

HEADQUARTERS

EUROPE, MIDDLE-EAST, AFRICA

the EMEA Magazine for Association Executives

Supported by ESAE, European Society of Association Executives, and UIA, Union of International Associations, Brussels

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Meeting Media Company
Meetings Industry Publishers (Belgium)

Afgiftekantoor 2800 Mechelen 1
Bureau de Dépôt 2800 Malines 1

Published 6 times a year: March,
April, June, September & November
Edition Edition March 2011 - P3A9029

TAIWAN A VERY SPECIAL ISLAND EXPERIENCE

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BILBAO, A DESTINATION DESIGNED FOR CONFERENCES

IN THE LAST TWO DECADES BILBAO, ONCE AN INDUSTRIAL CENTRE, HAS BECOME A BLOOMING SERVICE CITY FILLED WITH ATTRACTIVE BUILDINGS AND PLEASANT WALKING AREAS. DURING MY VISIT, I FOUND A DESTINATION ENHANCED WITH HOTELS, VENUES AND CONFERENCE CENTRES DESIGNED FOR CONGRESSES AND BEAUTY. **REPORT IGOR HENDRICKX**

Bilbao owes much of its success as a service city and meeting destination to the so-called Guggenheim effect. While the famous Guggenheim Museum, designed by Frank Gehry, is the most obvious example of the urban renewal, it's only one of the city's many ambitious projects. These projects have led to new suburbs, modern infrastructures and buildings, like the Bilbao Metro, the Palacio Euskalduna de Congresos y de la Música, the Bilbao Exhibition Centre in Barakaldo and many others. Most of these landmarks are located along a riverside promenade, where design hotels have joined the mix. It was a joyous experience to be able to walk from hotel to conference centre to museum. In this way I felt at home in a city where I hadn't

been before and where I didn't even speak the language.

MEETING IN BILBAO

The Euskalduna Conference Centre and Concert Hall, designed by Federico Soriano and Dolores Palacios, was inaugurated in February 1,999 and has since played host to 6,379 events, of which 3,754 were congresses and meetings. It won the International Association of Congress Centres (AIPC) 'World's Best Convention Centre Award' in 2003. This wonderful multi-purpose centre stands in the very heart of the city on the former site of the Euskalduna shipyard. Indeed, the whole building looked to me like a mighty ship able to accommodate major congresses

side by side with symphony concerts and other stage performances. In addition to the large acoustic auditorium (2,164 pax), there's a theatre hall (613 pax) and numerous meeting rooms. There's also a VIP meeting room and the many foyers and vestibules make up 8,000 m² of multi-purpose space for exhibitions. In 2011 work will start on an expansion of 5,000 m², of which half will be used for events.

Bilbao Exhibition Centre, located in Bilbao's metropolitan area, is perfect for large-scale fairs, congresses, exhibitions, etc. The BEC's great flexibility and versatility make it possible to adapt the spaces to the size and needs of each particular show. The BEC encompasses 150,000 m² of exhibition space in 6 halls, and hosts around 30 trade fairs per year. Its convention centre has 12 rooms of different sizes and configurations on 5 floors. The complex also boasts the BIZKAIA ARENA, a multi-purpose hall that can adopt a wide range of configurations to host different types of events, seating an amazing 26,000 attendees.

STAYING IN BILBAO

Bilbao's business hotels reflect the city's new modern design. In each one I enjoyed looking



Guggenheim Museum

GETTING TO AND AROUND IN BILBAO

Bilbao is the largest city in the Basque region and is accessible by virtually every means of transportation possible. As a port city, Bilbao can be reached by ferry from the UK. Last but not least, there's the Bilbao International Airport, which receives flights from all over Spain and many parts of the world. When I went to Bilbao, I discovered its architectural beauty in ever more wonderful steps. First, Bilbao airport has a sleek design with two symmetrical wings and a sharp tip at its centre, earning it the nickname 'La Paloma' ('The Dove'). Second, Bilbao itself seemed to open its doors for me when at the end of a tunnel, we drove over the La Salve bridge, past the Guggenheim Bilbao and along the main boulevard. Maravilloso! As mentioned before, getting around in Bilbao is easy: everything is within walking distance, but if you have to go to the larger metropolitan area, you can use the modern and fast Metro Bilbao or the tram or bus.

at the structural expressionist, modern, postmodern or even post-postmodern art and architecture. Here are just a few examples of what accommodations in Bilbao look like.

