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CORPORATE & INCENTIVE TRAVEL

THE MAGAZINE FOR CORPORATE MEETING AND INCENTIVE TRAVEL PLANNERS



Recipe for a Successful Event

Leave Attendees Satisfied With
More Than Just the Meal

PAGE 28

Executive Chef Travis Taylor
Sunriver Resort, A Destination Hotel

Travis Taylor

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Golf Events

PAGE 12

Meeting Design

PAGE 24

Caribbean

PAGE 34

Jacksonville

PAGE 42

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Credit: The Kohler Company

Players on one of two courses at Blackwolf Run, a 36-hole, Pete Dye-designed golf complex in Kohler, Wisconsin. **PAGE 12**



Credit: Lake Placid Lodge

Lakefront resorts such as Lake Placid Lodge are perfect destinations for executive renewal and relaxation. **PAGE 18**



Credit: Ryan Ketterman/Visit Jacksonville

Friendship Fountain in St. Johns River Park overlooks the downtown Jacksonville skyline. **PAGE 42**

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Contents

VOLUME 32 NO. 10

OCTOBER 2014

FEATURES

12 Planning Face-to-Face Events on the Links

Engage Attendees With Competitive Tourneys, Charity Events and Lasting Memories

By Patrick Simms

18 Water, Water Everywhere

Lakeside Resorts That Provide the Ultimate R&R for Distraction-free Executive Meetings and Retreats

By John Buchanan

24 Experiential Meeting Design

How to Map an Eye-opening Journey to Greater Value and ROI

By Gabi Logan

28 Recipe for a Successful Event

Creative, Engaging Dining Experiences Leave Attendees Satisfied With More Than Just the Meal

By Karen Brost

DESTINATIONS

34 The Paradise Next Door

The Nearby Bahamas and Caribbean U.S. Territories Are Enjoying a Renewed Demand

By Gabi Logan

42 Welcome to Jacksonville

'The Premier North Florida "Comfort Zone" Experience for Meeting Professionals'

By Paul Astleford

DEPARTMENTS

6 Publisher's Message

8 News & Notes

9 Snapshots

10 How to Master the Art of Registration

By Erin Thompson

50 People on the Move

50 Reader Services

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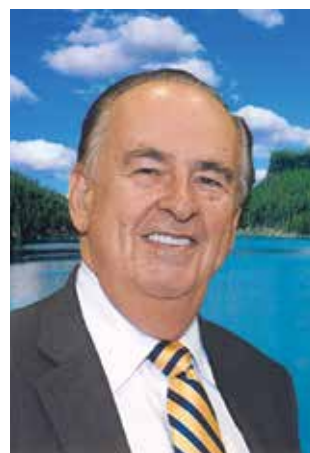
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Publisher's Message

It's the Experience That Counts

Professional meeting planners must deliver successful meetings and events at all times. On top of that, they also must figure out how to not only match but surpass their previous event, all the while maintaining a high level of engagement. Thus, in addition to establishing return on investment, return on experience is of utmost importance as well.



Paul Astleford, president and CEO of Visit Jacksonville, is an expert when it comes to experiences. He came to Jacksonville with more than 42 years of hospitality industry experience under his belt. On page 42 in this issue's destination report on Jacksonville, Paul says, "Jacksonville offers a unique and vibrant side of Florida where a group can have that 'big fish in an intriguing pond' experience without breaking the bank. Both the return on investment for planners, and the return on experience for attendees, makes the overall return on investment more than worth it while meeting in Jacksonville."

We also show you how to map an eye-opening journey to greater value and ROI in our fascinating feature story about Experiential Meeting Design,

which according to Greg Bogue, vice president of experience design at Fenton, Missouri-based Maritz Travel Company, is a type of design that puts people and individual needs first. "In neuroscience, it is called perspective-centered design, because the diverse viewpoints of each individual inform how they experience the world. As a result, experiential meeting design both engages guests in inherently personal ways and evolves over time," he explains. See page 24 to explore this thought-provoking subject.

For more great ideas check out the creative ideas in "Recipe for a Successful Event" on page 28. Travis Taylor (on our cover), executive chef at Sunriver Resort, A Destination Hotel in Sunriver, Oregon, says the changes in F&B trends are positive: "We're seeing group requests focus on dishes made from healthy foods that cater to a range of dietary needs. We're offering more diversity, more options on a buffet, more snack-throughout-the-day options vs. a 30-minute lunch window."

