

# How to choose your destination: a conference organiser's guide

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## **How much does destination matter?**

More than you think.

When it comes to conference delegates, destination is the #2 factor in the decision to attend: above networking opportunities, professional expectations, even cost.

If you're a conference organiser, that means destination matters to you too.

## **But how do you narrow down your options?**

Whether you're planning a one-day symposium for a small group or a high-profile international conference over multiple days, the rules are just the same.

There are four essential elements to choosing a conference destination: travel, venue, accommodation, and the 'beyond conference' experience: those extras that only come from being in that particular place.

## **Here's what to expect from this short, user-friendly guide.**

First, we'll take a closer look each of these four essentials, and unpick exactly why they matter so much to your delegates.

Then we'll put one particular city under the microscope, to see how it measures up.

Ready?

Let's get started.



# PART ONE

## Travel

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### **When was the last time you travelled for pleasure?**

Maybe you got lucky, and had a dream of a journey. Maybe you didn't: the traffic was awful; your flight was delayed; there were the wrong kind of leaves on the line for your train – and you arrived late, tired, and more in need of a holiday than when you started.

Now: when was the last time you travelled for work?

Your journey woes could be just the same – but you don't get a holiday at the end of it.

That's what your delegate faces when they're deciding whether or not to attend your conference. Remember that destination is the #2 factor in making that decision? Ease of travel is a big part of that.

## How do I get there?

It's a simple question.

Wait, you might say: it depends where you're starting from!

Of course it does. International attendees will always have to accept long journeys to reach you. Even home delegates will have to travel. You can't be convenient to everyone.

What you can be, however, is located somewhere that's as convenient to reach as practically possible. That means finding a hub.

## What is a hub destination?

Put simply, it's a place that's designed to reach other places on an infrastructural level. Hub destinations will have the following:

- An airport with international flights
- Easy access to a motorway
- A main line train station

While it might seem contradictory, when you're choosing a location, you're doing so not only on its own merits, but its relationship with other places.

The UK, for example, is blessed with many stunning open spaces: national parks; areas of outstanding natural beauty, rugged coastlines and beaches. But they're beautiful because they're remote. Hold your conference in a grand old mansion house in the Scottish Highlands and you'll have extraordinary views, tons of atmosphere – and a mountain to climb in terms of registration numbers.

That doesn't mean you can only choose city centre locations. But hub destinations are usually cities, so you'll want to be near to one.

## Getting around

Of course, travel doesn't only mean arriving at the hub destination. It means getting around once you arrive in a quick, uncomplicated manner – whether that's travelling to your conference venue, or heading out for the evening.

Your conference destination should also have the following:

- An easy road route from the motorway
- Good public transport
- Uber, or a reliable taxi service
- Accessible travel options and venues

Again, your remote Scottish Highlands mansion isn't going to cut it.

But being part of a hub means that transport in and around that hub – including the suburbs and satellites – is all waiting for you.

Don't rule out venues and accommodation that aren't right in the city centre; you can often find better value, more facilities and a less crowded feel within a 15-mile radius. Just make sure that hub destination is in place.

# PART TWO

## Venue

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### **The most common complaint from conference delegates?**

Having to walk or travel too far between venues.

Let's say your conference opens with a plenary session for 1000 people. You've chosen an amazing venue: a purpose-built conference centre hall, or an imposing historic building.

Your delegate loves it.

After the plenary, they have to find their breakout room. After that, it's the morning coffee break. Then, another breakout session before lunch.

Not all venues can accommodate everything in one central area. But if your breakout rooms are even a ten-minute walk away from your plenary, your delegate will start to feel frustrated; more so if the route is hard to find or the building layout isn't clearly mapped.

Frustrated delegates don't give good feedback. If they're missing out on the start of sessions because they got lost, or feeling too exhausted to concentrate because they've had to rush for a taxi or drive between venues, they're not getting the experience they hoped for.

## Where can I get a cup of coffee?

Catering is also a key factor in your delegate's experience. While it might not seem destination-specific, it's essential to bear it in mind when you're choosing your venue.

- Breakfast
- Afternoon coffee break and refreshments
- Lunch
- Afternoon coffee break

Residential conferences will probably have breakfast at their accommodation. If so, check what time they serve it, and factor in travel time: does your event plan allow everyone to arrive on time for the first session? If you're running a one-day event, look for an area where you can provide coffee and quick snacks for latecomers, or recommend a good coffee shop or breakfast place near the venue they can visit en route.

Mingling time between sessions is one of the most valued elements of a conference. It's why people travel long distances: to make connections and network with others in their field. Think carefully about where you can locate coffee breaks when you're choosing a venue. Is there a big enough space outside your meeting rooms?

