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BLEISURE IN ASSOCIATION CONFERENCES



FOREWORD

While the business, education and networking elements of conferences continue to be the main priorities for the people who organise them and those who attend them, the opportunity for participants also to enjoy the leisure, cultural and sightseeing attractions of conference destinations appears to have assumed greater importance in recent years.

Conferences can provide leisure elements as part of their programmes, for example as organised pre- and post-conference tours and excursions to places of interest. But the individual participants can also choose to add extra days to their conference trips, to explore and enjoy the attractions of the destinations or simply to relax. By turning their conference trips into opportunities to take a short holiday, participants are joining the growing trend towards 'bleisure' – the combination of business trips and leisure breaks.

This report, based upon the findings of an online survey of conference planners, is the first analysis of conference organisers' perspectives on the importance of the leisure, culture and sightseeing opportunities in the cities they choose as the destinations for their events. It explores the role of social programme elements such as pre- and post-conference tours, and it examines the conference planners' perceptions of how their participants' bleisure extensions to conferences are developing.

We believe that the findings detailed in this report are entirely relevant to the work of destination marketing organisations as well as people who design conferences of all types.

We would like to thank all of the conference planners who responded to our survey and generously agreed to share their opinions and observations.

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WHAT IS BLEISURE?

Bleisure ('business' + 'leisure') is the name given to the practice of adding extra leisure days to a business trip, for visitors to enjoy the sightseeing, entertainment, cultural or gastronomic attractions of the destination or simply to relax. It is also known as a 'bizcation' or 'blended travel' – making one trip serve two purposes, business and leisure.

WHY IS BLEISURE GROWING NOW?

The practice of extending a business trip for leisure purposes has already existed for many years. But in the past few years bleisure has been expanding in all world regions as more and more people are taking advantage of their business trips to enjoy a few days of leisure in the places where their meetings are located. According to a recent report from Switzerland-based consultants EHL Insights, 'The 10 trends that are shaping the hospitality industry in 2022', the top trend for that year was ... Bleisure travellers.



Some of the reasons for the recent increase in bleisure are linked to the Covid pandemic:

- Following the severe restrictions on travel during the pandemic, the latent desire to enjoy foreign destinations is now at high levels in the general population, after being repressed during the Covid years.
- During the pandemic, working remotely and other flexible work arrangements became normalised in many areas of professional life. Many business travellers quickly understood that - as they no longer must be present in their normal workplace to be productive - they can easily prolong their visits in their destinations, combining work with leisure.
- Our experience of the Covid pandemic increased our awareness of the potential risks to our health resulting from air travel and the close proximity of our fellow passengers. The continuing presence of these risks has convinced many people that it makes good sense to combine two different purposes in one trip, thus reducing the number of flights they take and limiting their exposure to health risks while travelling.

Other factors, not directly related to Covid, have contributed to the current growth of bleisure:

- **The rising cost of flights and holidays** means that it makes good economic sense for travellers to spend less on flights by turning their business trips into leisure breaks. This is even more advantageous for those attending corporate meetings as they are likely to have all their travel costs paid by their employer.
- The **natural environment** benefits directly when the volume of air travel is reduced. Instead of making two separate journeys - one to attend a conference and another for a holiday - bleisure travellers make one return trip by air serve two purposes. As climate change awareness increases, the opportunity to reduce travel, particularly by air, is attractive to a growing number of people
- **Generations Y and Z**, the Millennials and their younger colleagues enjoy blurring the distinctions between work and play, between their professional lives and their personal lives. They regard this as a means of creating a better work/life balance for themselves. Adding leisure days to their business trips naturally appeals to these generations, who regard bleisure as a means of enjoying a more holistic and authentic experience of the destinations they visit on business.



BLEISURE IN ASSOCIATION CONFERENCES

In any type of business event, the bleisure component can take one of two forms:

- Extra days for leisure added to the business event by the **organisers**: these are generally optional and are known as pre- and post-conference tours or leisure add-ons. For this form of bleisure, participants enjoy the leisure activities with other participants, and there is usually an additional charge for these tours.
- Extra days for leisure added to the business event by the participants themselves: in this case, the participants organize the bleisure days independently and are either spending the days alone or with a spouse or partner, if accompanied.

The option of adding bleisure components to their work-related trips is open to participants in any type of business event - including corporate meetings, trade shows, and incentive trips. But this report focuses on bleisure as an element in association conferences. For most destinations, association conferences - and especially the conferences of international associations - are among the largest business events that they host in their cities. Therefore, the extent of bleisure activities of participants in association conferences is of particular interest to the destinations where they are held. In addition, the longer average duration of association conferences, when compared with corporate meetings for example, allows more time for social programmes - planned leisure components such as excursions, cultural events and pre- and post-conference tours.





