

The Culinary Road of Tunisia promotes balanced and sustainable growth in business tourism while strengthening the overall appeal of Tunisia as a destination.

The Culinary Road of Tunisia is the road of all those, professionals and enthusiasts, who take part and share their experiences and points of view. Interview with Wiem Radhouane and Lotfi Mansour, respectively President and Executive Director of the Tunisia Convention Bureau, who talk about the opportunities for the MICE sector in developing a gastronomic tourism offer.



Can you give us a brief introduction to TCB: when was it founded? What are its objectives and missions?

Wiem Radhouane: The Tunisia Convention Bureau, set up as a Groupement d'Intérêt Économique (GIE), brings together MICE companies operating in the private sector. Founded in February 2023, its main objective is to position Tunisia as a preferred destination for MICE events, while establishing links with international organizers specializing in business events.

What is the profile of its members?

Lotfi Mansour: Tunisia Convention Bureau members include major international players in the MICE sector, such as DMCs, convention centers, hotels and caterers. These companies are highly committed to promoting the destination, and are recognized as leaders in their respective regions or nationally. In particular, if we take the case of TCB member DMCs, their market share exceeds 60%, testifying to their significant influence in the field.



Tourism in Tunisia is undergoing a complete overhaul, with a diversified year-round offering. How does this benefit the MICE sector?

W.R. : The ongoing evolution of the tourism sector in Tunisia offers substantial advantages for the MICE sector.

Firstly, the diversification of the tourism offering attracts a wider range of visitors, providing more opportunities for MICE events. Business event organizers are looking for destinations that offer a variety of experiences and activities for participants, and this diversification responds to that need by offering varied possibilities for pre- and post-event programs.

What's more, by offering activities throughout the year, Tunisia can attract MICE events at different times, avoiding over-reliance on a specific season. This smoothes out demand and encourages more regular use of event infrastructures.

The diversification of our offering also contributes to enhancing the destination's image as a place for business travel and professional events. The varied options for activities, leisure and cultural discoveries reinforce Tunisia's overall appeal to MICE event participants, while offering customization possibilities to meet the specific needs of each group.

The reconfiguration of Tunisian tourism with a diversified year-round offer provides the MICE sector with a solid foundation for attracting and hosting business events, capitalizing on the destination's variety and continuing appeal.

L.M.: Tunisia needs to diversify threefold: its products, which should no longer be limited to the summer season; its regions/destinations; and its accommodation.

As it happens, MICE is at the heart of this diversification, since events, congresses and incentives are held outside the summer season, and bring in their wake other, non-summer activities: thalassotherapy, golf or excursions are all so-called post-convention activities. Incentives are a tremendous tourism driver in regions like the South and North, which are not destined for mass tourism.

Last but not least, MICE is a business that shuns standardized products and services, and therefore demands creativity, originality and quality. These three requirements can only be met thanks to the combination of a creative DMC, personalized hosting services and, above all, a sufficient budget to ensure a high level of service. This last point is essential for Tunisian tourism, as the ultimate aim of diversification is to make the sector more profitable; yet the average expenditure of a MICE customer is 5 times higher than that of a tour operator customer.

Only the development of MICE can counter the weakness of our tourism revenues and the shortcomings of our image: a hotel buffet has nothing to do with Tunisian gastronomy, a visit to an archaeological site at a snail's pace doesn't allow you to immerse yourself in the country's history, and so on.

How can offering culinary experiences be an asset in positioning Tunisia as a MICE destination?

W.R.: Offering culinary experiences is a major strategic asset for a number of reasons:

