

Meeting, event planners gather in Baltimore for first-time exhibition

As Lt. Gov. Anthony Brown began his tour of the exhibition hall at the Baltimore Convention Center, Thursday, June 23, he passed by the Abu Dhabi display area where visitors were having their pictures taken in traditional Arab attire. Walking with a group of Maryland tourism officials, Brown continued his survey of the hall – site of the Americas Meetings & Events Exhibition, or AIBTM.

The contingent proceeded along a route that took them by Guatemala and Scandinavia. They turned at Moscow, went by Austria, turned at Madrid, then passed Holland and Malaysia en route to a large display area hosted by Visit Baltimore and the Maryland Office of Tourism.

AIBTM, a three-day show produced by Reed Travel Exhibitions, is the first event of its kind to be held in the U.S. It's also the newest event in Reed's portfolio of global hosted-buyer expositions – a roster that includes shows in Asia, Australia, the Persian Gulf and Europe. Reed's hosted-buyer shows typically draw a few thousand

pre-qualified meetings and incentive-trip planners to a venue where they can meet with exhibitors representing destinations, attractions and services. As part of an agreement with Reed, AIBTM will run in Baltimore for three successive years.

According to an AIBTM update, 789 exhibitors in 183 exhibit spaces were at the convention center and 740 hosted-buyers attended. This generated 11,200 appointments.

The space shared by the Baltimore and Maryland tourism offices included stations for a few-dozen industry partners. To accentuate the team approach of the two offices and their partners, everyone wore black polo shirts emblazoned with Visit Baltimore and state tourism logos.

Becky Bickerton, representing the Frederick tourism office, said she had spoken to a buyer from Mexico who was interested in setting up meetings in places that link with Civil War history. "We're celebrating our (Civil War) 150th anniversary next year," she said. "We plan to do some things with Antietam (National Battlefield)."

At the Ocean City Convention Center station, Kim Mueller said she was impressed with the quality of the buyers. "They were coming to buy, not just chat." She booked two

conferences the day before – one for 3,000 to 5,000 people, the other for 1,000 to 3,000.

Amanda Fenstermaker, from Dorchester County’s tourism office, said she had spoken to buyers from the Washington, D.C., area, who expressed interest in Cambridge’s Hyatt Regency Chesapeake Bay Golf Resort, Spa and Marina. “It’s a world-class resort that has everything,” she said. She also fielded inquiries about locations tied to the Harriet Tubman story. The Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad Byway runs through several of Maryland’s Eastern Shore counties.

Catherine Carroll, representing Charles County, said Southern Maryland’s connections to the Civil War and War of 1812 resonated with buyers. A German buyer, for instance, wanted to arrange a series of meetings along the John Wilkes Booth Escape Route, a Maryland Civil War Trail. Carroll also spoke to a buyer from China, a business-travel specialist. “Business travelers tend to be interested in history,” she said.

Across the aisle from the Maryland exhibit area, an Australian Aborigine – in native dress – dazzled onlookers as he blew into a didgeridoo, a 4-foot-long wind instrument that makes

droning sounds. Aborigines have used didgeridoos for 1,500 years. Along another edge of the Maryland space, show participants were taking advantage of complimentary foot massages.

And, not too far away, Mexico’s Araceli Ramos Rosaldo was dispensing three kinds of tequila to guests. “It is our national drink,” she said.

Rosaldo also said many of her Mexican colleagues had been unfamiliar with Baltimore, “but now they all are really impressed. Everyone has been so nice, and not just in here – even the taxi drivers.”

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