CASE STUDY

Founded in 1970 and with its headquarters in Switzerland, Euralarm represents over 5000 companies operating in the fire safety and security industry. The association's members are national associations, individual companies, and other stakeholders from across Europe. Each year, the association organises several events including conferences, symposia and roundtable discussions. But the main event is its annual 3-day conference which provides its members with an opportunity to get together, discuss industry challenges and trends, address standardisation matters and work collaboratively to advance the sector.

Regarding pre- and post-conference tours and spouse programmes, prior to the pandemic, Euralarm offered a pre-event the day before the conference and also an event for spouses on the first day which was very well attended. But although the organisers tried to bring these back after the Covid period, there was less interest for these initiatives. In particular, these seem to be less acceptable for representatives from bigger companies, who are now less likely to get approval from their employers to attend the pre- or post-event, due to the companies' travel policies. These, followed by work responsibilities and family responsibilities would appear to be the main reasons for participants not extending their trips.

Nevertheless, Euralarm considers the leisure attractions of their conference destinations to be quite important in the decision-making process.



According to **Paul van der Zanden:**

The place has to be the right place and when it is attractive it can help to get more people to the event, even though it is not the main decision factor to attend for the majority of people. On our conference website, we provide information on what to do and see in the destination. When we make a choice for a location, we look at the location's meeting rooms, hotel, restaurant, and then we look the time it takes for people to travel to that location: the travel time from an airport to the meeting location, the possibility to come by high-speed train or other form of public transport are important. In general, we try to reduce the time people have to travel and target locations where you can arrive in the morning and travel back on the last day. This means also that our locations are mainly in the centre of Europe e.g. Brussels, Frankfurt, Den Haag.

Most association conference planners acknowledge the importance of destinations' leisure attractions as a motivating factor for their members in the process of deciding whether to attend a conference. Planners understand that as it is not mandatory for their members to attend association events they must make the whole 'conference package' as attractive as possible. Many studies indicate that for conference participants the presence of tourism and leisure opportunities in destinations is a major element of what makes cities attractive to them. For example, a survey done by the American Society of Association Executives showed that for 75% of association conference participants, 'a variety of things to see and do' was a key factor in what makes destinations attractive to them. Another survey, by Tourism Australia*, concluded that while there is a wide range of motivations for choosing to attend an international conference, the majority of participants are seeking a balance between destination appeal and conference content:

"For most respondents, the ideal association conference combines work and leisure. Striking a balance between opportunities to connect with peers and to discover the destination is the optimal scenario. Destination appeal is judged on a broad range of factors, including the ability to extend the trip beyond the conference and having a range of activities to experience, including food and wine, history, culture and iconic attractions."



* Tourism Australia: New Research on Association Conference Delegate Behaviour.

A recent report by Dr Rob Davidson and Professor Oliver Kesar analysed the various strategies and techniques that European convention bureaus are adopting to motivate and inspire more conference participants to engage in bleisure in their destinations.

Complementing that report, this survey investigates the opinions of association conference planners regarding the importance of leisure opportunities in the destinations they select, and the part played by bleisure activities in the events they organise. The findings are significant for all destination marketing organisations, and they provide valuable insights for conference planners regarding the current attitudes of association members towards adding bleisure elements to the conferences they attend.

