

FACTORS AFFECTING MICE TRAVEL IN HO CHI MINH CITY

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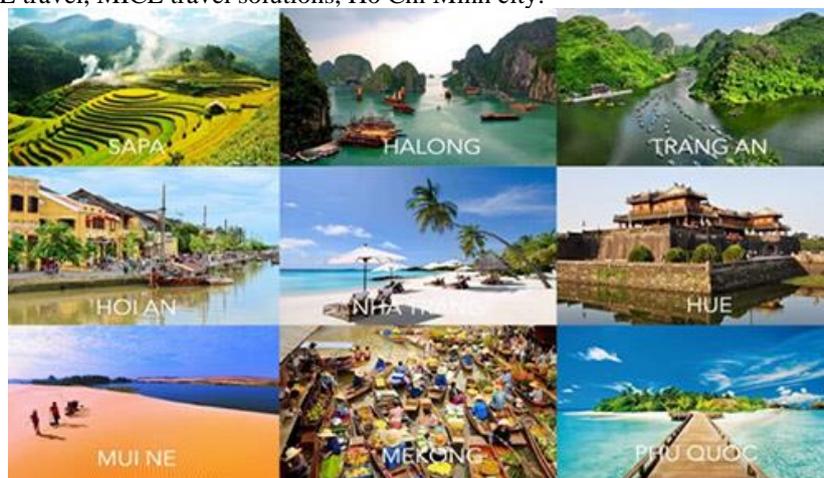
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ABSTRACT

Ho Chi Minh city considers MICE travelling (MICE tourism) one of four tourism types that need future development focus together with shopping traveling, ecotourism and cultural tourism. Being able to keep up with this tourism trend, some tourism businesses in Vietnam in general and in Ho Chi Minh city in particular, identify MICE tourism could be strongly growing at present and in the future. Many advantages for Vietnam: Impressive economic growth speed, sufficient potential to overcome global economic crisis, young labor workforce that has good education background ...are promising factors to bring a profitable business opportunity to Vietnam in its economic growth rhythm. WTO entrance, international economical affiliation. Apart from opening opportunities, there are challenges that Vietnam's economy in general and its MICE tourism in particular must overcome. To develop this type of tourism, businesses should step-by-step advancing themselves professionally. Realizing the importance, profitability, development trend of this tourism, the writer chose to write on the topic "Factors affecting MICE travel in Ho Chi Minh city"

Keywords: MICE travel, MICE travel solutions, Ho Chi Minh city.



I. INTRODUCTION

In the recent 10 years, people in Vietnam have been talking about MICE travel as an emerging type of tourism that demands high service quality. This new trend has also uncovers great prospects for the contribution of MICE to the general tourism market growth in Vietnam. Being the gateway to international trade, Ho Chi Minh city is one of the economic centers that growing fast and leading in tourist attraction in Vietnam. Yearly, the number of international tourists visiting the city increases by 8,2% per year on average. The tourism revenue increases by 16,4%, contributing 9% to the city's economic growth on average. Also tourism is actively

contributing to the shift of city's economy mechanism. The positive growth of Ho Chi Minh city tourism has been substantially contributed from Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibition, it indicates the opportunity for Ho Chi Minh city to become a new destination for MICE travel in South East Asia. The 2017 report data from McKinsey - a leading global consultancy firm, showed up to 17% of tourists visiting Ho Chi Minh City for business purposes, compared to the average rate of 14%-15% for the South East Asia region. This fact confirms that Ho Chi Minh city has great attractions to MICE travel customers and the city converges full potentials and elements for a comprehensive development of MICE travel which contributes to the enhancement of economical value of tourism in particular and to the sustainable development of the city in general.

II. CURRENT SITUATION OF MICE TRAVEL ACTIVITIES IN HO CHI MINH CITY

2.1. A brief on the importance of MICE travel in Ho Chi Minh city

Contributing to Vietnam's development, Ho Chi Minh city with a population of more than 8.9 million has always been a strong leading force in the economy. For years, Ho Chi Minh city economy's contribution has frequently accounted for more than 1/5 of the nation's GDP and more than 1/3 of the national budget. In almost every area of the economy, Ho Chi Minh city has always been in the leading position, including tourism in general and MICE tourism in particular. Since 2004, Mrs Nguyen Thi Lap Quoc, the former director of Ho Chi Minh City's Department of Tourism, said "Ho Chi Minh city has better conditions than any other cities in the country for MICE tourism development".

