Geneva: Switzerland’s Space Centre

This September, around 2,000 participants from around the globe are anticipated to attend the European Science Planetary Congress (EPSC-DPS 2019), hosted at the Centre International de Conférences de Genève (CICG). Taking place every four years, the congress features oral and poster sessions, as well as workshops and panel discussions designed to facilitate interaction and discussion between participants on one broad theme: planetary science. Boardroom caught up with Stéphane Udry from the local organizing committee to hear why Geneva and the CICG were selected and what they hope the event will achieve.

Words Rémi Dévé
Why is Geneva an ideal host destination for the EPSC-DPS 2019?

The EPSC-DPS is organized jointly every four years by the European Society of Planetology (the "Europlanet Society," which organizes the annual European Planetary Science Congress - EPSC) and the Planetary Science Division of the American Astronomical Society (DPS / AAS), and it alternates between the United States and Europe.

The 2019 congress is emblematic for Geneva and Switzerland for several reasons. First of all, Switzerland has made history in the realm of planetary sciences on several occasions. Two of the most remarkable instances relating to the congress are the Apollo 11 mission, which, in 1969, had been initiated by Professor Johannes Geiss of the University of Bern. The other took place in 1995 when Professor Michel Mayor and Dr. Didier Queloz of the University of Geneva detected a giant, gaseous planet that was the first extrasolar planet to be discovered around a star similar to the sun.

These two historical milestones have also marked the beginning of the current evolution of the field of planetary sciences, which aims to bring the exploratory activities of the solar system and the study of planetary (exo) systems closer together, especially when it comes to the potential to shelter life. We must take advantage of the detailed knowledge of the unique system in which we live, and of our new, more distant but statistical knowledge of other worlds out there. This is the goal of the National Research Center PlanetS, established by the Swiss government in 2014 (and co-directed by the universities of Berne and Geneva).

In terms of European infrastructures that support this kind of research, these activities are carried out within the framework of two major bodies related to astronomy: ESO (European Southern Observatory) for ground observation and ESA (European Space Agency) for space missions. In connection with these two organizations, Geneva occupies a preponderant place in the field of planetary sciences.

This is why the congress offers an excellent platform to showcase the scientific activities that are carried out in Switzerland and Geneva, particularly with the international organizations of the field. These organizations, both European (ESO, ESA) and American (NASA), support the congress and will actively participate in it.

Does CICG serve as an actual partner, as opposed to a service provider?

In order to organize a conference that brings together thousands of people, potentially from all over the world, it requires the implementation of a set of specific services and associated know-how. It’s not just about having rooms big enough to accommodate the participants—or enough of them to organize parallel sessions. It’s a delicate combination of logistical elements (security, AV, catering, etc.), access to public authorities, tourism professionals or the media, academic and educational features, etc. Often, the organizers are not professionals—this is definitely our case—and the intel and local help provided by the CICG are of paramount importance for the success of the event.

As a convention destination, what does Geneva offer associations?

Geneva is an internationally known city. Pair its global reputation with its attractive tourist attractions (such as the lake or mountains), and you'll see why Geneva is so highly regarded around the world. The perception of Switzerland and Geneva of being clean, efficient and serious also instills confidence in the participants in terms of both safety and the quality of the congress.

For delegates like scientists, the presence of CERN in Geneva greatly increases the attractiveness of the city. I imagine it's the same thing in the political field when it comes to the international organizations that are based here. Attendees come to Geneva for the congress, but they can take advantage of the trip by visiting institutions that are close to their own interests.

Last but not least, from a geographical point of view, the location of Geneva in the centre of Europe makes it easily accessible and encourages visits to neighbouring countries for delegates coming from far away. Another perk is how convenient transportation is to and from Geneva, whether you’re arriving by train or plane.