Placing your lunch spot is also worth careful thought. Lunch might also be a prime opportunity to visit an exhibition area, so place your buffet nearby– or expect tumbleweed in your exhibition space or marquee. Again, this networking time is highly valued, so be sure to provide enough room and plenty of seating.

## Not all conferences are the same.

Understanding the nature of a specific event will make choosing a venue a clearer process, too.

In some industries, privacy is an absolute essential. Major pharmaceutical companies, for example, may require a completely secure space for their meetings and showcases - so a venue with open-plan exhibition spaces or areas open to the public at all times won't be appropriate.

Others may be keen to raise their profile, and would prefer a marquee in the centre of a bustling space where passing traffic will take note of what's happening.

Choose the venue that suits that event, not just the one that's most convenient or familiar to you.

# PART THREE

## Accommodation

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### High or low?

You've just read about choosing a venue that suits the event, not the one that's most convenient or familiar.

Choosing accommodation is the same: you need what suits that delegate.

Not everyone's needs and expectations are the same, of course. But as a rule of thumb, attendees of academic conferences are often keener to keep costs low, and would prefer a lower ticket tag and simpler accommodation. High-profile industry conferences, however, expect quality hotel-standard accommodation.

Understand your customer, and let that lead your choices.



## Essentials

There are some fundamentals that really are must-haves, whatever kind of attendee you're welcoming.

- Free high-speed Wi-Fi
- Parking
- 24-hour reception/security
- Baggage store

Regular travellers will know that some of the bigger chains cap their free Wi-Fi; realistically, this means you'll have to pay a daily fee to use it for anything other than very light use. When your delegate's away from home, they'll want to keep in touch with family – and, of course, they may need to share files or upload conference materials. Poor Wi-Fi can be a real area of disappointment. Always ask, and if possible check it yourself; it's not always as promised.

Parking at or near the delegate's accommodation is also a must, even if it's rarely free. While this is an essential, it's also an opportunity for you to encourage attendees to travel sustainably. Can they car share or travel by public transport? Offer a special rate if they don't bring a car.

International travel often means unusual arrival and departure times. Make sure guests have the option for a flexible check in at their accommodation, and can store luggage if they have a late departure time.

## More than a good night's sleep

Choosing a place to stay might be the attendee's own responsibility. But if you're responsible for accommodation bookings, it's essential to factor in transport time.

Just as delegates don't like to walk too far between venues during their conference, they don't like to travel too far from their hotel.

The ideal scenario, of course, is a conference centre with its own accommodation attached or nearby. Social spaces like bars and restaurants allow the kind of relaxed post-session networking that adds real value to your event.

If that's not an option, look for other ways you can add value: accommodation in a peaceful area with some privacy for a block-booked group, for example.

# PART FOUR

## Beyond the conference

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### **Downtime matters**

So far, this guide has focused on the nuts and bolts of a destination. But it's the #2 factor driving decision-making because of much more than just the conference itself.

People come because they want to be in an exciting new place: one that inspires them just as much as the conference content will.

That means your hub destination needs to have a unique charm all of its own.

### **An authentic experience**

Here's where destinations can really shine: in their authenticity.

There's no part of the UK without a rich history all of its own. International visitors particularly love to visit places where the British countryside, architectural treasures and historic past are showcased.

Is there a world-class place to eat, or traditional food you can't find anywhere else? A historic setting or view that simply must be Instagrammed for friends at home? What about unique cultural attractions, like museums and galleries?

Your choice of a hub destination will pay off again here. Whether your guests stay in the immediate area or travel to nearby highlights, you've given them a lively, interesting and well-connected place to begin.

### **'Bleisure' stays**

It's not the most attractive portmanteau, but 'bleisure' is big news – especially for millennial attendees. Blesisure means blending business and leisure: in other words, turning a work trip into a holiday too.

It's become commonplace to tack a few days more onto a conference, to make the most of the travel time and the opportunity to explore a new city. That means, if you're block-booking a hotel, factor in the option for individuals to stay on for longer, without the hassle of changing rooms.

Even if they choose to switch to new accommodation, be sure to let your attendees know some valuable local details before they come. If they know they're having a fun break afterwards, they're already in a positive mind-set for your event.

# PART FIVE

## An exemplary city

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Let's look at an example: the city of Birmingham.

OK, we'll admit it. We're biased.

With over sixty years of experience in the industry, the Conferences & events team at the University of Birmingham knows exactly what the city has to offer.

That's why you can take it from us: the UK's second-largest city is worth a second look. In fact, it scores high for all four of those destination essentials

### Travel

#### Easy to reach

They call it the Midlands for a reason.

Birmingham is a genuinely central hub destination, with outstanding links across the whole country.



Driving here is easy, with access from the M5, M6, M40 and M42.

