

VOICES

68th ANNUAL ICA CONFERENCE
Prague, Czech Republic
24-28 May 2018



Dear ICA members and attendees,

I'm writing you for a few reasons this weekend: to correct some misperceptions about our housing process, to explain things more fully, and to apologize for any confusion you may have experienced thus far. The best way to do this is by posting the questions I have read (on social media, and that you have sent to me and to your division/interest group chairs), and by answering them directly. Please take a moment to review the FAQ below.

Q: How did the housing for Prague sell out when I haven't even received a link to book a room?

A: The housing link went out first to accepted presenters, the board of directors, and planners (this is typical: it is often included in the acceptance letter), the minute we received the link from Experient and were told it was ready. This ended up being late in the day Eastern Standard Time (EST) on Thursday, 18 January. We had planned to send the link out to everyone in our database on Friday, 19 January at Noon EST, but as it turned out, the accepted presenters alone sold out all the rooms. After deliberation, we concluded that there was no point in sending a link to a sold-out housing block to everyone else at that point—it would have just antagonized everyone. Instead, we updated on social media and the conference page on the website to explain that Phase Two of housing (including more rooms in the headquarters hotel) will be released next week as soon as we have them ready. Many of you, however, simply heard that housing was sold out from others on social media, and wondered how that could be when you hadn't even received a link yet. This is our fault. We should have emailed you anyway to explain.

Q: Why do the board of directors and the planners get first crack along with the accepted presenters?

A: Many of our board members and planners do not submit papers themselves for the conference, but it is crucial that they attend. Planners must be there to ensure their Division/IG's programming goes smoothly, and the Board of Directors must attend for the same reason and to attend the Board of Directors meeting that occurs on the first day of conference. In addition, each of those individuals spends countless hours working tirelessly for the benefit of the Association. The planners agonize over fitting in as many of you as possible to their program, while maintaining academic rigor and coming up with compelling programming. They spend hundreds of hours each year working on the program and having few hours of early access to book housing is one of the only ways we have to thank them for all the time they volunteer to this organization.

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Q: It seems like ICA is always caught off guard and has to scramble to add more rooms. Why don't you plan better?

A: We actually are never caught off guard by this – there is just a limit to how many rooms hotels will release to us when we first sign the contract. Hotel contracting is an extremely complex process. Hotels do not allow any organization to book 100% of their rooms at the onset of a contract. If a hotel has 800 rooms they will only sign over 700 to you initially at the conference rate because they are wary of risk (no matter how much data you show them that your block sells out on day one every year, and we do show them that data). They also think they're better off keeping some rooms aside so they can sell them at full price to regular paying guests. For example, a hotel would rather have those last rooms sell at US\$400 a night than give them to ICA to sell at a deeply discounted US\$200 per night. Once we do sell out the block, though, they will release more rooms to us, involving an addendum to the contract and some concessions. This takes a couple of days to implement (and this is what's going on right now for Prague). We always start out knowing we will need more rooms added, but hotels refuse to give them to us until we prove that we can sell out the block. This is why there is a Phase One and a Phase Two to our housing block. There are also other hotels in the vicinity (within easy walking distance) that we chose not to book initially because they had no availability for Wednesday arrivals, but they have been in our back pocket for Phase Two, as we assume some people would rather arrive Thursday than not come at all. If those had been included in the original release of rooms, it would have confused and possibly angered people to be told there was no availability for arriving before Thursday. They will be added this week.

Q: Well, 800 rooms doesn't seem like enough. Why don't we contract bigger venues?

A: First, those 800 rooms I mentioned are just at the headquarters hotel, and you'd be hard pressed to find a European hotel with more rooms than that. We book over 1,200 rooms on peak (our busiest nights) across several hotels, sometimes up to 1,600 rooms (as in San Diego). We book on a bell curve, so Thursday, Friday and Saturday have the most room nights, and inventory falls off a bit on the shoulder dates. This is because we have 10 years of data showing when attendees typically arrive and depart. If we contracted 800 rooms for Tuesday night we would end up paying a penalty to the hotel for unused rooms on the order of hundreds of thousands of \$US. Even if we wanted 800 rooms on Tuesday, the hotel doesn't have them to give. When ICA guests are arriving, the attendees of another conference are usually leaving. The hotel's capacity peaks on the weekends when conference attendees from various organizations are in town. As the prior conference starts to leave and ICA starts to arrive, the rooms in the hotel switch hands. Second, I do book much larger venues when we are in North America, and if at all possible when we are in other locations. In Europe, those giant mega-hotels **don't exist**. Some of you have suggested that all of this would be much easier if we were in North America each year like some of

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our sister associations, but it is crucial to our organizational culture, our global reach, and our mission as an international organization to rotate our conference location globally. We are committed to maintaining our international rotation. Currently we are in North America every other year, and in intervening years we alternate between Asia/Oceania and Europe. On years when we are in Europe we do the best we can to arrange a collection of hotels to piece together the housing (and meeting space) we need. We will not block hotels that are a 45-minute cab ride away from headquarters, or in dangerous areas. We also learned from Fukuoka, and we will never book a headquarters hotel again that is so isolated from the city center (and other hotels). We go through an exhaustive process to be sure our attendees are safe, close, and well taken care of.

Q: When is this Phase Two going to happen?

