

Bohemian, cosmopolitan and a treasure trove for event organisers, Brighton's London-by-the-sea tag is to receive a new endorsement in 2016.

The i360 visitor attraction is set to open on Brighton beachfront next summer, and designed by architects David Marks and Julia Barfield – the team behind the London Eye – draws yet further parallels with the capital. Although the 160m-tall structure's £46 million price tag is contentious and not universally popular locally, its event spaces have proved a hit with planners, especially agencies.

Sales manager Pippa Atkinson says bookings have already been taken ahead of the official opening of the event spaces in September 2016, and the i360 will introduce a host of new facilities on Brighton beach. The attraction's glass pod, which ascends to a height of 140m, affording views of up to 26 miles in all directions, can accommodate 200 when hired exclusively for evening events and a champagne bar is an option being explored by developers. Additional spaces are to include three seafront-facing meeting/function rooms, with a combined capacity of 477, an intimate boardroom (all accessed via a private events entrance) and even a restored Victorian-era toll booth dating back to 1866 – a nod to the



The i360 will boast meeting rooms on the beach from next September

Towering achievements

i360's iconic forerunner the West Pier. Events for up to 1,000 can be accommodated if the pod and entire building are hired. Atkinson says: "For agents, it's great, it's something new for them to offer. You can be really imaginative and it's also great for breakouts from the Brighton Centre for example."

Add the multitude of large conference spaces on offer at the nearby Brighton Centre to plentiful hotel options on the beachfront, and it creates a heady mix for organisers.

For the city's convention bureau, VisitBrighton, the i360 is indicative of Brighton's direction of travel.

"We have worked really hard over the last five years to balance the image of the city," says bureau head Julia Gallagher. "We are well beyond the bucket and spade, it's a far more adult offer, which embraces the beachfront, gastronomy and hotels."

The tactics are working, too. Meetings and events have generated an estimated £50m for the Brighton economy and the Brighton Centre, thriving after a 2012 refurbishment, has conferences on its books as far in advance as 2030. The venue is also benefitting from the bureau's focus on attracting conferences from the rest of Europe. Next year the European

Allan Norbury checks out Brighton's latest beachfront attractions

Society for Paediatric Infectious Diseases international congress will bring 2,500 delegates for sessions at the centre, gala dinner at the Grand hotel and a social evening on Palace Pier – along with an estimated £5m in economic benefit. Gallagher adds: "We want delegates to absorb the local flair."

Brighton's exposure will be taken to a global level when the American Express Community

Stadium (the Amex), home of Brighton & Hove Albion FC, hosts two matches during this month's Rugby World Cup. The stadium will stage the South Africa vs Japan and Samoa vs USA group matches, and sales staff expect to see an uplift in interest post-tournament – although strict licensing rules mean promotional activity is restricted.

Typical of the more sophisticated offer now available on the beachfront is The Salt Room, a seafood specialist restaurant that opened in February to rave reviews (*The Independent's* feared Tracy MacLeod was particularly impressed). Its a bonus to the Hilton Metropole, which underwent a £3.7m refresh of rooms and meeting spaces earlier this year.

Indeed, the beachfront is a hub of regeneration: the arches next to the i360 construction site have been lovingly restored to create interesting retail outlets, while the Holiday Inn Brighton – Seafront is set for a £4m makeover. The hotel's drab concrete exterior is to be re-clad and given a lick of paint to help it better blend into its Regency surroundings. Inside, 130 bedrooms have been refurbished, while all nine meeting rooms are being given a light and airy update to make up for a lack of natural daylight. The big news

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here though is the complete refit of the lobby area while the hotel's restaurant is to rebrand as the Stock Burger Company, selling craft beer and Brighton favourite Small Batch Coffee.

Further along the seafront, the Grand is making the most of its new ownership. De Vere sold the hotel for an undisclosed sum, thought to be around £50m in April 2014, and the new, independent owners are wasting no time in making their mark. Smaller meeting rooms have been given a new, sophisticated look and feel while the iconic façade is in line for a spruce-up.

Behind the seafront hotels and the bustling, rabbit warren-style shops of The Lanes and North Laine, the Brighton Dome remains a big player on the city's meetings scene. A plan to combine the Dome with the splendour of Brighton Pavilion and the versatile Corn Exchange to create an events campus remained under wraps at the time of writing. The Dome is popular with small associations, hosting the 700 delegate World Muscle Society this year, while the Corn Exchange can host gala



New-look arches are part of a beachfront regeneration in Brighton

dinners or awards ceremonies. Incoming enquiries are said to be up by 8 per cent while revenues are forecast to be up by a quarter. Elsewhere, redevelopment of the areas surrounding Brighton Station has refreshed the city's 'gateway', just 45 minutes by train from London. Here, a new 90 room hotel –

expected to become IHG brand Indigo – is under construction.

Out at the Amex Stadium, nestled among the South Downs, a 160-bedroom Starwood-branded hotel is in the pipeline for 2017, and is expected to open up the stadium to residential conference business.

CASE STUDY



Charlie Hepburn
Vivid Event
Group

Media agency Starcom Mediavest hit Brighton beach as bosses combined a thank you with a business update for 450 staff during an away day on the south coast.

Vivid Event Group devised a summer holiday-themed event, with a lost-luggage treasure hunt after the morning business briefing in the Grand's Empress Suite, finished off with an evening barbecue and party.

Starcom Mediavest wanted a venue less than an hour from London, able to appeal to a range of ages and experience levels and accommodate all delegates in one location on an exclusive basis.

MD Charlie Hepburn says: "The Grand Hotel Empress Suite was a great choice in terms of size and standard of service, also for its location giving access to the city and making the most of the nooks and crannies of the historic and eclectic Lanes that were perfect for the treasure hunt. Combined with the vibrant seafront and the trappings of being a famous holiday destination, the city offered everything to create a true summer holiday experience as an event."

Once the morning presentation was complete, the Empress Suite was transformed into an airport terminal, complete with departure boards and cabin crew, who gave the treasure hunt



Teams took to the Lanes as part of the 'lost luggage' treasure hunt challenge

A summer sizzler

instructions in the style of an onboard cabin safety briefing.

Armed with empty suitcases and iPads, teams of eight were sent out on to the streets of Brighton to locate the various holiday items needed to fill the case. Upon completing their task, teams were sent to the beach for a welcome drink and a game of beach volleyball. An evening party, complete with barbecue and music from Radio 1 DJ Huw Stephens, was staged back

at the Grand, in the hotel's GB1 restaurant, its GB2 extension and Albert Room.

The event left engagement at 'an all-time high'. Starcom's Cassie Gailey says: "It's clear to see the rise in morale, it's infectious! It's one of few opportunities we have to bring everyone together over the course of the year. Our away day really is such a huge part of our company culture, most staff even plan their holidays around it so they don't miss all the fun!"