The exciting run of international economic integration of Vietnam and Ho Chi Minh city has made tourism activities including MICE tourism standing out in the economic area of the South East Asia and the Asia-Pacific regions.

"Vietnam is a rising star in the sky of tourist destinations in the Asia-Pacific region" - was the statement made by Mr. Taleb Rifai, World Travel Organization deputy secretary general. The admission of Vietnam as the 150th member of the World Trade Organization, has brought in the wave of traveling, market research and investment promotion between Vietnam and countries in the world. In that context, Ho Chi Minh city is one of the big centers that are favorable to tourism development especially MICE tourism which is novel but fully potential.

The tourism industry in Ho Chi Minh city, which has a relative high growth rate over recent years, has played a major part in the city's shifting of economic structure and increasingly affirmed its role as an important part of the economy. The number of foreigner visitors to Vietnam has increased by the years, however there has been fluctuations due to the world economic downturns. In parallel with a remarkable increase in visitors number, the number of agents that provide travel and accommodation services has also rapidly grown to meet tourism needs.

2.2. Travel agents and tourist accommodations in cities for MICE tourism.

2.2.1. Traveling agents that serve MICE travel

- ❖ **Vietravel** is a Vietnam top travel agent winning 7 consecutive World Travel Award which known as "the Oscar of the travel industry". Vietravel is known to have a strong human resource with high qualification and experience; and the advantage of existing branch system all over the major tourism cities. Vietravel formed MICE travel department with functionalities that serve high demanding yet attractive customer market. It can be said that, until present, Vietravel is the only business that has a professional department for MICE travel. Having all strengths and internal resources, Vietravel was honored to be in charge of transportation duty for 2006 and 2017 APEC summit meetings.
- ❖ **Exotissimo Travel**, a France - Vietnam joint venture firm, is a very first business organizing professional MICE travel in Vietnam. In 1993, Exotissimo tourism firm joined Vietnam's "non-smoke" industry and quickly affirmed its position among very few professional MICE organizers.
- ❖ **Saigontourist**, a travel agent that has strong human resource and a professional hotel chain, is on its way to become the principal organizer for MICE travel in Ho Chi Minh city. As an official member of world tourism organizations like PATA, JATA, USTOA, in cooperative relationships with more than 200 foreign travel agents from 30 countries, Saigontourist has been focusing on market development, especially international markets like: Japan, China, Taiwan, Singapore, North Korea, France, Germany, England, Canada, USA ... through the promotions of new products on accommodation, restaurants, travel, shopping, MICE, river and ocean cruise travel. For a sustainable growth, Saigontourist is actively growing its branches in South East Asia region. Based on a strong potential and having a bright future vision for Vietnam's tourism industry, Saigontourist is continuously striving to extend its market and contributing to the enhance Vietnam tourism to the Asia tourism level.
- ❖ **Bến Thành tourist** emerges with its professional activities on organizing conference, events, medium term and long term MICE travel programs. Benthanh Tourist is one of the top tourism agents in Vietnam and South East Asia region. The company has been honored with international awards like: Asean 2015 award, 2016 Strategic partnership award from Korea general department of tourism,...Benthanh Tourist also offers Vietnam discover tours from the North to the South, and the Central Highlands tours in the S-

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shaped country (Vietnam). In addition, it offers world travel tours in 5 continents of the world such as: Europe, Africa, America,...

- ❖ **Fiditour** Fiditour Joint Stock Company (Fiditour Travel), founded in 25/03/1989 with initial business on organizing tours for foreigners to Vietnam. Until present, after 30 years (1989 - 2019) of development, Fiditour Travel is now in the top 10 of travel agents in Vietnam tourism. Also the company is expanding its business to a number of areas like: Domestic and oversea tourism, flight ticket supply, hotel booking service, transportation, MICE travel, Free & Easy, Visa service... Fiditour Travel has also established branches in Hanoi, Da Nang, Ho Chi Minh and Can Tho city, as well as its agents in many cities and provinces all around Vietnam. Other names in MICE travel market such as: Cholontourist, Viet Tourism, Thanh Nien Tourism, Hoan My Tourism, Vietnamtourism, TST Tourist...are building up a large travel business community that serves the fast growing MICE travel. Nevertheless, in reality, MICE travel in Ho Chi Minh city may not be growing as strongly as it could be. One reason is that travel agents are merely doing their business in a separate manner without stable collaborations in exploitation and organization of MICE tourism.

