive travel periods, creating

opportunities for unique snow-season and Christmas-market themed incentives.

“The key message for agents is to think beyond the destination itself. In MICE in cruising, the ship is not simply transport – it is an integral part of the experience. By focusing on the right product and planning well in advance, agents can deliver truly exceptional programmes that stand apart from traditional incentive travel,” advised Neill. ■

YOUR CLIENT'S NEXT INCENTIVE IS WAITING IN ASIA



Reward your top performers with an unforgettable journey through Japan, Singapore, Thailand and beyond aboard Royal Caribbean's *Spectrum of the Seas*.



WORLD-CLASS DINING

Exceptional cuisine for every palate.



AWARD-WINNING ENTERTAINMENT

Shows and experiences that inspire.



ICONIC DESTINATIONS

Explore Asia's most captivating places.



MEANINGFUL CONNECTIONS

Strengthen relationships in inspiring surroundings.



EXCEPTIONAL VALUE

Extraordinary experiences, all in one journey.

START PLANNING YOUR NEXT INCENTIVE >

CRUISES
international

**ROYAL CARIBBEAN'S
TRUSTED REPRESENTATIVE
IN AFRICA**



**BOIPELO CHOLO
- BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT MICE**

+27 76 838 1681

boipelo@cruises.co.za