Train travel to the city is excellent. Travel time from London Euston to Birmingham New Street is currently a speedy 82 minutes, but that's set to be slashed in 2026, when phase one of HS2 is completed. This high-speed rail link will make the journey from London Euston to Birmingham's revived Curzon Street station in just 49 minutes.

And, of course, the city benefits from Birmingham International airport, with international flights across Europe, the US, the Middle East and more. The airport has its own rail station, with a high-frequency service taking you directly to the city centre in 15 minutes or less. By road, the journey is around 25 minutes.

## Getting around

Travel within the city is just as easy.

Hop in an Uber, just as you would in any other global city.

A well-oiled public transport network will comfortably take you around the Greater Birmingham area.

The bus network accepts contactless payments, so you can climb aboard, tap and go. You'll be charged one flat fee for a single trip: any subsequent trips will buy you a day pass, so you'll never pay over the one-day rate.

Birmingham city centre has a much-loved tram, called the West Midlands Metro. As well as stretching northwest to Wolverhampton, it offers short hops around the city for just £1, with reduced rates for groups.

Train tickets can easily be purchased on the go using a train company app, like Cross Country's Train Tickets or the VirginTrains app; the ticket is held on your mobile phone, so you never need to worry about queuing up to buy, or losing your ticket.

Holding a conference at the University of Birmingham? You're really spoiled. The University has its own train station, University. The high-frequency service takes just 7 minutes from Birmingham New Street. Arriving by car? The University is just 8 miles from the motorway, along the A48.

## Venues

### Convenient and practical

Remember that common complaint from conference delegates, running from plenary to coffee break?

While you can lay on shuttle buses, extra signage and helpful staff to lead the way, nothing beats choosing a location that gives you all the venues you need in one place.

That's when a setting like the University of Birmingham really comes into its own.

Large meeting spaces like spacious lecture halls are complemented by smaller teaching rooms, clustered together, in the heart of a campus designed for busy people to get around quickly. And with purpose-built facilities like Edgbaston Park Hotel and Conference Centre offering flexible spaces all within a single venue, you're spoilt for choice.

### Period charm, modern flexibility

There's not only convenience to be found in the buildings here; there's grandeur, too.

The original red-brick Aston Webb building and clock tower of 1900 are home to the imposing Great Hall, with capacity for 2000 seated theatre-style, and fine banqueting for 480 beneath its stained glass windows and vaulted ceiling.

Edgbaston Park Hotel and Conference Centre's modern silhouette is a striking new addition to campus. The interiors are just as imposing, with high ceilings and a phenomenal sense of space and light. The hotel also boasts two period buildings: Grade II-listed Garth House, offering characterful meeting spaces for small meetings, and Hornton Grange, whose meeting spaces are enhanced by a stunning modern extension.

And across campus, you'll find more examples of distinctive design, from brand new teaching facilities overlooking the campus's Green Heart to the charming meeting rooms and seven-acre botanic gardens of Winterbourne House.

## A historic setting

As any organiser knows, a university can be the ideal setting for conferences large or small.

At the University of Birmingham, a long tradition of pioneering research in the sciences, arts and humanities has led it to become one of the world's Top 100 universities. That makes it ideal for welcoming high-profile international academic conferences. They benefit from an environment that's already well-equipped, internationally respected, and dedicated to professional excellence.

Of course, that prestige has immense value to all professional events, not only academic conferences. When you choose a campus environment, you immerse your delegates in an atmosphere steeped in progressive thinking, world-class achievement, and passion for learning new things.

## Accommodation

### Bright lights, big city

If you want to be in the heart of a bustling, lively city, you'll find plenty of choice when it comes to a place to lay your head.

Birmingham city centre has the array of hotel accommodation you'd expect from the UK's second-largest city. The simplicity of a familiar brand makes some visitors feel at home, and you'll find all the big budget hotels in great central locations, including one that's right on the doorstep of Grand Central.

For premium stays, there are plenty of smaller boutique hotels, independents, and luxury brands.

And, if you're based out of the centre for the NEC or Genting Arena, Resorts World offers an array of places to stay (as well as to eat, drink and shop).

## Campus hotels

The city has plenty to offer. But if you're more interested in a quiet night's sleep and easy access to your conference venue in the morning, staying a few miles out of the city might be perfect for you.

Edgbaston is a peaceful, leafy suburb of Birmingham, just 2 miles south of the city centre. This is where you'll find the University of Birmingham campus: a village all of its own, built on rolling green parkland, and with not one but two hotels on offer.

Edgbaston Park Hotel and Conference Centre is a four-star-standard hotel, with a choice of double rooms, executive suites, or luxury bedrooms in its two historic houses. The landscaped gardens, spacious bar and chic steakhouse restaurant are coupled with an enviable location, just a stroll from the centre of campus.