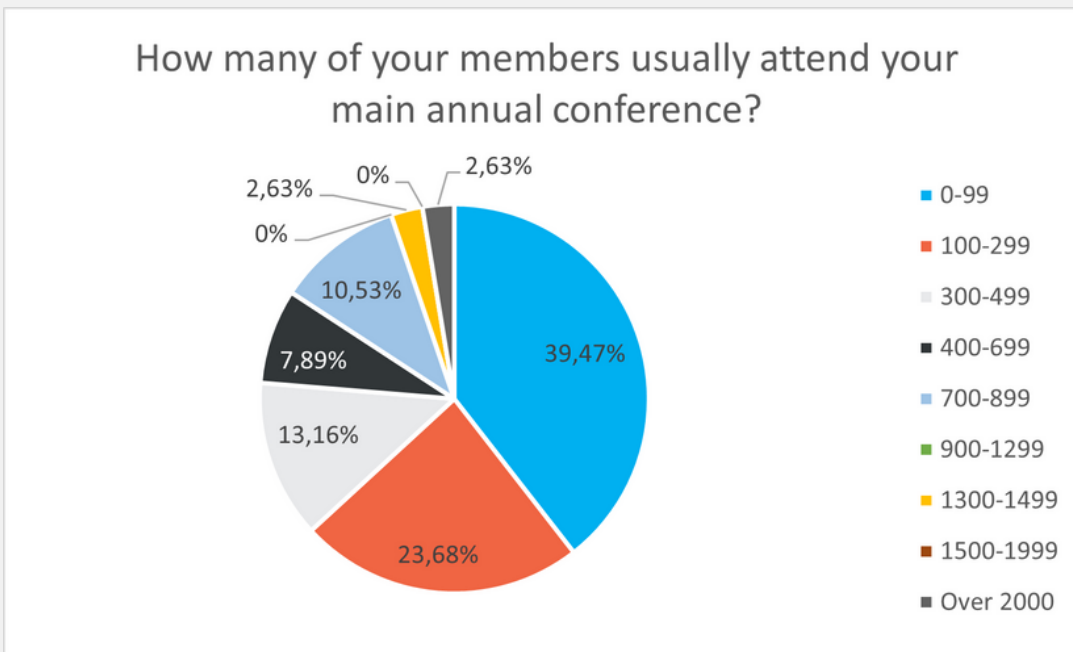
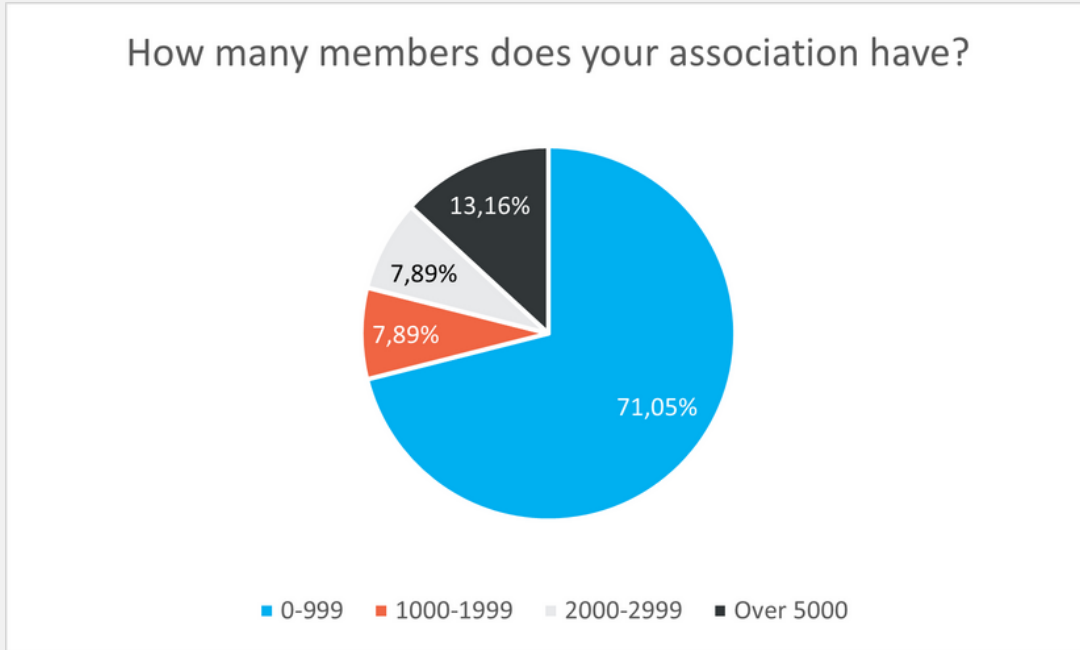
Survey Findings

The online survey was distributed through the Conferli database of conference planners. In August and September 2023, a total of 44 association conference planners completed the questionnaire. They represented a wide range of professional and trade associations based in Europe, North and South America, Africa and Australasia. The variety of industries covered by the associations who responded is shown below.

Industry	Industry
Medical Semiconductors Information Technology Hospitality Leisure Cultural Tourism Public Health Education	Constuction Power Transmission Criminal Law Insurance Broadcast Media Pharmaceuticals Manufacturing Road Safety

Size of the associations and size of their conferences

The majority of the associations responding to the survey have fewer than 1000 members. Only around 30% of them have over 1000 members.



Regarding the average number of participants who attend these associations' main annual conferences, 40% of them reported having fewer than 100 attendees. Almost one quarter of the associations' conferences typically attract between 100 and 300 participants. Only 2 of the respondents reported having more than 1000 participants at their main annual conferences.

The Rise of Bleisure Travel in Poland: A Perspective from Industry Experts



In the fast-paced world of business travel, a new trend is emerging, one that blurs the boundaries between work and leisure. "Bleisure," the fusion of business and leisure, is gaining ground as professionals seek to make the most of their work-related trips by adding a touch of personal enjoyment to their itineraries. **Paula Fanderowska**, Chairman of the Board of the Polish Conference & Congress Association, and **Aneta Ksiazek**, Head of the Poland Convention Bureau, share their insights on this evolving concept.

Paula Fanderowska, a significant figure in the Polish MICE industry, starts the conversation by addressing whether associations take bleisure options into account when choosing destinations. Congresses and conferences have a rotational nature, introducing participants to new and often unexplored destinations. While bleisure may not be the sole determining factor, it remains a significant consideration. The attractiveness of the city/region and its cultural offerings play a crucial role in the decision-making process.

