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The DNA of **SEOUL**





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LEGALLY RESPONSIBLE EDITOR IN CHIEF Atti Soenarso
atti.soenarso@meetingsinternational.com

PUBLISHER Roger Kellerman
roger.kellerman@meetingsinternational.com

GLOBAL SALES DIRECTOR Graham Jones
graham.jones@meetingsinternational.com

TEXT Robert Cotter, Roger Kellerman, Atti Soenarso

TRANSLATOR Dennis Brice

PHOTOS/IMAGES Sara Appelgren, Magnus Malmberg, cover
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CONTACT Meetings International Publishing
P.O.Box 224, SE-271 25 Ystad, Sweden
info@meetingsinternational.com
www.meetingsinternational.com


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Seoul Is Not Resting **ON ITS LAURELS**

IN SOUTH KOREA, with its population of more than 50 million, education, research and innovation are three key success factors in the substantial economic development that has taken place in recent decades. The country is often described as an economic miracle that grew from the ashes of the Korean War (1950–1953) to become one of the world's largest economies. Many put the miracle down to a greater focus on education. In contrast, others maintain that it stemmed from the will of the people to overcome poverty hand in hand with state economic development.

In 1996 South Korea became a member of The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), a move that facilitated quicker economic growth. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) lists the country among the world's most advanced economies.

South Korea has a centralised school system with free education from six to fifteen years of age. Preschool between four and six years of age is followed by nine years of compulsory primary and middle school. After this comes three years of high school and two to three years of vocational college. The country usually ranks very high in international comparisons of school results and has among the highest number of higher education students in Asia.

Not unexpectedly, there are many universities in South Korea. The three highest-ranked are Seoul National University, Korea University and The Korea Advanced Institute of Science & Technology.

Seoul National University (SNU), ranked number one in South Korea and 36 in the world, was founded in 1946 through a merger of ten institutions. SNU has the country's most influential alumni network and is said to be able to produce one in four candidates as future CEOs of the 100 most successful companies. The university has an impressive portfolio of global partnerships and collaborates with 289 universities in 58 countries. SNU ranks among the best universities in the world in 41 subjects, including the 20 best in chemistry, mechanical engineering, pharmacology and sport-related subjects.

Korea University was founded in 1905 and has around 37,000 students on two campuses. While ranked second overall, its international research network is ranked number one in the country and the university has the second highest number of international students in the country. Roughly eleven per cent of the students come from other countries. At the time of writing, Korea University is listed among the world's best educational institutions in 33 subjects. It holds top 50 positions

globally in accounting and finance, management, chemical engineering, mechanical engineering, modern languages, politics and social policy, and administration.

The third university, Korea Advanced Institute of Science & Technology (KAIST), is located in the research and technology hub of Daejeon. KAIST was founded in 1971 as the country's first research-oriented science and technology institution. While the institute is mainly based in the Daedeok Innopolis area, a cluster of high-tech research institutes, government agencies and venture firms. It also has a campus in Seoul and is home to the KAIST College of Business.

A few years ago, the Mayor of Seoul, Park Won Soon, had this to say in an interview with *Meetings International*: "The meetings industry is Seoul's future and the economic driver for the society. Also, we will build a sustainable city."

Although Seoul holds a prominent position in both the UIA and ICCA rankings for the number of international meetings it holds annually, an affirmation by the global community that they are moving in the right direction, it is not resting on its laurels. Seoul has taken great strides to realise its vision of turning the city into a district-wide, and worldwide, meetings capital.



PHOTO Magnus Malmberg

Swedish-Indonesian **ATTI SOENARSO** has worked as a journalist for over 40 years. She has worked for Scandinavia's largest daily newspaper, was TV4's first travel editor, has written for many Swedish travel magazines and has had several international clients. She has travelled the length and breadth of the world and written about destinations, people and meetings.



Building Ecosystems OF BUSINESSES

LEADING LIGHT of Korea's event industry for the past three decades, Coex Convention Centre has played a pivotal part in helping elevate capital city Seoul to one of the world's foremost meeting destinations. Its pathway to world prominence has notched global event pinnacles such as hosting the G20 Seoul Summit in 2010 and the Seoul Nuclear Security Summit in 2012.