For the more budget conscious, Lucas House Hotel is found on the same road. It offers simple comfort and a great location.

## Simple group stays

Of course, many delegates (and organisers!) make decisions of conference attendance on the value of the conference to their career; extras like a fancy hotel room come way down the list.

For many, too, the budget is a significant factor in their attendance, with self-funding attendees of academic conferences in particular often hoping to keep their costs low.

Fortunately, there's no need to miss out on a great conference experience or a good night's sleep. University accommodation might bring back memories of narrow beds and chilly bathrooms, but times have changed.

Now, a stay in University accommodation will give you a comfortable modern en-suite bedroom, with free Wi-Fi and access to a kitchen-lounge to help you relax and mingle in the evenings. These purpose-built spaces are designed with your comfort and wellbeing in mind, with a glorious lakeside parkland setting in what's known as the Vale Village.



## Beyond the conference

### The perfect hub

Travellers to a conference love to know they're getting the most out of the experience. Birmingham wins again: its central location means it's blessed with easy access to some of the UK's most dazzling cultural highlights.

Shakespeare's birthplace Stratford-upon-Avon is a huge draw, for international travellers in particular. It's a beautiful and compact city, with stunning Elizabethan buildings, tours of Shakespeare's former home – and three theatres to allow you to experience the world's greatest playwright's works, performed by the very best.

Warwick Castle offers 1100 years of history in one day out. This vast, well-preserved castle allows you to walk the towers and ramparts, explore the lavish rooms inside, and imagine the lives of those who called it their home. Visit the dungeon for a sinister experience featuring live actors, or enjoy a live mediaeval joust.

The Cotswolds are famous for their postcard-perfect villages, rolling green landscapes and quaint charm. Stroll through ancient beech woods, or enjoy a traditional English cream tea at Huffkins in the pretty mediaeval town of Burford.

All three are within 50 miles of Birmingham city centre.

### Vibrant city

For delegates keen to find souvenirs of their stay, Birmingham's shopping scene ticks all the boxes. The city's long relationship with silversmithing and stained glass continues today, with young designers and creators making unique gifts; take the tram to the Jewellery Quarter, or choose one of the quirky independent shops dotted around the city in pretty Victorian arcades. For more traditional shopping, you'll find Selfridges in the Bullring, and high-end luxury shopping at the Mailbox.

Foodies will find plenty to love in this inclusive, multicultural city. At Chung Ying in Chinatown, you'll find the UK's largest selection of dim sum. A little further south of the centre, the 'Balti Triangle' offers unique family-run restaurants – especially good for veggies. Or try Brindleyplace for canalside dining.

There's a wealth of quirky entertainment on hand for millennials, from crazy golf for grown-ups at Ghetto Golf to Tilt's mix of café, bar and retro pinball. Craft beer fans are well served, with Warwickshire brewery Purity's Purecraft bar, and the Jewellery Quarter's own Two Towers brewery, based at the Gunmakers Arms. And, of course, there's plenty of nightlife on offer, from clubbing to live music and comedy.

## Culture on campus

Stay at the University of Birmingham, and you'll have an array of cultural treats on the doorstep.

Winterbourne House & Garden is on the University campus, just across the road from Edgbaston Park Hotel and Conference Centre. This 1904 Arts and Crafts home is now a museum, recreating Edwardian life. It's accompanied by seven acres of botanic garden, featuring rare species and a beautiful Japanese bridge, plus a traditional tea room.

The Barber Institute of Fine Art is home to a remarkable collection of Old Masters and modern works. Housed in an impressive Art Deco building, this free-to-enter gallery features works from Rubens to Botticelli, Gainsborough to Renoir, Van Gogh to Degas and many more.

At the Bramall, in the heart of campus, you'll find a concert hall with a lively and varied programme from stand-up comedy to classical music. And the Lapworth Museum of Geology is also a must-see, with an outstanding collection of over 200,000 fossils, minerals and rocks.

## Convinced?

The evidence speaks for itself. Birmingham really does have it all.

But there's one thing we haven't mentioned: the people.

That's not just the people of the city – though they're worth a special mention. After all, they say the further north of London you head in England, the friendlier people become. 'Brummies' might be Midlandsers, but if you're more familiar with the south, you'll notice it too. From a warm chat when you're buying a coffee to smiles and help if you're looking lost, you can expect to feel welcome.

No, we're talking about the people of University of Birmingham| Conferences & events. They've got the local knowledge to ensure you get the very best out of your time with us, and the professional experience to deliver a memorable event.

Best of all, it's a complete service from start to finish, giving you a single point of contact to manage everything on campus: venue booking, catering, and accommodation. That means wherever you're based, you can always feel confident that the job's being done, and being done well.

**Is Birmingham is the natural home for your next event or conference?**

It's time to get in touch.

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