One planner says her company creates interactive food stations so attendees can engage one-on-one with the chef, observe food preparation and then sample what they would like to eat. Now that's an experience that really counts.

Harvey Grotsky
Publisher

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Visit Orlando Recognizes Founders at Its Anniversary Event

ORLANDO, FL — Visit Orlando recently recognized individuals who worked with local government and industry partners to establish the organization 30 years ago. The group that worked with Orange County Administrator Jim Harris during the early '80s to launch the then Orlando/Orange County Convention and Visitors Bureau were recognized with the Founders Award. Members include: Joe Cantrell, Cathy Kerns, Jim Brown and Dan Darrow.



Those individuals who led Visit Orlando's Board of Directors as either a president or chairperson also were recognized for their volunteer leadership to the organization as well as Bill Peeper, the first employee, who received the Association's Legacy award. Pictured (l to r) Visit Orlando's Chairman of the Board Paul Mears III; Joe Cantrell; Cathy Kerns; Jim Brown; Dan Darrow; and George Aguel, president & CEO, Visit Orlando. www.orlandomeeting.com

AMEX Report: How Technology Is Changing the Meetings Industry

NEW YORK, NY — New research recently released by American Express Meetings & Events explores the many ways emerging technologies are changing the meetings industry landscape. The report, "Great Expectations: The Evolving Landscape of Technology in Meetings," reveals the similarities and gaps in attendee and planner expectations across three areas of technological advancement: virtual and hybrid meetings, social media and events apps.

Key observations include: Meeting apps have increased in popularity at large industry conferences and events as they provide the ability to deliver real-time information to attendees. According to the research, 67 percent of meeting planners found event apps to be important. Also, social media is more vital to meeting planners than to attendees, however, with 43 percent of planners feeling social media capabilities are very important, while only 35 percent of attendees felt the same way. The surveyed attendees and planners cited a wide variety of reasons as to why they attend virtual meetings and events, but both strongly agreed that in-person attendance continues to provide the best overall experience. The study showed that attendees are nonetheless looking for more opportunities to attend meetings and events virtually: 63 percent of attendees agreed they would attend more meetings and events virtually if the option were available, while only 17 percent disagreed.

American Express Meetings & Events surveyed 336 meeting planners and 161 meeting and event attendees in the first half of 2014. www.amexglobalbusinesstravel.com/meetings-and-events

Harrah's Atlantic City Waterfront Conference Center to Open August 2015

ATLANTIC CITY, NJ — Caesars Entertainment announced that the \$125.8 million Waterfront Conference Center at Harrah's Resort Atlantic City is set to open in August 2015. The 100,000-sf conference center — the largest convention center-hotel complex between Baltimore and Boston — will increase the meeting facilities at Harrah's Atlantic City to 125,000 sf.

"Caesars Entertainment is adding to its meeting and convention facilities here, because we believe Atlantic City has a great future," said Caesars Entertainment Senior Vice President of Meetings and Events Michael Massari. "Caesars wants to attract business travelers to the Atlantic City market, and we offer them three casino resorts — and expanding its choices by adding the Waterfront Conference Center — to show our commitment to the city. In order to attract different groups, you have to have a portfolio of properties like Caesars Entertainment has."

Boasting state-of-the-art technology and audio-visual capabilities, the new center will connect to the 2,500-room Harrah's Resort Atlantic City, situated on the harbor in the Marina District. Meeting planners will have plenty of options with 63 individual meeting rooms, 300 possible meeting configurations and general sessions for up to 5,000 attendees. Two 50,000-sf, pillarless ballrooms will each be divisible into as many as 27 breakout rooms.

www.harrahresort.com

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Snapshots



Credits: 1, 2, 3 IMEX America; 4, 5, 6 SITE

1 IMEX America kicked off in Las Vegas with an abundance of education options on Smart Monday. Chief playmaker for the Life is Good Foundation Steve Gross delivers "How Joy and Optimism Ignite the Best in Us" an inspirational keynote session. **2** A tour of the Venetian/Palazzo captivates attendees in Las Vegas at the start of IMEX America. **3** Industry volunteers pose at The IMEX Challenge at the Shade Tree Shelter, Las Vegas, an annual opportunity to give back to the community. **4** SITE Classic 2014 participants enjoyed activities including fabulous golf **5** at the The Ritz-Carlton, Dove Mountain, Tucson, Arizona. **6** SITE leaders pose with entertainers at SITE Nite at the start of IMEX America in Las Vegas. (L to r) Bonnie Boisner, SITE Nite event chair; Paul Miller, SITE president 2014; Philip Eisvold, SITE board member; Kurt Paben, SITE Foundation president; and Jane Schuldt, SITE Foundation past-president.