Despite today being a relative grandee of the meeting facility world, it has firmly stood the test of time through an outstanding original design alloyed with careful management and maintenance. The four exhibition halls, auditorium and grand ballroom alongside more than fifty versatile meeting rooms and large breakout space make it suitable for meetings of every size. The venue feels as fresh today as it would have done when its doors first swung open back in the 1980s, and the high-end meeting facilities are just one factor in what makes Coex stand out in the global business event industry.

"I also want to highlight the value add-ons that you get from hosting an event with us," says Steven Kim, Convention Sales Team Director. "I think of Coex as more than just the convention centre. We have the shopping mall, hotels, the aquarium, casino, movie theatre within our grounds and

the temple across the street. I have been pointing out to event organisers that you are getting all of these value add-ons for your event participants too."

In the heart of Seoul's Gangnam district and occupying an area several city blocks in size, the combined value add-ons led to the establishment of the Coex MICE Cluster (CMC) in 2013. The CMC boasts a vast array of cultural, tourist, shopping and business extras all integral to the complex, such as three 5-star hotels on-site offering 1,453 rooms, transport connections to the rest of the city and directly to the airport, and no less than the world's biggest underground shopping mall directly below the facility. The entire complex is, in effect, a knowledge hub micro-city embedded in a mega-city and the coming year's pipeline expansion projects will not only cement Seoul's standing as a meetings destination but will unquestionably further enhance it.

"Although we annually host between 2,000–2,500 events here, we often have to turn down international conferences because we have a limited amount of space and we are just too fully booked. Together with the government we have been pursuing expansion to the Olympic Stadium area close to here, not only updating

the stadiums and building new attractions around it but also pursuing a new convention centre there.

"It has gone through a series of government approvals and is at the very final stage, after which things will pick up speed and hopefully with construction starting next year around 2026 will be the opening. We are looking at 100,000 square metres of indoor exhibition space plus 20,000 square metres of meeting facilities inclusive of a 2,500-seat auditorium. Our current one is 1,000-pax maximum, but bigger and bigger events want to have their events here. To cope with that demand, we need the big auditorium space.

"They are looking at making it an outstanding convention centre in terms of design, they are talking with architects about that. Underneath Coex the plan is to develop a huge underground transportation centre with all forms of transport where new high-speed trains would transit alongside the existing metro trains, which would make it the main hub connecting to all parts of Korea.

"We will try to reposition our new venue not only as a hub for Korean business but also East Asian business. That is one of our main goals. When we have a new venue, we can provide more options to our clients," says Steven Kim.

Making more options available to clients is something Coex is already well versed in. It is not only a fully managed top-end venue but also offers bespoke Professional Congress Organiser (PCO) and Professional Exhibition Organiser (PEO) functions too, for which it has an established track record.

“We have a PCO business, and we do the exhibition business. That is the biggest advantage that we have as a venue partner for any show, congress

and venue rental because we organise events, conferences and exhibitions, both domestically and internationally, I think that gives us a cutting edge level up.”

Alongside their PCO functions, a focus is on exceeding other cutting edge levels through a mixture of both continuous renovations as well as by keeping pace with global sustainability trends and local CSR initiatives.

“We continually renovate our spaces. Over recent years we have

becoming bigger criteria for them, so we continue to make progressive steps.

“We are also contributing to the local economy. Last year we created a start-up innovation centre in the building to help start-ups grow their business. It covers all industry sectors, and any start-up that wants to have their event here will get a space for free, and our mother company helps them meet venture capitalists. We are also talking with some of the successful start-ups grown through that system to provide better conditions if they want to have any space within our building or facilities,” says Steven Kim.

From start-up incubation through to the head of state convention and every kind of meeting and initiative in between, Seoul's very own meeting micro-city is fully geared up for the industry demands of the 21st century.

“A convention centre does more than just hosting a big conference. It acts as a gateway between different fields, between the public and private sectors, fosters creativity, growth, and it introduces people to new audiences and new partners. People are seeing that more and more on the local level here as well.

“Ten years ago, we had a new vision of the company to become a major player in the MICE industry in Asia,” says Steven Kim. “The Coex name itself is a name that people recognise, not just within Korea but within Asia, and a brand that people know for its services and quality.”

“Last year we created a start-up innovation centre in the building”

or meeting organiser. We have very good experience in this field and can be a local partner for any event to be held here. That seems to be a great advantage different from other venues that only do the venue business.