2.2.2. 4-5 star hotels for MICE tourism

Rooms for conferences, seminars located in 4-5 star hotels own unique settings for MICE Many luxury hotels have affirmed its reputations and brands in Asia and in the world such as: Sheraton, Caravelle, Majestic, Park Hyatt Saigon, REX. Hotels like Inter Continental, Asianna Saigon, Windsor Plaza, Legend Saigon, Continental only target businessmen customers.

In parallel, Ho Chi Minh city has the most centers for conferences, and exhibitions in the country. Among those there are famous places like Saigon Exhibition and Convention center, White Palace, Phu Tho Sports complex, Van Thanh Park, Tan Binh Exhibition and Convention Center...

In a talk with top 10 travel agents and hotels that serve MICE tourism, the speech given by Ho Chi Minh city's Department of Culture, Sport and Tourism stated that in 2010 the city had about 200 rooms of various size that serve conferences, whose total area was 28.000 m².

2.3. Factors that affect MICE travel in Ho Chi Minh city

2.3.1. Political - Social - Economic - Financial Environment

At present, Vietnam in general and Ho Chi Minh city in particular are recognized as safe and friendly destinations to the world. While the number of murders and violence is increasing in the world, the Institute of Economics and Peace based in Australia, ranked Vietnam (with 1.877 points) 57/163 countries and territories that have high peace index. For that reason, more and more foreign companies and organizations choose this country as a destination for hosting conferences and seminars.

Vietnam, a country that has relative social, political and economic growth stabilities. In line with success from APEC 2006, Vietnam successfully organized Asian Beach Games in 2016 and 2017 APEC Economic Leaders' Week (AELW) both in Da Nang city. In AELW event, there had been around 10.000 international delegates. Da Nang used approximately 13.000 rooms for this convention.

As forecasted by the World Tourism Organization, which belongs to United Nations (UNWTO), in 2020 the Asia-Pacific would attract 27% of global tourists, the arrivals to Europe could drop from 60% to 46%. This trend will be continued in the coming years... Experts forecast that Vietnam could be a rival for Singapore in terms of MICE customers attractions in the future, and Ho Chi Minh city would be leading the country in MICE tourism.

2.3.2. Destination image

Ho Chi Minh city which has a longstanding and rich culture of 320 years, is an inspiring place for international visitors who enjoy a dynamic life-style and love the beauty of local people's mind. Customers for MICE travel not only participate in conferences for professional purposes but they are also interested in visiting, learning the culture of the destination, either before or after MICE activities. To serve them well, travel agents should understand the customers in order to make the appropriate tour design. In addition, the coordination in implementation between organizations to bring a safe, friendly and hospitable impression of Vietnam to the visitors is also an important demand.

2.3.3. Ho Chi Minh city: Global business integration and cooperation are inevitable in the common development trends

Over the years, Ho Chi Minh city has affirmed its role. Ho Chi Minh city is the destination for more than 50% of international tourists and 35% of domestic tourists According to McKinsey - a global consultancy firm, in 2017 there had been 17% of tourists visiting Ho Chi Minh city for business purposes, compared with a rate of 14% for South East Asia region.

This is to confirm that Ho Chi Minh city has a special attraction to MICE customers, and that this destination has full potential and required elements for a comprehensive development of MICE travel; contributes to boost the economic value of tourism industry in particular and to the city sustainable development.

2.3.4. Tourist Accommodations development

It can be seen that, there has been 3-5 star hotel systems with abundant room facilities for accommodation, conference and seminar. Apart from existing 3-5 stars hotels, from 2008, Ho Chi Minh city's tourism had projects to build mass off 5 stars standard hotels with over 4.000 rooms at locations such as: Thu Thiem new urban area, Lam Son construction site, Tan Cang area, Le Loi - Nguyen Hue - Nguyen Thiep - Dong Khoi quadrangular area. This shows an increasing capability on accommodation that could meet demanding needs from MICE customers.

2.3.5 Professional human resource - key factors that affect MICE tourism in Ho Chi Minh city.

It is noted that, MICE target customers are high-demanding people. Not all people in the tourism business could transfer to do MICE travel business and become successful.

