



an interview with...

Mr. Ramón Alvarez

An interview with President and Managing Director, Mr. Ramón Alvarez of GSAR Marketing, Spain, organisers of the forthcoming CULTOUR 2011 exhibition taking place in Quito, Ecuador from 22-24 June. Here Tourism around the World Monthly discovers more about the event and the ideas of the man behind the only global Cultural and Heritage travel exhibition in the world.



1. What was the catalyst that made you launch CULTOUR? The travel industry is in continuous change, because society is also changing and travel adapts fast to society needs.

In the rich, developed countries - from where most travellers come from - now people live longer and in better health. The space of time between the kids are gone, retirement is near and you are not in shape to travel any more may spread to 25 years or more of active life. So if you have the money, the health and the time, you travel. And because of this, your travelling interest is not just to visit London or Paris where you have probably already been. You want to take cooking classes in Italy or a wine tour in Chile, a new year's concert in Vienna, take a train in Ecuador's Andes or visit Scotland distilleries....And if you go to London or Paris is for a theatre play or to a concert.

This new travel market is already here and cultural and heritage attractions can be found everywhere. Some countries processing many cultural features know how to commercialise it - as Italy - others, most of them, have no idea how to.

So, I thought about setting up an international forum where cultural and heritage related travel suppliers - public and private - would meet with tour operators and travel agents producing and selling cultural travel packages. Or for those tour operators not yet in this business, a place where to contact and contract cultural

travel features and services. So this is why CULTOUR is needed.

2. What were the main challenges you faced when launching the event and was it always intended to be a moving event? The main challenge to launch a new - in this case very new - event is to get venues sponsorship, just because it is new. Everybody wants to sponsor a well established event, but not a new one.

Then, there are the exhibitors. I found out suppliers that were enthusiastic about an event such as CULTOUR. But many were unsurprised. Because if travel is an ever changing business, also it is a business crowded with traditionalist and conformist executives.

CULTOUR was intended to be a moving event to cover different world regions. This is possible for as long as it is a small event.

3. What is the key success to the CULTOUR exhibition?

The key success of CULTOUR is based on the same premises of our MITM - Meetings and Incentive Travel Market - fairs: small, quality oriented with the same number of professional buyers than exhibitors, guaranteeing a minimum of individual meetings between exhibitors and buyers plus networking functions, where exhibitors still have opportunities to meet more buyers. And of course a change of venue every year.

4. What is your 'one wish' that would revolutionise/improve the CULTOUR event? My wish is to make of CULTOUR a tool, an instrument, to develop a new travel market niche, particularly for countries and regions where they do not have any other thing to offer but cultural and heritage travel.

5. Do you think countries around the world are doing enough to protect their cultural heritage? The great majority, yes. But often the problem is the high cost of maintaining and protecting their cultural heritage treasures. Precisely, the only way to get funds for it is to develop cultural tourism. And CULTOUR is a place where countries will be able to have their cultural features commercialised.

6. The 2011 edition of CULTOUR takes place in Quito, Ecuador, and was UNESCO's first World Heritage site back in 1974, this must feel quite special? This is very exciting but also Quito is the capital culture of the Americas in 2011, which makes CULTOUR in Quito something special.

7. How did you get into the tourism events industry? Over 30 years attending travel trade exhibitions run by people without knowledge of the travel and tourism industry told me that somehow these events could be made better for both, exhibitors and buyers. This is the real reason I got in this business.

8. What is the best thing about your job?
I get to travel.

9. Who is your favourite philosopher and why? Einstein. Although he is not considered a philosopher, his belief that crisis is a challenge to excel and opportunities for growth can be found because while most people shy during crisis. The ones that are creative and fight the crisis are the real winners.

10. What is your favourite cultural site in the world and why? No cultural feature is better than other, the same way a colour is not better than other, just different. Each one is unique and as such is impossible to have a favourite one. How to compare the Parthenon with the Grand Canyon? Or the Egyptian Pyramids with Machu Pichu? All are wonderful sights that no human should miss.

But for this we have cultural travel so we can travel and travel from one to another. ■