By Erin Thompson

How to Master the Art of Registration

Oftentimes, the most important details of an event are the most tedious to plan. The art of registration certainly falls in this realm as it is a process that needs to begin well before an event. Although most professional meeting planners recognize the importance of having the registration form available early, the planning often stops there until right before or even the day of the event, creating chaos and long registration lines. With a thorough planning process and review of best practices, your event's registration process can run smoothly.

Understanding Registration

Too often, little thought is put into registration as a process except for actually gathering information about who is coming. However, a proper registration process has three phases:

- **Pre-Planning Phase** is the process in which an event sets up an online registration to collect data and details from attendees.
- **Planning Phase** is the process that involves attendees completing a registration form, providing the meeting planner with much needed information.
- **Event Execution Phase** is the onsite act of attendees arriving to the venue/location to collect their registration material and to officially check-in to the event.

In the initial planning phase, the online registration process should include all information that the planner will need to produce a successful event. Registration can include a variety of marketing-type questions if the meeting producer would like to tailor content based on attendees' preferences. The online registration portal or forms should be available as soon as possible, especially when an event is open to customers, the general public, and/or it generates revenue.

The onsite execution phase also should be thought out well in advance. Recognizing that registering is frequently the FIRST experience the attendee will have, it sets the overall tone for the rest of event. Always keep in mind these items:

- Hours of operation for the registration desk.
- Registration desk location.
- Signage for attendees so they can easily find registration and meeting rooms.
- Registration details.
- Staffing needed to allow attendees a quick and satisfactory experience.

After thinking through the process, all registration materials should be organized and labeled. Based on the number of attendees, the planner should arrange for enough registration counters to accommodate a quick check-in process. A good rule of thumb is 250–300 attendees per counter at a maximum and one staff person per counter. If onsite registration is offered, it is necessary to have two people to staff that desk to collect payment, print a badge and handle other details.

Ideally, package in advance all materials in one packet so the staff can spend their time greeting the attendee and making them feel welcome instead of grabbing items to hand out. A single packet that includes their name badge, handouts or other materials can easily be pre-stuffed and labeled with attendee names. Larger items, such as a conference bag, should remain generic to allow for easy distribution. For example, metroConnections recently assisted a client with an event attended by approximately 1,500 people, and each of the attendees had a personalized agenda/schedule and each attendee received ribbons to display on their badge. To make the onsite check-in process fast and seamless, metroConnections pre-stuffed all personalized materials before the conference. This allowed the team to keep the onsite resources minimal by having only a single item to hand out when the attendees arrived.

The registration counters should be clearly labeled with large headers or signs so your attendees know which counter to approach. No attendee wants to wait in line only to be told they're in the wrong location. Headers above the counters are ideal for larger groups; easel signs or other signage work for smaller venues/groups.

Common Trouble Areas

Despite the best laid plans, there are several common areas that are often overlooked during the planning phase.

- **Identify an emergency contact for attendees.** Although you hope to never use the information, it's important to have it should the need arise.
- **Request dietary restrictions, ADA or other special needs.** It is important to identify food allergies or specific needs. However, many planners have learned that an open text box on the registration form isn't wise as some attendees will use it as a chance to pick their menu. Opt instead to limit the requests to preferences you

can actually accommodate such as vegetarian, vegan, kosher, halal, allergies etc. It makes it clear to the attendee that you are concerned about dietary restrictions, but cannot provide a personalized meal for every conference attendee. ADA needs are equally important to identify and accommodate.