“The PCO and PEO also does not operate exclusively within our convention centre. They organise events in other centres, hotels, venues and even countries. We know what it takes to plan an event and organise it, bring in the vendors and suppliers and also to execute it in a manner that is successful for everyone. I always like to highlight that, because I think our experience and expertise in that gives us a significant competitive edge.

“Our PCO and PEO team management always create teams that have experience working with international partners, negotiating with them, seeing what their needs are and meeting them. We have the personnel that are comfortable and capable of all of that, and we see more demand for it. We know beyond venue management

incrementally renovated all of them, so they are now newer. Within the exhibition hall spaces, we have also been opting for more sustainable options such as switching to LED options and re-using the water in the bathroom facilities to cut down on water management,” says Steven Kim.

“We have also installed Electric Vehicle (EV) parking spaces and charging stations, and have moved away from doing carpeting in the exhibition halls. We also installed 5G networks last year. Our pillars are currently undergoing construction to be digitalised for signage and other uses, as for 2,000–2,500 events a year the majority are using signage all the time.

“One of Seoul City Convention Bureau's support strands is in helping fund the building of event apps so they can go paperless, and we also encourage event organisers to do that. A lot of event organisers are asking about these things as it is



Teambuilding **WITH A MISSION**

PUTTING TOGETHER the schedule for a corporate event can often involve making tricky trade-offs when time is tight. Activity programmes that can simultaneously tick some boxes, such as those designed and run by Seoul-based immersive experience company Rokstar, are therefore increasingly gaining prominence and popularity on the city's event radar.

"We've created this as a solution to the quintessential problem that corporate groups seem to have here. When they need to do something fun and on-brand they always try to shoe-horn in a cultural experience as well as a teambuilding experience," says Alex Paik, cofounder of Rokstar.

"There is no way they can do that in the one free afternoon they often have, so we focused on how to hit all those points in one. That was our main goal. People can get their cultural teambuilding component in one short, snappy programme."

Putting those points into programme resulted in Rokstar developing a range of action-packed games, from their original themed Escape Room puzzles to creating team relay workshops, a Running Man-style indoor competition and the hugely

popular Urban Quest teambuilding urban challenge. The Urban Quest programme is fully fused with the fabric of the city's cultural picks, designed to engage all sizes and mixes of groups and getting actors and locals involved too.

"I knew straight away that Urban Quest was going to be a great teambuilding event and there was also nothing like it in Korea," says Alex Paik. "We start in a big room where I get everyone fired up, and they get their mission. We give organisers the option to set their teams. Otherwise, we mix up the countries, the ages and the genders, so there is a right balance, which is usually what they want, that's the whole point."

"The games are designed to take you throughout traditional markets and local alleyways. You get to meet authentic Koreans who don't speak much English, and you have to interact with them," says Steve Kim, cofounder. "We add a little bit of culture to everything they do. We'll always have a mix of traditional sites along with modern cityscapes. The game offers a glimpse of the real Seoul, which is something that people might not otherwise get."

"When we designed the programme, we mostly focused on creating an immersive experience, creating actors and making it interesting with the story," says Alex Paik. "After they finish, we do a debriefing session and then cap off with an awards ceremony, sharing some of the photos and giving out some fun awards."

Galvanising groups through tasks such as a photo challenge along the way wearing custom-branded t-shirts or taking a group karaoke video, the programme can also build in specific corporate core values on request. With an initial hour of briefing and socialising, an hour of the game in the city and a further hour of debrief and awards, the teambuilding culture programme ticks all of the boxes and can be arranged with as little as two weeks notice. And with clients such as Delta Airlines, Prudential and Swiss Re, Rokstar is already building a solid client base.

"We've been doing these games over the past couple of years, and the response has been overwhelmingly positive," says Steve Kim.



O'ngu
FOOD COMMUNICATION

L. Choi

Revitalise Tradition THROUGH MODERNISATION

SERVING UP stirring sustenance has long been recognised as a significant ingredient in stimulating delegates at business events. The power of nutrition not only boosts brainpower and optimum levels of engagement. However, and for Seoul-based O'ngo Food Communications, their cooking classes and food tours are the platform for new team building and great networking opportunities too.