Associations also inquire about bleisure options in specific destinations, with non-corporate clients seeking comprehensive information. The role of Convention and Visitors Bureaus (CVBs) is pivotal in presenting the destination's appeal, and venues that act as knowledgeable advisors are highly valued.

As for what interests congress and conference participants, they are drawn to tourist and cultural experiences that the destination is known for. Recommended itineraries, concierge services, and activities such as hiking trails and culinary routes are in demand. Additionally, post-tours to other cities or regions have become a popular promotional tool, allowing participants to explore more of the host country.

Aneta Ksiazek further emphasizes that bleisure is integrated into the bidding process for events. Bid books influence decisions based not only on logistics and infrastructure but also on well-being aspects, local traditions, and cuisine. Participants are increasingly looking for relaxation, physical activities, and culinary experiences beyond the event content.

The evolving concept of bleisure is closely tied to the post-pandemic reality, where sustainability has gained immense importance. Planners and meeting owners are now focused on minimising the negative impact on the environment and embracing the local community, culture, and traditions. Bleisure becomes the ideal solution for fully exploring a destination.

Aneta Ksiazek recounts the transformation of business trips in the age of social media, where professionals can now extend their stays, optimise costs, and reduce their environmental impact. This trend, referred to as "bleisure," gained significant traction during the COVID-19 pandemic, as remote working allowed professionals to fulfill their job responsibilities from almost anywhere in the world.

The Poland Convention Bureau actively participated in the 61st ICCA Congress in Krakow, offering dedicated study tours and bleisure options. Collaboration with other bureaus allowed participants to explore more of Poland. The 62nd ICCA Congress in Bangkok also embraced the bleisure trend, with Aneta planning to extend her stay to explore Thailand.

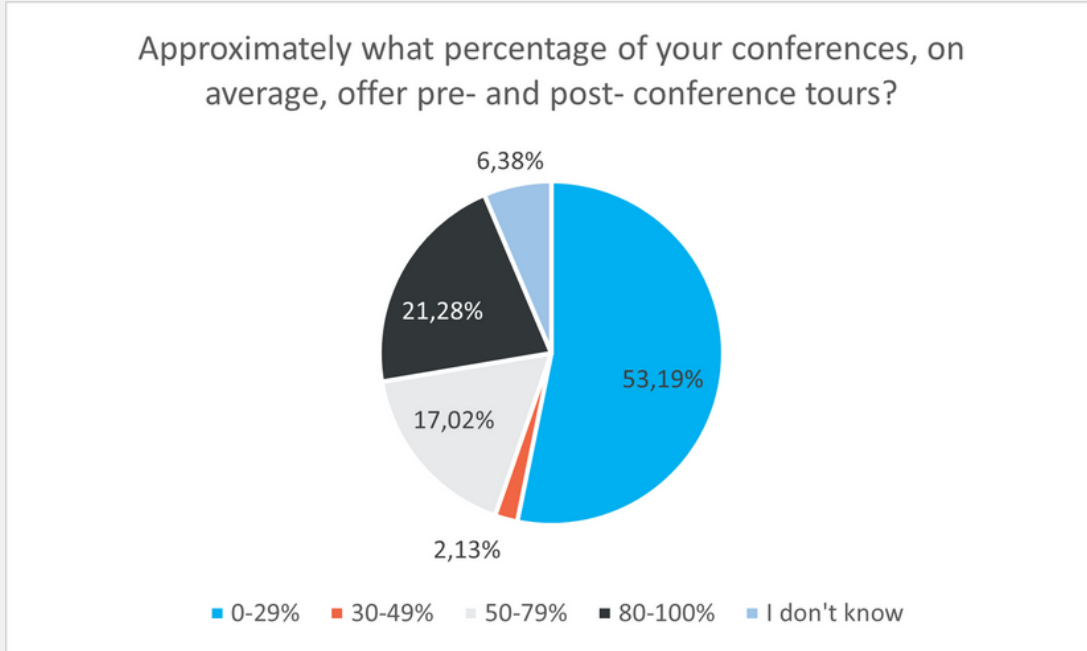
Polish cities like Gdansk, Poznan, Wroclaw, and Lodz are also offering opportunities for conference participants to extend their stay and immerse themselves in the local culture and cuisine. Bleisure has become an additional attraction for business guests, aligning with modern priorities such as employee well-being and sustainable development.

In the ever-evolving landscape of business travel, Poland is leading the way in embracing the "bleisure" trend, offering a richer, more satisfying experience for conference attendees. As professionals increasingly seek to balance work and personal enjoyment, the boundaries between business and leisure continue to blur.



Pre- and post-conference tours

Asked about the presence of pre- and post-conference tours in the events they organise, almost 40% of the respondents reported that these were an element in over half their conferences.