- **What is included.** Items that are not clear during registration (i.e., do attendees pay their own hotel fees, are meals included, etc.) can be frustrating for attendees. The more detail you can provide attendees within the registration, confirmation and event website, the more content those attendees will be.
- **Outline registration separation.** Should employees and attendees register in a separate manner? By separating registration counters by attendee type, you are able to keep the process moving. (Employee Registration, Sponsor/ Partner Registration, or Attendee Registration). Each of the attendee types usually receives varying registration materials, and they have their own set of needs and questions.
- **Asking too much.** While not asking enough questions can be problematic, asking too many questions can result in the registrant failing to complete the registration, and/or annoying them with a lengthy process. A planner should only ask for information that will be used and is applicable.
- **Providing directional assistance.** Avoid at all costs attendees walking through the venue confused and frustrated when they cannot find a room. Arranging for staff floating around the venue to assist attendees creates a warm and helpful experience. If you have a large group movement to buses for an offsite event, you should stage



Separate registration counters for different attendee types keeps the registration process moving in a fluid manner.

multiple staff along the pathway to keep attendees moving in the right direction.

Planning for Success

Since budgets are tight, staffing and travel costs seem like an easy area to cut in order to save money. However, if the attendee experience is compromised, is it worth the savings? One of the best ways to ensure success is to work with an expert who can help you through the online registration setup process, which may include sample forms and a suggested list of fields based on the event/meeting. This is where best practices and experience count. For example, incentive trips require a very different set of data from attendees than a user conference or national sales meeting.

Finally, be sure to look at your event from your attendees' viewpoint when planning the registration process, the event website and other conference/meeting communications. Walk in the attendee's shoes to determine that you have clearly outlined the details and information. This final step in the process will go a long way in ensuring a great attendee registration and set the stage for a memorable event experience. **C&IT**

“Recognizing that registering is frequently **the FIRST experience** the attendee will have, it sets the overall tone for the rest of event.”



Erin Thompson

is the director, Attend-eSource Services for metroConnections. A longtime veteran of the meeting planning industry, Thompson has nearly a decade of experience in the hotel industry handling reservations, front desk activities and management. Her 14-year tenure at metroConnections has focused on attendee management services and the technologies that go into the management of those attendees. With offices in Minnesota and Florida, metroConnections translates business goals and key messages into informative and memorable events that engage, inspire and move attendees. www.metroConnections.com

Planning Face-to-Face Events on the Links

Engage Attendees With Competitive Tourneys, Charity Events and Lasting Memories

By Patrick Simms

When a planner looks to stage an engaging recreational activity for internal meeting attendees, he or she can be in the more advantageous position of knowing specifically what would appeal to the group, through personal acquaintance with many participants and the corporate culture. But when the attendees are external to the company, such as clients, vendors or sponsors, it is typically best to look for an activity that has broad appeal, and in corporate America, golf has always been that “safe bet.” A tournament, as opposed to a casual outing, can make the time on the greens even more alluring with the prospect of prizes, or at least bragging rights. It’s a more intense, competitive experience that often serves as a meeting’s recreational highlight.

A Real Draw

The first step is to select a resort that is not only a capable tournament host, but a real draw for the external audience. Golfers will often look to play an exceptional course, and any non-golfers in the group will want a good selection of free-time options, whether spa, tennis or fine dining. Katie Malone, senior director of

The 11th hole at the River Course at Blackwolf Run, Kohler, Wisconsin, one of the two award-winning golf destinations associated with The American Club.



The Ocean Course Clubhouse at Kiawah Island Golf Resort, South Carolina, boasts spectacular views of the ocean and The Ocean Course's 18th green — site of the U.S. team victory in the 1991 Ryder Cup matches. (Inset) An exploding bunker shot on the 18th.

marketing for the Greater DC Region of Brookfield, one of the country's largest commercial real estate companies, found such a destination in Kiawah Island Golf Resort, located on a barrier island a few miles from Charleston, South Carolina. Brookfield's annual corporate client event draws about 65 attendees, nearly all of whom participate in the tournament. Having teed-off at renowned courses such as Whistling Straits and Pebble Beach Resorts, attendees would not be impressed with just any course, but "they love golfing at Kiawah, and they particularly love the Ocean Course because the scenery is hard to beat," Malone observes.

One of only four courses to have hosted each major PGA championship, the Ocean Course boasts more seaside holes than any other course in the Northern Hemisphere, with 10 right along the Atlantic. "I look at what our resort options are every year, and I pick a few that I think would fit our clientele and the way

we're trying to entertain them," Malone explains, "and (Kiawah Island) definitely fit the bill."