- **Cultural and gastronomic diversity:** Tunisia is rich in cultural and historical diversity, which is reflected in its cuisine. Offering a variety of culinary experiences allows MICE participants to discover a range of unique flavors and traditional dishes. This adds an enriching cultural dimension to their stays, stimulating interest and curiosity.
- **Emotional commitment:** food is often linked to memories and emotions. Offering authentic and memorable culinary experiences can create strong emotional bonds between participants and the destination. These positive memories can have a lasting impact on their perception of Tunisia as a good place for business and events.
- **Event personalization:** MICE event organizers are looking for ways to personalize experiences for their attendees. Diverse culinary options enable menus and tastings to be tailored to the specific preferences and needs of each group, offering a tailor-made experience.
- **Social and networking programs:** meal times and relaxation offer valuable opportunities for informal networking and social interaction. Well-orchestrated culinary experiences can encourage more informal and relaxed discussions between participants, strengthening professional relationships and group dynamics.
- **Destination promotion:** dishes can become ambassadors for the destination. Participants sharing their culinary discoveries on social networks and with colleagues are helping to promote Tunisia as an attractive location for future events.
- **Competitive differentiation:** offering unique culinary experiences can set Tunisia apart from its competitors as a MICE destination, increasing its appeal to event organizers.

In short, integrating quality, authentic culinary experiences into Tunisia's MICE offering helps create unforgettable experiences for participants, while reinforcing the destination's image as a dynamic, culturally rich and business-friendly location.

L.M.: I'll answer with an anecdote from the 90s in Paris. My CEO at the time, whose family was of Tunisian origin, spent an inordinate amount of time on each of his visits to Tunisia, being invited to dine at the homes of one or other of the families he knew there; whereas in Paris he treated himself to the best restaurants! To our astonishment, he replied: "You can't find real couscous in Tunisian restaurants, let alone in hotels. In other words, Tunisian cuisine had a long way to go before asserting itself outside private homes, where the "real" chefs lived, who knew how to acquire the right

products, the right proportions and the thousand and one subtleties of this or that dish. Today, this refinement of Tunisian cuisine is present in many places, thanks to talented chefs, some of whom don't hesitate to add their own touch of modernity to ancestral recipes. A trip to Tunisia is also a culinary journey, and at the same time Tunisian wines have never been so good or so varied.

Does the Culinary Road of Tunisia help spread MICE opportunities throughout the country? What synergies could you envisage?

W.R. : This project can indeed help spread MICE-related opportunities throughout the country, while creating beneficial synergies for the sector, by playing on several factors:

- Geographical distribution of events: the Culinary Route can encourage MICE event organizers to explore different regions of Tunisia, beyond the traditional destinations. Cities and regions along the route can host events and related activities, capturing a share of the MICE market and stimulating local economic development.
- Local partnerships: the Culinary Route can facilitate collaboration between local players, such as restaurants, food producers, accommodation and activity providers, and MICE companies. These partnerships create opportunities for package deals, special experiences and guided tours, adding value to events and encouraging a more balanced geographical spread.
- Creating themed events: each stage of the Culinary Route can be the setting for themed MICE events focusing on local cuisine, culture and history. This draws attention to less explored destinations, while offering participants a complete and immersive experience.
- Impact on brand image: the Culinary Route reinforces Tunisia's image as a unique and diverse MICE destination. This geographical and cultural diversity can attract a wider audience and capture the interest of event organizers looking for unique venues for their meetings and conferences.
- Stimulating regional economies: the economic benefits of organizing MICE events along the Culinary Route can stimulate regional economies by generating local spending on accommodation, catering, transport and tourism activities.
- Infrastructure development: the growing demand for MICE events in different regions can spur the development and improvement of infrastructure, such as convention centers, meeting rooms and accommodation, to the benefit of the entire tourism sector.

In short, Tunisia's Culinary Route can play a key role in spreading MICE opportunities across the

country by encouraging the exploration of new regions and creating synergies between local players and the MICE sector. This approach promotes balanced and sustainable growth in business tourism, while strengthening Tunisia's overall appeal as a dynamic and innovative MICE destination.

L.M.: The Culinary Route has enabled us to showcase many of the local products that Tunisia has to offer. The publications, seminars and meetings organized as part of this project have raised the profile of local cuisine and regional recipes, and raised awareness among professionals who can and should draw inspiration from them for their MICE programs.

What are TCB's upcoming projects?

L.M.: Our flagship project is to organize the Tunisia MICE Day event on November 2 in Hammamet, at the Complexe Azur (Royal Azur and Sol Azur hotels). It will consist of a MICE trade show (the Tunisia MICE Market) in the morning and an awards ceremony (the Tunisia MICE Awards) in the evening. Some 300 Tunisian and international professionals will be attending.