A: I am working on contract additions as we speak. My best estimate is that we will have Phase Two ready for booking by the middle of this coming week. In the meantime I recommend that anyone still looking for a room [visit the housing link that is live on our conference page right now](#) to input your desired dates of arrival and departure, press "search hotels," and then choose "hotel pending" to be added to the wait list. This will also help me know exactly how many of you are still waiting for rooms, so we can contract accordingly.

Q: I'm fed up, and I'm just going to book an AirBnB. Why don't you work with them?

A: AirBnB does not work with organizations like ours because they don't need us. More importantly, however, we have had cases both in San Diego and in Fukuoka where attendees booked AirBnB arrangements and arrived in town to find they were locked out of the space they were supposed to be staying. These attendees then had to come to ICA, suitcases in hand, and ask to be relocated into a conference hotel. I won't always be able to do this, and we have no recourse with AirBnB when things don't work out for our attendees.

It's also worth noting in the long term that the more people find housing outside the block, the harder it becomes for ICA to accurately block rooms that meet our true demand. When we negotiate with hotels for space, we have to show them data from the past 10 years or more. If 10% of our attendees are staying outside the block, those numbers are not captured, and we look like we are bringing less business to the venue and the city than we really are.

Q: When will we have outgrown this whole "we booked this when ICA was smaller" phenomenon?

A: Things are getting better every year, as I've already been able to go back--knowing what we know now--and add more rooms and more hotels to the blocks for Washington, DC (2019), and Gold Coast (2020). I signed the contracts for Denver (2021), Paris (2022), and Toronto (2023) myself, so I know they are adequate, but we continue to grow so I will be constantly monitoring our

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size and pickup (the number of rooms actually sold) each year to make adjustments as we go on. Part of that improved data and improved forecasting is made possible by our partnership with Experient, who also provide the new housing site at no cost to ICA.

Q: Why has ICA outsourced housing?

A: This is a misperception. We have *not* outsourced housing. The Executive Director of ICA is still as personally involved and in charge of our housing blocks as ever. I personally tour each hotel numerous times prior to and after signing the contract, to plan where things will go and how much space we need. I personally sign all contracts. I personally make the decision to add more rooms at each hotel and what dates they should span. When I tour each hotel, I look at all the meeting space and every room type. I sit on the beds, I flick the light switches off and on, turn on the TV, and turn on the showers to check the water pressure. I *truly* care that you have a positive experience at our conference and I spend a great deal of my time ensuring that things go smoothly. *Every single decision related to housing goes through me as Executive Director.* The addition of Experient as a housing partner simply allows us to do better data collection on how our blocks historically perform, allows us to provide the "one stop shop" housing site at no cost to ICA for a better user experience, allows us to move quickly when we need to add more rooms, and comes with the bargaining power (and, if things ever go wrong, the legal representation) of a large corporation. Because ICA will never return to the same place sooner than about once per decade, individual hotels have little reason to keep a small organization like us happy as they know they won't get repeat business from us anytime soon. Experient, however, works with has literally hundreds of associations – in addition to for-profit corporations – and hotels are loathe to alienate a company with that much buying power.

Q: I don't like this consolidated housing site, though. I thought it was easier when I could just call the hotel.

A: All I can say to this is that for the past two years, I have heard (and read) literally hundreds of complaints about the way we used to do this: attendees having to shop around to different sites for hotel rooms, calling front desk staff, and putting different codes into different websites. Members told me that they would find a room at one hotel, go to compare it to another hotel, and by the time they came back, the first one was sold out. That process created a lot of stress for everyone. We also often dealt with uninformed hotel front desk staff telling attendees the wrong thing, from the wrong number of beds in a room to the wrong check in date. Most of the feedback I've gotten this year is that the housing site has been a wonderful improvement. Not everyone agrees, and that's ok – we are not a homogenous group, nor should we be. But in addition to being an improvement from an attendees perspective on most counts, it also makes it easier for us to monitor and immediately identify when our block is selling out so that we can move quickly to add more rooms. Before, that required asking for reports from individual staff at four or five different hotels. Now

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booking is managed in one place by people who are experts at housing, freeing ICA staff up to do what we do best: bringing you an excellent conference.

To sum up:

Please know that I am personally making every effort to get everyone's housing needs taken care of in the most expeditious way possible. As you remember, we had a record breaking 3,300 people (600 more than usual) show up to San Diego and every single person that asked for a room had one. I am sympathetic to your concerns. I know that time is ticking away and you are eager to have your room settled so you can book your flights. I am just as eager to get this wrapped up as you are.

Lastly, I apologize for any confusion. It was not the staff's intention for anyone to feel left out, but we can see in retrospect that NOT sending that second email to all of our database – to let you know that the block had sold out just from the accepted presenters and that we were working on Phase Two – made many of you feel ignored and undervalued. We had assumed that sending an email with the subject line "ICA housing" that went on to say nothing but "housing is sold out" would just anger the recipients. I'm confident it would have, but in retrospect I can see that it would have been better than what we did, which was to say nothing at all via email and put the message only on the website and social media. The point is well taken, and I will be sure to follow my instincts next time and always, always err on the side of more communication. It is in our name, after all.

I'll be in touch with an email to our whole database when Phase Two of housing is ready. If you put yourself on the waiting list as mentioned above, you may receive an email in the interim from housing telling you that they've found a room for you. Either way, I look forward to seeing all of you in Prague.

Sincerely,
Laura

Laura Sawyer
ICA Executive Director