"We have a Korean cooking class with a normal capacity of a maximum of 36 people. But we work with a different programme and two different venues located in the centre of Seoul, so we can also do bigger groups," says Jia Choi, President of O'ngo Food Communications.

"There is a facility for 150 people, and the maximum we could have is 200 people in our separate venues. For the teambuilding, they have to work together. I do a demonstration, and then everybody has a different ingredient, or they have to discuss with each other how they will make, for example, their own style Bibimbap. It's not one person's opinion, so they have to discuss things collectively and form a team opinion. And then we have a judge, so we also make a game of it.

"We very often get corporate requirements asking for this," says Jia Choi. "Almost every year for the last four years we have had people from universities such as Yale, Stanford and other good schools in Europe. Major companies such as Ikea, Adidas and others also come here as a group and do a full-day seminar and work together."

Alongside the teambuilding cooking classes, O'ngo also runs regular food tours for those more comfortable at the table than at the stove, offering great networking in some of Seoul's lesser-known but highly prized culinary corners.

"The food tours are more popular because not everybody likes to cook or do everything from scratch, so we do a group night dining tour with one guide and a maximum of ten people," says Jia Choi. "We have up to twelve guides available. In high season we do big groups with four or five guides at the same time, but don't go to the same places at the same time. People learn about the Korean lifestyle and the history of the local areas. In terms of the food, we don't eat a lot in one spot, but we go to more hidden places where locals would go after work, visiting four to five places for sampling."

Catering to all religious and dietary requirements upon request and with several more adventurous food tours in their development pipeline, booking a season ahead for bigger groups is recommended. And for those curious as to what O'ngo might mean, it is 'to revitalise tradition through modernisation'. Very apt, given that their traditional twist in Seoul can markedly modernise a meeting held there.



A Hint of Better ROI FOR BUSINESS EVENTS

WHETHER it's registration, calendar management, networking or even socialising, the strongest fusion of technology with the business event industry has been its widespread adoption of apps. In a full app market catering for almost every facet of event organisation, there is nevertheless a lack of those offering properly detailed or bespoke data on Return on Investment, ROI. Xsync, a Seoul-based start-up event management platform founded in 2015, has stepped up to fill this vacuum.

"Online ad companies provided data on how many people clicked or bought your product. But in the event market nobody is calculating any such kind of data, so if we could provide organisers with a 'hint' of how significant their ROI was then that would make them come to us," says Bryan Song, CEO and Founder of Xsync. "We are, therefore, the company that is focusing mostly on how to provide valuable data to event organisers so that they can calculate their events."

"If there were 1,000 people who attended an event and you want to

know who the main ones are that you have to focus on, our app records people who try to make more connections with others. For example, who ask more questions to the organisers or who clicked a lot of information from the websites," says Bryan Song.

"We provide Word Clouds, so the kind of words people were using to explain the event or what kind of questions they were using, and what the main focus was of the words they were using. In some cases, we have a reward system where people can get points. We also have a recommendation system that the app instantly recommends another person to connect with."

"We collect all the data from how people were participating and how many rewards were given to them. For all the data, we have a scoring system, and the people who have a higher score are the ones to focus on."

Currently available in five languages, Korean, Japanese, English, Chinese and Thai, Xsync is initially targeting the Korean and Japanese markets but has plans to seek

international partners to penetrate the European and American markets. Alongside data, for better ROI, the app is simultaneously boosting better environmental outcomes through its elimination of lanyards, tickets, printed publicity, brochures, maps and much more besides. And through its geo-location data harvesting and website-linkage capabilities, it can also help optimise event planning and lift sales too. For now, however, its primary focus remains the best available data to demonstrate Return on Investment.

"Right now, we are providing the organisations with some data so they can get the 'hint' of how people were reacting to their event. But our eventual goal is to provide them with an actual figure for ROI," says Bryan Song.

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WORLD COFFEE
LEADERS FORUM

The Cafe Show

BRINGS ATTENTION TO SUSTAINABILITY

GROWN IN ONE country, roasted in a second, ground in a third before finally being brewed and served in a fourth. The journey from picking to perfect pour can be quite a long one for the humble coffee bean. The idea for the Cafe Show, Asia's biggest annual coffee exhibition organised by Exporum and held in Seoul, had an equally lengthy gestation from its initial planting through to maturity, with its motivation also harvested from around the world.