When prompted to give their reasons for including such tours as part of their conference programmes, the responses were:

"They are always well received by attendees" and "It's a great opportunity for destination marketing and to showcase the destination's MICE, leisure and 'bleisure' offerings" and "They provide a mind-soothing moment to refresh our minds".

But for those association conference planners who did not offer pre- and post-conference tours, one reason emerged above all: **the participants' lack of time:**

"This was certainly something that was routinely offered many years ago, along with spousal programmes. I find now that delegates want to get in and out of city as quickly as possible. The only exception is the real long-haul travellers who may add on days before and after the event, depending on their seniority" and "Time limitation" and "These days people are short of time to take too long a trip".

Other reasons given for not including pre- and post-conference tours focussed on participants' lack of interest and issues of approval and compliance:

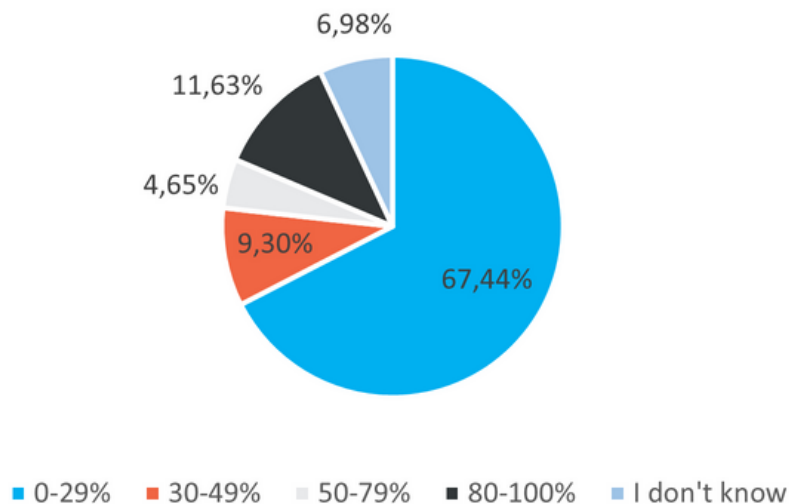
"We noticed that delegates are losing interest in them", furthermore "It isn't something we currently offer or see of interest." and "Attendees always comment that they are expensive and require minimums" as well as "A pre- and post- (social) event looks to be less acceptable for bigger companies than before the COVID period. We have members attending a meeting or event who do not get approval from their company to attend the pre- or post-event" and "Risk of being non-compliant for Continuing Medical Education".



Accompanying spouses and partners

It seems reasonable to expect that the likelihood of participants extending their conference trip for leisure purposes could be linked to them being accompanied by their spouses or partners on those trips. To explore this, the conference planners were asked about the extent to which they encouraged accompanying persons by offering a parallel programme of activities for them, as an element of their events. Only approximately 1 in 7 of them offered this component in over half of the conferences they organise.

Approximately what percentage of your conference, on average, offer a programme of activities for people accompanying your participants?



The reasons given for offering a programme of activities for accompanying persons were as follows:

- “Their presence allows our participants to actively participate in the conference without distractions. These people also support our participants to extend their length of stay and spend more in the destination and contribute to the geographic spread of conference benefits”.
- “We will start this, as taking care of accompanying persons helps the attendees to focus and stay at the conference”.
- “It's important that we look after the partners of our business delegates, so I design a specific Partners Program”.

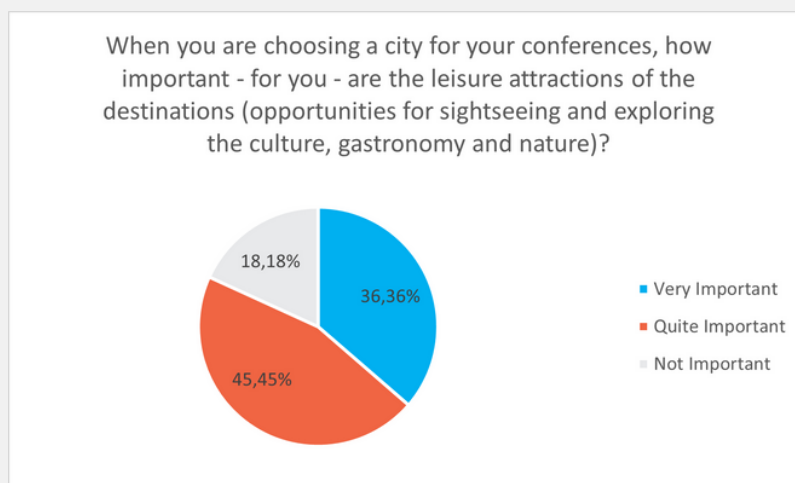
Conversely, the reasons given for not offering such components were largely related to a decline in demand for accompanying persons programmes:

- “Each year, fewer delegates bring their spouses/partners”.
- “We continue to offer, but participation has declined significantly”.
- “Not many accompanying people these days - so we've stopped it”.