Therefore, organizations should have strategies in educating its staffs and persistently providing supplementary training courses so that their staffs could have knowledge in various fields that benefits MICE tourism. Any tour for an international MICE customer should be prepared 6 months to 1 year prior to the event. Creativity is the secret to success for every design, yet to be creative, the designer should have basic knowledge and skills. An exciting game in a team building (membership, group training), or a gala dinner (evening party for social gathering) to highlight an organization culture ... could be an everlasting impression to MICE guests and to their company. Even with same MICE tour format, designers must not repeat previous tours, MICE designers should put efforts in making "touch points" for each tour.

Ho Chi Minh city has a big tourism educational system with 37 schools (11 universities, 6 colleges, 20 secondary schools). Every year, there are hundreds of graduates in travel-tourism and hotel majors. They could serve as a high quality human resource for Ho Chi Minh city tourism. Ho Chi Minh city is a place which has young, dynamic, creative and professional workforce who are able to keep up with latest trends. The tourist guides are knowledgeable, fluent in using languages, working in a highly competitive market. It can be said that the services quality in Ho Chi Minh city is the best in the country.

2.3.6. Competitive service costs

MICE's customers are willing to spend their money on professional and high quality services. However, a service price is also affected by the market. The classificability of customers in a city that has high competitiveness on market price is increased. Companies, corporations or associations usually give careful consideration on pricing with a MICE travel order. In fact, services' price in Vietnam in general and in Ho Chi Minh city in particular is relatively cheap compared with that in other countries. Ho Chi Minh city should exploit the mentioned advantages more effectively. Moreover, the city's MICE product is also benefited from its natural landscapes, sceneries and hospitality from the people living there. For that reason, the formula "good product, competitive price" should be a slogan to attract tourists. In addition, sales promotion campaigns from travel agents, airlines, luxury hotels could be seen as another driving force for MICE customers.

2.4. MICE tourism in Ho Chi Minh city: comparison with other countries in Asia

For Vietnam, low tourism infrastructure and a lack of MICE professionals was the reason that made the country tourism stay behind other countries in MICE "playground". Typically, Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Center has been the top destination for MICE customers in Asia-Pacific region with an average of 4.5 million visitors every year. Another typical example is the Impact Exhibition Center (Bangkok - Thailand), although founded not long ago, the center attracts approximate 3 million guests every year. In China, there are plenty of exhibition and convention centers in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Chongqing. They attract MICE customers by professional style and the capability for big events organization.

According to Shenzhen Daily, there has been about 3.000 events that could be exploited for MICE tourism in China every year. In the neighboring countries of Vietnam like Singapore, Malaysia... The annual numbers of MICE customers are much higher than that for Vietnam. Facilities for MICE including convention rooms, equipment in those countries are more abundant and diverse. It is showed that, in comparisons with other countries in the region, MICE travel in Vietnam in general and Ho Chi Minh city in particular should continuously strive to keep up with other countries and to grow faster.

However, the practice of MICE in Ho Chi Minh city has shown a lot of new factors that bring positivity on its fast development potential. Creativity has become an important touch point in MICE travel agents. As travel agents realize that the customers could pay premium price for MICE because of their creativity in organizing MICE programs. An author once said "The more unique, even more crazy, the better"

Vietravel recreated "Vietnam village festival" with village gate, bamboos clumps, flute bushes, flower garden, paddy fields, and series of folk games in the Sheraton's campus! The careful and professional setups of the event had made participants satisfied. Among those, many were fascinated by this concept and later on ordered Vietravel to organize the same event for their companies. As MICE customers are VIP, meeting their needs is a secret to boost passenger traffic to the city. For instance, 100 MICE customers may need 100 cars for their travels. They may also need airport pickup services; checkout service while being at the hotel pool... Organizers should understand each individual guest to better serve their meals...As the taste of each guest is also different from country to country; for instance, Russian guests would enjoy sight-seeing from helicopters that fly over the bays; Australian and German guests would enjoy adventure travel on large motorcycles or mountain biking...