"I attended an event in Milan called the Coffee Pavilion. I took inspiration to go back to my country and start the Cafe Show in 2003," says Danny Hyundae Shin, CEO of Exporum. "I knew that a couple of years later, coffee would be widely consumed in Asia and that our coffee market would increase very quickly."

As Exporum's maiden venture in Seoul it was assisted by resources being at hand from the local government side as well as through university programmes, both ensuring that the right people were available to help drive it forward.

"Seoul Metropolitan government and central government support for business events, including the exhibition industry, was really helpful. It also helped that our Mayor has a lot of interest in the meeting and event industry. Some universities had a curriculum for the MICE industry, and they provided a very qualified human resource. This was very helpful," says Danny Hyundae Shin.

"At the beginning, it was also a really tough business as coffee wasn't

a suitable item for the industry in Korea, and there were no speciality cafés at that time. Over five or six years, I invested a lot in the exhibition, and after that, we got good feedback from the F&B industry. Our show is the first coffee event in the Asian region, so we are fortunate at the moment that so many coffee producing countries or global coffee companies have had no other option to attend any Asia coffee exhibition."

From humble origins to today's global focus as Asia's showcase coffee industry exhibition, the Cafe Show is now the top attraction in this burgeoning coffee-consuming region. The event has in turn, however, also had to address key global issues within the industry and make them an integral part of it, creating initiatives that offer the right forum for the main players to address them.

"We are the platform that would like to bring more attention to the issue of sustainability. Of course, the issues that are in producing countries, as the awareness is now growing and we want to help them realise that more," says April Cho, Marketing Executive at Exporum.

The International Women's Coffee Alliance (IWCA) is the organisation that supports women providing the labour in coffee-producing countries.

"We recently kicked off the chapter in Korea, and that's one of the CSRs that we want to pursue. We are also interested in the use of child labour in producing countries. We have donated a percentage of the show to an organisation called Coffee

Kids that helps those labour issues in producing countries," says April Cho.

"When it comes to sustainability, we want to emphasise the importance of the eco-campaign in our event. We promote people to use their mock cup or tumbler instead of a plastic or paper cup, and also that there is a waste that is made out of coffee extraction. We want to reuse those ingredients to make another product, and we give them back to organisations that can recycle this. It gives back to the coffee-producing countries also, so these are all campaigns that we do.

"We also made a World Coffee Leader's Forum as part of the event, like a big international forum. For our first forum, we saw so many Southeast Asian coffee people. They do not have any other chance to hear about the global coffee trends or global coffee knowledge from coffee analysts or scholars," says Danny Hyundae Shin.

Such positive feedback has also helped propel better prospects. So much so that in recent years it has launched sister events beyond its Seoul base with further international growth scheduled to come on stream very soon.

Begun and blended in Seoul, as an event the Cafe Show has blossomed to become the perfect brew in today's global coffee industry.



K-Pop WITH A TWIST

HAVING CONCLUDED the day's serious business at an event, delegates often seize the opportunity to unwind by immersing themselves in some local culture and entertainment. To that end there's nothing better than an activity that can both harmonise a group and hit all the right notes, especially so when its melody is a musical mood currently sweeping Asia and far beyond, K-pop.

"The restaurant is located in the shopping block of the new Lotte World Tower and Mall. It is a landmark 123-storey skyscraper in Seoul, and it's the only venue in Korea where you can enjoy live performances of K-pop music and other culturally fused entertainment," says Bernard Cho, CEO of Just Kpop Limited.

In operation for less than a year, the venue has proved to be not only a welcome addition to Seoul's entertainment offer but also its meeting industry scene. The place can be fully booked and customised for corporate clients looking for something extra special for their events.

An exclusive use of the venue for private functions can be reserved for a group of as small as 100, and a sitting layout can flexibly accommodate up to 300. For a standing-only function the capacity can be extended to 450.

The A/V system supports all kinds of on-stage events and activities: presentations, lectures, training, singing and instrumental performances, team competitions and much else besides.

"Meal options for business functions and events are also very flexible, from general Western-style choices to a mix of Asian and Western offers, from cocktail reception arrangement to various course meals to buffet settings," says Sophie Jeung, Marketing Manager.

Although the venue is not halal or kosher certified, it has accommodated groups with such requirements by a partial catering arrangement and also by adjusting the kitchen utilisation through the organiser's inspection beforehand.