The importance of leisure attractions in the destination selection process

The next question in the survey was designed to determine how much importance conference organisers gave to cities’ leisure attractions when choosing destinations for the hosting of their events. Their answers indicate that only 8 respondents out of the 44 considered leisure attractions to be completely unimportant. On the other hand, over one third of respondents considered leisure attractions to be very important in the destination selection process.



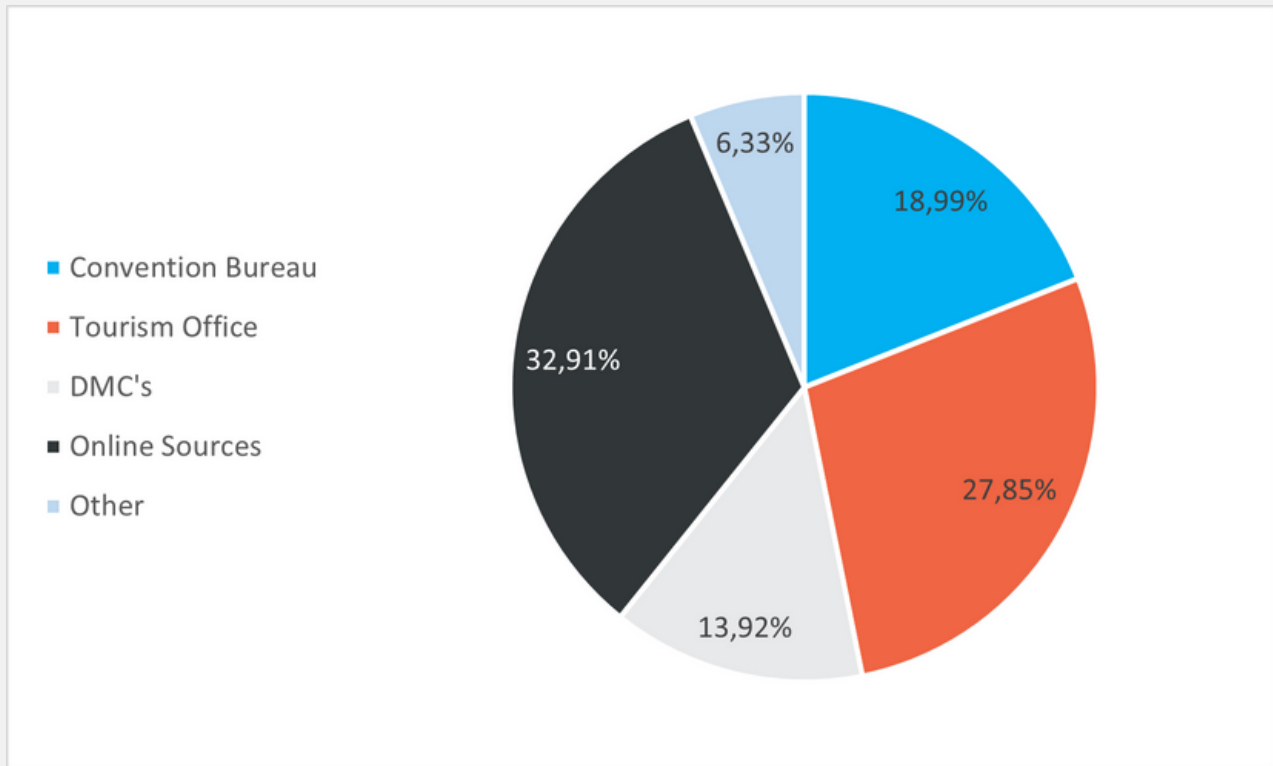
When asked to specify what types of leisure opportunities and activities they most liked to see in destinations, the most common answers given by the respondents were **tourism/sightseeing/exploring** (7 mentions); **relaxation** (3 mentions) and **culture** (2 mentions).

Those respondents who emphasised the non-importance of leisure in their choice of destinations mentioned:

"(Our participants) are more business focused, they want to spend less time travelling" and "Our events are work-related and already include a short technical visit related to the event" as well as "An attractive place helps to get more participants but is not the main decision factor to attend for the majority of people".



Regarding the sources that association conference planners use to get information about the leisure attractions of the destinations they are considering, their responses were:



Online sources and local tourism offices were the sources mentioned by 60% of the respondents, with convention bureaus used by fewer than 1 in 5 of them. It may be that conference planners believe that convention bureaus are useful sources of meetings-related information such as local venues and accommodation but not the leisure opportunities in their destinations.

Nevertheless, 21 of the 44 respondents reported that they regularly put information about the leisure attractions of the destinations on their conference websites. The other most common channels for sharing information about the leisure attractions were: emails (5 mentions); the social media (4); pamphlets/booklets (4); newsletters (2); and the conference app (1).



