

# Lavish gala ball highlights hangar venue's potential

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By Dan Rutstein

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One of the largest parties in Bermuda's history may inspire a shot in the arm for the ailing tourism industry.

More than 700 guests attended a lavish gala ball at the NATO hangar on Saturday night, the first such event to take place in the gargantuan building's eight year history.

The event was a fund-raiser for the ISIS Foundation and marked the 50th anniversary of Sir Edmund Hillary's first ascent of Everest, with his son, Peter, the main after-dinner speaker.

And so impressed were the guests, which included politicians, key movers and shakers from the business world and climbing enthusiasts, that the 69,300 square foot hangar may well be used again.

"Ever since I took up this role, I have been trying to encourage people to use it for this kind of event," said Transport Minister Ewart Brown, whose Ministry has control of the airport building.

"Although people have been to look at it, there were too many problems with it for them to run their events. Acoustically it has its drawbacks, and it is basically a plain, unattractive shell.

"But on Saturday night, the ISIS Foundation arranged an amazing transformation and you couldn't help but be impressed with the venue.

"It is now very likely that other people will also see the potential and I am sure we will see further grand events take place there in the future.

"It has been available for some time, but maybe now it will be used again after people saw what could be done with the place."

He said that to secure the premises, event organisers simply needed to apply to the Department of Airport Operations.

Tourism Minister Renee Webb, also a guest on Saturday night, shared this view, although she said that Bermuda still needed a purpose-built conference centre to cater for large-scale events in the future.

"I was very impressed with what they did there on Saturday," she told *The Royal Gazette*.

"ISIS had a vision and they did a great job."

"It took a huge amount of work to achieve what they did, but it showed people what can be done with the venue and I think others will now want to also take advantage of the facility.

"But this can't replace a conference centre and a multi-cultural centre. People have approached us about staging a conference for 2,000 people and we have had to turn them down."

She said that a lot of work had to take place in advance, include work on the roof and dealing with security concerns.

Tickets for the event, which raised more than \$500,000 through the live auctions alone, were priced at either \$350 or \$500 with more than 650 attending.

"It was a wonderful evening and the feedback has been astounding," said ISIS CEO Audette Exel.

"People have been telling us the evening was unlike anything they had seen in Bermuda before. The venue is spectacular and so versatile. With a bit of imagination, and a lot of hard work, there is a lot you can do with it.

"We were celebrating an occasion of enormous achievement on an enormous mountain and I think the cavernous venue did it justice."

The NATO hangar was designed to support the operations of the US Navy's patrol aircraft, but it was not completed until 1995 – the same year the Bermuda base was closed.

Apart from housing private jets and serving as an emergency terminal in case of the disablement of the main airport, the Hangar often remains unused.

From: The Royal Gazette  
Date: 24<sup>th</sup> November 2003