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Such silent efforts from MICE organizers in Ho Chi Minh city have proven effective in attracting customers. Another objective trend for MICE travel: To avoid a boring trip, many MICE customers change their destinations frequently to have new experience at novel places. As a typical example, FrieslandCampina Vietnam Limited Company (widely known to Vietnamese people as Dutch Lady dairy company) has annually held its customer conference as a field trip with more than 500 invited guests; the selected destinations from 2014 to 2019 were: USA, Phu Quoc, Nha Trang, Taiwan, Ninh Binh, Da Nang respectively. Many MICE customers changed their destinations from Singapore, Malaysia or Thailand to Vietnam for conferences and researching Vietnam market. This trend is facilitated by marketing activities from growing travel agents.

According to yersin.edu.vn, Vietnam's VMIC club which specializes in MICE has made efforts in expanding Vietnam's image and Vietnam's MICE on specific journals like: TTG journal (Singapore), CEI journal (Hong Kong), MICE NET (Australia).

Vietnam has also actively participated in many international tourism fairs for MICE such as AIME fair in Australia, IT & CMA fair in Thailand, IMEX fair in Germany, EITEM fair in Switzerland, MICE fair in Frankfurt - Germany. This activity is for the promotion of Vietnam's MICE through technical books like "Vietnam - When meeting matter" and "Ho Chi Minh city - The real MICE destination". Also, tourism journalists from countries like Singapore, Hong Kong, Germany were invited to Vietnam to discover the MICE market in Vietnam through FAM trips.

It was not a coincidence that Mr. Tom Hulton, expert from the International Congress and Conventional Association (ICCA) in 2005 stated that: "Vietnam emerges as an attractive destination for MICE programs in the region". Sharing the same point of view, Mr. Stephen O'Grady, general director of Caravelle said "In comparison with Bangkok, Singapore, Hong Kong, Ho Chi Minh and Hanoi city have great advantages as being novel and friendly destinations. Also, there has been significant improvements on service quality and infrastructure that attract foreign MICE organizers"

In general, MICE tourism in Vietnam and in Ho Chi Minh city is a new business and not very strong, yet is expanding quickly in terms of size and quality due to great efforts from tour organizers. This situation could open good prospects for the future development.

III. FORECAST AND PROPOSAL OF SOLUTIONS FOR MICE TOURISM PROMOTION IN HO CHI MINH CITY

3.1. MICE Tourism in Ho Chi Minh city: a forecast

According to reviews from Asia-Pacific Tourism Association, after nearly 20 years of 21st century, MICE tourism has helped Asian countries boost revenue and visitors, strongly affected cultural exchange, promoted investments and increased export turnover.

In reality, Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh city are the two cities that focus strongly on MICE tourism. MICE could gradually become a major product to attract tourists and foreign exchange, contribute to enhance the national brands value. Many tourism companies have forecasted a strong growth in MICE customers in the process of global integration and globalization in Vietnam. The main customer sources may come from businessmen, businesses that are looking for business opportunities in Vietnam.

Experiences in the past showed that Vietnam had a strong potential to boost tourism activities, and it is a reliable premise to forecast on MICE tourism industry. Australian tourism experts said that Vietnam have had a respectable economic growth rate, 756% in 10 years from 1990 to 2000. In comparison with global tourism, Vietnam has ranked 4th in tourism growth rate according to April, 2010 data from The World Tourism Organization. From 1995-2015, international arrivals to Vietnam had raised continuously with an annual rate of 15%. From 2015-2018, international arrivals to Vietnam had a breakthrough growth, from 7.9 millions in 2005 to 15.5 millions in 2018, which was increased by 1.95 fold, reached an average growth rate of 25% per year. This period made the record in history of Vietnam tourism growth. The number of foreigners visiting Vietnam in 9/2019 was estimated to be 1.561.274, which was increased by 28.8% compared with that in 9/2018. Numbers for the first 9 months of 2019 showed that international arrivals to Vietnam was estimated to be 12.870.506, which was increased by 10,8% compared with that of the same period in 2018.

In addition, high professional travel agents should help the city tourism approach and attract more MICE customers from ASEAN and from the rest of the world. Vietnam successfully organized APEC peak summit in 2006 and 2017, 8th South East Asia Games, 2008 - 2014 -2019 Vesak celebrations, 2010 World Economic Forum on Asean, 2016 Asia Beach Games... Those success stories brought an echo in the travel communities and established trusts from international MICE customers.