CASE STUDY EUROPEAN PARQUET FEDERATION

The European Parquet Federation (FEP – www.parquet.net) is the main body representing and defending the interests of the European parquet industry at all relevant levels. Typical activities of the FEP are:

- The collection of market data in FEP territory and beyond
- The follow-up of relevant European legislation and standardisation
- The publication of newsletters
- The initiation of market research related to parquet flooring
- The promotion of personal contact and communication amongst its members

Besides these activities, the association also organises an annual European Parquet Congress for its members. The FEP's 68th General Assembly and 48th Parquet Congress are scheduled for the 13 and 14 June 2024 in Vienna, Austria. In previous years, the destinations chosen for these events have included Athens, Hamburg and Barcelona. Approximately 80-100 members usually attend these meetings, which run from Thursday to Friday with an informal dinner on the Friday. However, preferred hotel rates are negotiated from the Wednesday to the Sunday night, to meet the needs of participants who wish to prolong their stay.

Pre-conference tours are occasionally organised, but they are fully business-related in the form of visits to relevant companies operating in the destination. Post-conference tours on Saturdays are also offered to participants, but not every year. It depends on the destination and whether it is already very well known or still 'exotic'.

The leisure attractions of the destinations (opportunities for sightseeing and exploring the culture, gastronomy and nature) are considered to be a 'quite important' for the conference organisers choosing a destination and for the participants themselves.

According to **Isabelle Brose, FEP Managing Director**, the percentage of participants who stay longer in the destination remains stable:

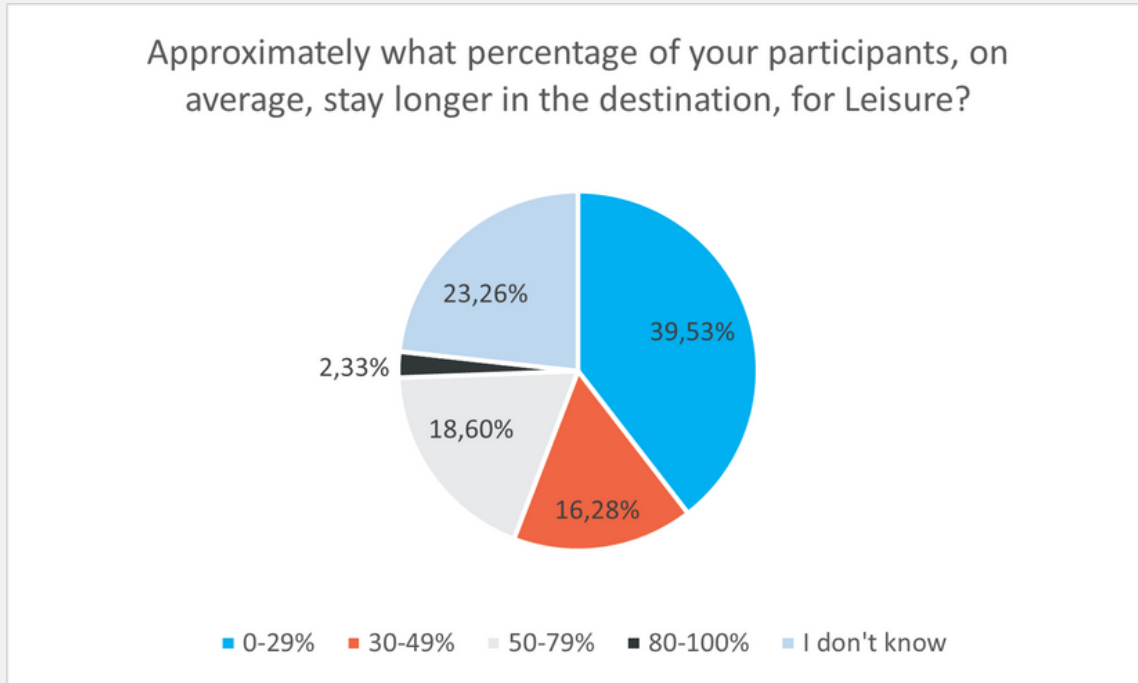


Usually, a few participants arrive on the Wednesday to enjoy the city before the conference begins. However, most of our members join on the Thursday. At the end of the event, a few participants leave on Friday afternoon, but the majority stay at least until Saturday, or even Sunday, so they can enjoy our informal dinner on Friday. Finally, a couple of them take advantage of the hotel's preferred rates until the following Monday.

At the first meeting we organised after the Covid-related break, most of the people stayed longer because of the will/need to travel and socialise again, but also the appeal and the average distance of/to the destination (Athens, on average an extra flight hour compared to our other destinations). After that, things normalised and we came back to the situation described above, with the percentage of participants who stay longer in the destination remaining stable because of their wish to socialise.

Nevertheless, we see a decreasing number of companions present. We have almost divided by two the number of participants to our companions' tour which takes place during the Friday all-day meetings.

