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SBJ/May 30-June 5, 2016/Olympics

## Hospitality firms map out plans to deal with Rio's traffic

By **Ben Fischer**, Staff Writer

Published May 30, 2016, Page 1

**Editor's note:** *This story is revised from the print edition.*

For all the concern over the Zika virus, pollution and economic instability, the biggest headache facing the Olympic business world right now is much more mundane: Rio traffic.

Travel agents, hospitality planners and marketing consultants predict the slow pace of surface transportation will emerge as a major theme of the Rio Games, affecting everything from athlete appearances to private meetings. Even those more optimistic say congestion is an omnipresent concern as they fine-tune plans.

"If you're working the business side of the Games, you're going to have to be really thoughtful about how much you can get into a day," said Adam Lippard, head of global sports and entertainment consulting at GMR Marketing, whose Rio hospitality clients include Visa, General Electric and Procter & Gamble. "I think transportation is probably the biggest issue on the board right now."

Rio's striking beaches and mountains leave little room for thoroughfares, and its densely populated neighborhoods near Copacabana and Ipanema beaches are crowded by design. Earlier this month, Rio 2016 organizers admitted a major subway line intended to carry 300,000 people a day will be done just four days before the Games, and some businesses are skeptical it will open at all.



As a solution to the congestion, Lippard said he's trying to



Despite headlines about other problems, Rio traffic is stacking up as a major concern.

Photo by: GETTY IMAGES

consolidate GMR clients' events and meetings as close to their hotels as possible. Others are spreading their internal teams out, assigning staffers to be embedded with clients or stay at certain locations full time.

For guests staring at multihour bus rides, the answer is on-board entertainment, said Aykan Azar, co-managing director of Octagon Brazil.

"You can even turn one of these trips into a party," he said. "Whether it's bringing in retired athletes or legends to travel with you, or do a Q&A session, there's really smart and creative ways of turning what on the surface seems like a negative into a real positive."

Fundamentally, the solution is found in your state of mind, many said. The best tools will be a spirit of flexibility, plenty of battery power, a good international data plan and realism in scheduling.

"The idea of being able to run around the city and see numerous events in the same day is going to present a great challenge," said Tom Shepard, a partner at 21 Sports & Entertainment. "I think you need to plan carefully around one or two events in a day and call it good. Charging off to see some quick one-offs, whether it's meetings or events, I don't think that's going to be as feasible as it's been in other Olympic cities."

The Rio 2016 organizers have structured the Games around four primary clusters, the largest two being Copacabana and the Olympic Park in Barra da Tijuca, a suburban district about 9 miles west of the beaches.

Most sponsor hotels are near the beaches; most sporting venues are at the park. Athletes, officials and elite sponsors can use dedicated Olympic lanes, but not unescorted guests or lower-tier sponsors. "A taxi driver is happy to take you to Barra da Tijuca, and if there's no traffic it can be 25 minutes," said Brian Peters, CEO and owner of Bucket List Events, which has reserved 100 hotel rooms for its vacation package buyers. "In traffic, it can be an hour and a half."

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The Subway Line 4 is supposed to make the trip in 27 minutes. It also was supposed to meet a July 1 construction deadline but is now set to open on Aug. 1, and then be limited only to Olympic ticket and credentials holders. Peters is one of many who is assuming it will be delayed again, based on sources he has in Rio.

Rio 2016 spokesman Philip Wilkinson said the subway completed a test run this month and further delays are not expected.

United Entertainment Group is assigning staff to client hotels in both Copacabana and the Olympic Park region, said Erin Weinberg, executive vice president and group head of sports and entertainment communications. For staffers assigned to travel with clients or move between venues, they'll be prepared to stay overnight at different locations if they're stuck late at night.

"I'm staying in an apartment close to Olympic Park, because I think we need to have a footprint in both locations," Weinberg said. "So some people will be bunking there when they need to. Some of our team will be embedded with clients the whole time."

Bringing sponsored athletes to corporate events could be the toughest challenge, she said. Unless they happen to be competing close to a hotel, it will be hard. "We're looking at maybe changing some plans because we know athletes don't have the luxury of sitting in traffic for two hours," Weinberg said.

Tamara Jacobs, senior vice president of Ketchum Sports & Entertainment, said the potential for delays has forced planners to have an excellent grasp of the overall Olympic picture in Rio — where and when popular events are, what might be competing for your time, and where your attendees will be coming from. "It's really a matter of smart planning," she said.

Jackie Harkness, vice president of sport strategy at GlideSlope, said it's crucial to keep clients abreast of the potential challenges and the likelihood of changes on the fly. Particularly for domestic sponsors, who have fewer perks than Rio 2016 or International Olympic Committee partners.

"And so that means we manage expectations from an agency side with executives, athletes, ambassadors and guests, just to make sure they understand that changes will occur," Harkness said.

The Rio city government has declared three public holidays to free up streets: Aug. 5 for the opening ceremony; Aug. 18 for the men's triathlon; and Aug. 22, the day after the closing ceremony. Also, Wilkinson noted, the Rio city government shifted the school's usual winter break from July to August.

Azar is optimistic. He thinks the local governments will succeed in minimizing traffic concerns and that Rio's roads will ultimately be fine. Peters agreed. He said the Brazilian spirit of hospitality ultimately will win out, and delays that frustrate Americans during a typical business day won't seem as bad during the Olympics.

"It's part of the Brazilian culture," Peters said. "It's to get it together at the last minute and make do. Maybe pour a little liquor on the equation, everyone's going to have a good time."

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