On this basis, it could be predicted that Vietnam MICE could reach top 3 in South East Asia in the course of 10 years, and that Vietnam MICE has its own attractions coming from the cultural beauties which make it competitive among the top countries in MICE travel. Nevertheless, this forecast is only practical if Vietnam persistently setting its targets and improving MICE tourism. The actions that help making Vietnam MICE respected by tourist communities could be infrastructure upgrading and expanding; upgrading MICE's staff profession and qualifications.

3.2. Solution suggestions for MICE tourism development in Ho Chi Minh city

As an individual in the tourism sector, with more than 8 years of experience in organizing MICE travel programs for domestic and foreign customers, I have attentively give my concern on MICE travel developments, continuously researched and kept up with the latest MICE trends and development directions for MICE travel. Therefore, I would like to suggest some solutions to promote MICE travel development in Ho Chi Minh city as follows:

3.2.1. Proposal for MICE developments: medium and long-term solutions

There are 3 groups of solutions for MICE development in medium and long terms. They are related to the setup and completion of MICE service quality in Vietnam

3.2.1.1. MICE product diversifications should be accompanied by relevant improvement on infrastructures

Tourism industry in Vietnam in general and in Ho Chi Minh city in particular should focus on updating MICE trends from other nations and continents. Those trends are essential for making product innovations to meet changing customer demands. Relevant infrastructure development should be indispensable to ensure a long-term development for MICE.

3.2.1.2. Professional qualification for MICE tourism personnels should be upgraded to increase knowledge-based and cultural values of MICE products in Vietnam.

Giving more professional training for MICE tourism personnels some positions in a MICE business should be trained overseas such as PCO (Professional Convention Organizer). This is a driving force to make MICE travels in Vietnam experiences of culture and knowledge without losing the nature of the MICE for every customer.

3.2.1.3. Identification of directions for extensive promotion programs and having a system of MICE products in Vietnam that serve in South East Asia and international market.

Directions and systems for promotion, marketing Vietnam's MICE travel to South East Asia, Asia and other continents should be setup from national level down to city level. Market research and MICE customer psychology research should be seen as a vital element in maintaining up-to-date promotions and marketing campaigns.

3.2.2. Proposal of a detailed solution

First, the collection, processing and publication of reliable statistics on MICE are important to the tourism business community, to the media and to the society. They can be seen as significant requirements in doing business and in promotional activities in Ho Chi Minh city in particular and in Vietnam in general. To carry out these actions effectively, the local tourism departments should be able to manage tourism businesses, travel agents that have MICE services, regularly monitor their activities and collaborate with the businesses to collect accurate data. The local tourism departments should propagate its purposes to the businesses when collecting information to achieve the highest collaborations.

Second, the associations model, which is primarily proven effective in some organizations (Saigontourist - Fiditour - Cholon Tourist), between travel agents, accommodation agencies with high-professional event companies should be expanded. It is aimed at making MICE products with novelty and lasting impressions.

Third, tourism and media sectors should be in collaborations to build promotional campaigns for spreading information on MICE tourism such as putting commercial on TV, webs, reports and magazines. This is an offer to domestic MICE customers, also such campaigns help create a cultural environment that leverages MICE breakthroughs in Vietnam in the coming years.

Fourth, the state-own tourism managing agents and travel agents that serve MICE travel should use after-sale services and incentives as advantages to attract MICE travel customers including preferential visa treatment for MICE customers.

Fifth, scientific and managerial bodies should have solutions to make new research findings on MICE travel in Vietnam and overseas more accessible to the public. This helps grow MICE activities in Ho Chi Minh city in particular and in Vietnam in general in a more effective manner.

CONCLUSION

MICE travel is a relative independent travel type which has specific operating principles, and is an important constituent of the tourism industry. MICE has met with "face to face" contact needs between partners for the exchange of ideas, knowledge, products, business technologies through meetings, exhibitions, event hosting, team building... Thus, MICE is not only a pure tourism form but also a unique kind of marketing. However, MICE's market segment is identified as "high class" customers based on its service quality requirements. For that reason, MICE tourism has specific requirements on destinations as well as human resources. With a decent strategy, MICE travel has a good growth opportunity in Vietnam in general and in Ho Chi Minh city in particular. MICE possibly has positive impacts on socio economical developments...To think about a near future - as a metaphor from my Chinese colleague - MICE will be "a shiny pearl on the crown" for Vietnam tourism./.

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