When asked about the average percentage of their conference participants who usually stay longer in the destination for leisure purposes, over 1 in 5 of the respondents admitted that they did not know. The principal reason for this was that it was not something that they measured. The responses of the others are shown in the following chart:

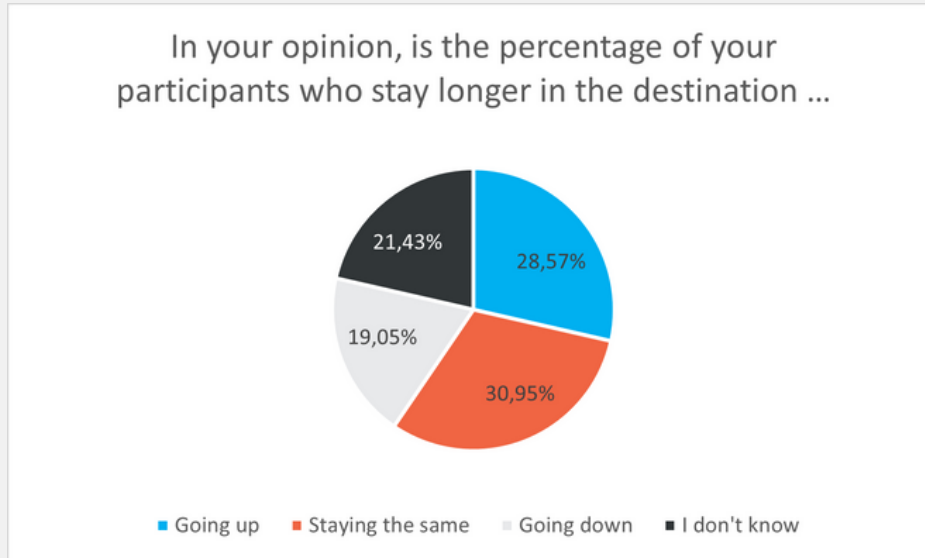


Over 37% of all respondents reported that 30% or more of their conference participants spent extra time in the destination for leisure activities, before or after the actual event. This figure alone demonstrates the current interest in bleisure among people attending conferences.

A few respondents expanded upon their answer, providing insights into the motivations of their participants for extending their conference trips – or not:

- “It’s very dependent on the location, audience and timing of the event. If the event finishes on a Thursday or Friday, guests are far more likely to extend their trip for the weekend. If mid-week, not so much. C-level attendees are also less likely to extend their trip”.
- “It depends on the location and whether or not the attendees have visited before. Also, the time of year varies, so summer is usually more popular for tours”.
- “We have sometimes people who stay longer on a location but in general everybody goes back home after the event ... A lot of our members are travelling on a regular base for their company – organisation”.

The last question in the survey focused on the issue of whether bleisure was a growing phenomenon. Again, 1 in 5 of the respondents said that they did not know. But the two most common responses were that bleisure was either growing (approximately 30% of the respondents) or staying the same (approximately 30% of the respondents). Conversely, almost 20% reported that bleisure as an activity was declining among their conference participants.



The respondents' reasons for their answers offer further insights into the factors that are currently motivating or deterring participants with regards to extending their conference trips.

Motivations	Deterrents
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • After Covid, everyone wants to stay longer • Due to recent lockdowns • To socialise after Covid • We assume they take the chance for vacationing in the event location once they are already there • People now want to experience a destination beyond the conference room • People are interested to explore more when they travel • (People have) less travel budget, so (they spend) more time in one destination. Also (it is) more sustainable to see sites when already there for a meeting! 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They find it expensive to stay longer than the conference time • Time constraints mainly • Organisation travel rules / regulation make it more difficult to stay longer on a location. Travel budgets are also lower. The "get greener" strategy from a lot of organisations is also discouraging people to travel • Delegates have visited the same city before, or they wish to return home due to work pressures or wish to spend time with their family • Higher hotel costs and more work • The time of year will really have an impact... Our event is during the first week in December. Just before Christmas

Conclusion

The evidence from this survey indicates that participants' interest in extending their conference trips by adding days for leisure is largely continuing or even growing, according to a majority of the conference planners who responded. For certain categories of participants, the opportunity to enjoy the leisure attractions of their conference destinations is something that they do consider when deciding whether to attend their associations' events.

However, for those participants who are either unable or unwilling to spend extra leisure time in their conferences' destinations, the principal constraints appear to be a lack of time or a lack of money or a lack of permission from their employers.

Nevertheless, it is also evident that a significant percentage of association conference organisers still know very little about their participants' bleisure preferences and habits, despite the important consideration given to destinations' leisure attractions in the decision-making process of many association members.

As the younger generations increasingly form a significant proportion of their associations' membership, it is highly likely that their attitudes towards work/life balance and frequent flying will lead to greater interest in the opportunities that conference destination offer for bleisure.

Future, larger-scale surveys of association conference planners will reveal if this is indeed the case.