The Silken Gran Hotel Domine is one of three 5-star hotels in Bilbao. It's got an enviable location right in front of the Guggenheim Museum. Nearly every aspect of the hotel was designed by Javier Mariscal. The result is a model of 'contemporarity' with an understated and welcoming environment. It has 135 rooms, 10 suites and 2 break-out meeting rooms for medium-sized meetings. The hotel's rooftop terrace offers - apart from a refreshing breakfast location - interesting possibilities with its magnificent view. No wonder that it's the flagship hotel of the Silken hotel chain.

Strategically located in the heart of the new business, leisure and cultural centre of the city, next to the Euskalduna Conference and Culture Centre, lies the Meliá Bilbao. It attracts the eye with its warm Mediterranean colours. While I was there, the Prince of Asturias was accommodated in one of

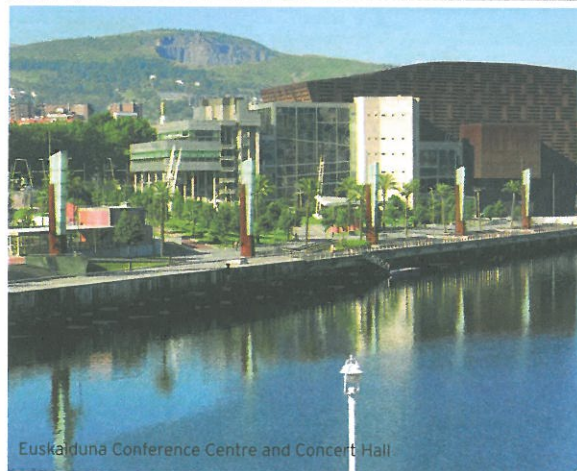
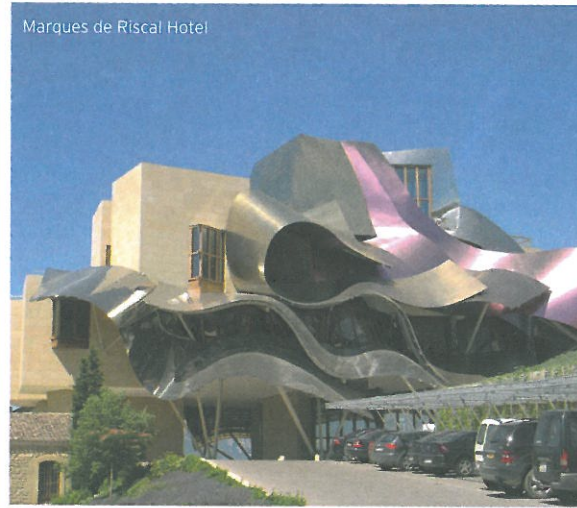
211 rooms. The four convention rooms, like the rest of the interior, combine soft pastel colours with warm wooden furnishings, augmented with state-of-the-art audiovisual technology.

Inspiring architecture, inspiring design, inspiring conferences!

151 outward-facing rooms decorated with large, tinted-glass windows, have earned Hotel Hesperia Bilbao the nickname 'the hotel of colours'. To me it looked like Mondrian himself had come to Bilbao. Built in 2005, across the river from the Guggenheim Museum, the hotel can pride itself on its 9 meeting rooms. Most can be adapted to fit events of all sizes.

www.tourspain.es
www.spain.info

Marques de Riscal Hotel



Euskalduna Conference Centre and Concert Hall