Overlooking a scenic lake in one of Seoul's top spots, the venue comes alive in the evenings when the lights and music switch on. It can also offer additional space, both lakeside and within the mall, to cater for any other activity requirements.

"We have a huge outdoor space, and we can get some help from Lotte to use a grassed area to set a stage there for performances. Furthermore, subject to schedule availability we can negotiate with Lotte to rent the atrium space on the ground floor, make some walls, decorate them and set up a cocktail bar or whatever else is requested," says Bernard Cho.

Providing not only upcoming K-pop artists, but also magicians, traditional Korean music, Gangnam-style imitators, comedians and Korean drum music, as well as organising flash mobs for corporate clients, the new venue on Seoul's scene has already made quite a splash. It is now planning its second venue in the city as well as opening new sites in other locations in Southeast Asia.



PHOTO Sara Appelgren

ROGER KELLERMAN *Publisher, business intelligence analyst, trend creator, educator and networker. Has close to 40 years' experience of the global meeting industry. Founder of Mötesindustriveckan. twitter.com/thekellerman*

Seoul's Expansion OF THE HYDROGEN INFRASTRUCTURE

SOUTH KOREA and Seoul were quick out of the blocks in trying to slow the spread of the Covid-19 virus and, in doing so, have become a good example for many other countries. With its ten million inhabitants, Seoul is, after all, a megacity. Including Greater Seoul, the number rises to 25 million. The spread of infection has been limited by strict control and sampling.

South Korea is one of the world's most innovative countries. In just a couple of generations, it has gone from being a poor agricultural nation to becoming one of Asia's wealthiest countries. Industrial giants such as Samsung, LG, Hyundai and Kia have turned the country's exports into global brands. Seoul's independent liberal mayor, Park Won-soon, aims to transform the city into the world's leading environmental metropolis. In a green model city, smart full-scale building solutions are being tested for the first time, and the country's researchers are working on a revolutionary transport system. And it is to Seoul that many of the world's top politicians set their course when making study visits.

Seoul is a city of contrasts. If you follow a flight of steps down from a busy street in the bustling heart of the town, you could arrive at an oasis of rippling water, birdsong and greenery. Created as part of an urban renewal project that began eight years ago,

Cheonggyecheon is a six-kilometre long restoration of the stream that was there up until the end of the Korean War when it was covered over by an elevated highway as part of the country's post-war development. The project, which cost in the region of 255 million Euro, was an instant success and a turning point.

The new direction is clear to see in the hypermodern Seoul City Hall. In the lobby, you are met by a vertical garden, recognised by Guinness World Records as the world's largest green wall. It is covered by plants that stretch up to the seventh floor in an area that is roughly 1,600 square metres. And it is here in the shade of the green oasis that the strategies for a sustainable Seoul are formed.

In addition to the 8,000 buses that traffic the streets, over seven million passengers a day are transported by the world's highest-ranked metropolitan subway system. It is widely known for its superb ease of use, smart ticketing system, temperature-controlled carriages and free Wi-Fi.

But most of all, Seoul is investing in energy-saving initiatives. The One Less Nuclear Plant action programme is aimed at reducing the city's energy needs with the equivalent of an entire nuclear power plant. One of the items recently won the UN Public Service Award, and already has over a million members.

South Korea is investing heavily in hydrogen. The government, in collaboration with the business community, is spending almost two billion Euros on an expansion of the hydrogen infrastructure. The scheme will hopefully help the country to establish itself at the top of the global market for hydrogen-powered vehicles. According to Electrive.com, the government expects the promotion of the hydrogen economy to generate nearly €34 billion in economic value and 420,000 new jobs by 2040. New industries and jobs will be created in the production, storage, transportation and use of hydrogen. This is an opportunity for South Korea to secure a new engine of growth.

In the same way, Seoul's meetings and events industry is already prepared for the turnaround that is to come. Strategies are being updated, meetings venues and convention bureaus are ready, and it will not be long before marketing campaigns are underway to take the initiative to become a leading business events destination once again. Just as quick as the country stopped corona in its tracks, it now aims to pave the way to becoming one of the world's most attractive meetings cities. And, to tell you the truth, I'm looking forward to that day.

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Email: plussoul@sto.or.kr | Tel: +82-2-3788-8151 | www.miceseoul.com

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