Great Golf Courses

Course quality and status are natural criteria for the Golf Channel Amateur Tour (GCAT), which features one-day tournaments for members (currently totaling about 7,000). "A named course or resort with prestige certainly has a better chance of doing well (in terms of drawing attendance)," says Frederick (Drake) Schunck, regional director of GCAT events. Part of the tour's "selling point" is the many "great golf courses that we can get players on, such as La Cantera, Pinehurst, Homestead or Barton Creek," Schunck says. A second aspect is to ensure the course is in top condition, and Schunck suggests relaying that desire to the resort. "The communication between the host golf course and the meeting planner or tournament coordinator is

probably the most important thing. The local pro or director of golf helps make sure the course is in good shape," he says. "That to me is what players really enjoy. It's paramount to people having a really good time."

This summer, the GCAT was held at La Cantera Hill Country Resort, in San Antonio, Texas, where players teed-off on the world-class Resort Course, a PGA Tour stop for 15 years. La Cantera is also home to the 18-hole Palmer Course, designed by the legendary Arnold Palmer.

Also key to GCAT participants having a good time is that they play their own ball all the way through. Participants compete in flights composed of players within about four handicap points of each other. Overall, they vary widely in experience level, from 20-plus handicap to 10-plus handicap to scratch golfers (those whose average score for a round is par or better). Nonetheless, a scramble format is eschewed in favor of individual

stroke play. "That's very unique when it comes to tours of this level," Schunck says. "If you're a mid-90s shooter you don't expect to be counting every single stroke." But the idea is to approximate a PGA tour experience. "We announce everybody on the first tee. They exchange scorecards, just like you would do at a PGA tour event. They go out in threesomes, and they're battling it out to see if a guy who's a 20 handicapper can perhaps shoot a 95."

An advantage to individual stroke play, one that corporate planners might well consider, is that players get a feeling of personally facing the challenges of a renowned course. "We find that if somebody's going to play a really nice or prestigious course like Pinehurst No. 2, they like to play their own ball," Schunck explains. Corporate golf events are typically about building camaraderie, and that can certainly arise with a scramble where everyone places his or her ball where the best ball is. "Our event's a little different because we think of those scramble events as outings; ours we consider tournaments." Individual stroke play can of course make the pace of play slower than a meeting schedule can accommodate. Thus, some groups opt for a modified scramble (or shamble), where each player hits a tee shot, the best one is selected, and the hole is played out from that position individually. The best of the four scores is kept.

Face Time on the Green

Participants of a charity golf tournament held by Fort Worth, Texas-based Range Resources play a shorter version of a scramble due to the number of golfers: 144 on each course at Nemaconlin Woodlands Resort. Mystic Rock is a PGA Tour tested, par 72 course high atop the Pennsylvania Alleghenies, and The Links is a par 70 course with views of Pennsylvania's Laurel Highlands. Customers and vendors of oil and gas company Range Resource Appalachia have participated in the tournament at Nemaconlin for five years in a row, and well more than 100 participate in clay shooting at the same event, notes Merilee Domanick, executive assistant with

Range Resources, who plans the event. Attendees are grouped into two foursomes on each hole, creating a convivial atmosphere. "The vendors want to network with our people," says Domanick. "They bring three people with them, and they pay for a fourth person from our company to play with them; they put on the registration form who they would like to golf with," she explains. "And we



do our best to match them with that person. So let's say someone who does production gas marketing wants to golf with someone from production gas marketing here; he'll put that name on the registration form. Oftentimes they've already talked to each other and they want to golf with that person, and we match them up if at all possible. If not, we at least try to match them up with someone from the department they're doing business with."

"With five hours on a golf course, you

get to know someone pretty well," remarks Malone. "We bring clients and Brookfield colleagues from all over the country, and you're not always able to see them (in person), so it's a great time to form those relationships and continue them. We have at least one Brookfield person in each foursome so they can get time with their clients."

Similarly, the Green Bay Packers place one current or alumni player in each foursome at the annual Golf Invitational for the team's corporate sponsors, creating a five-person scramble. "We try to mix it up so the same group isn't getting the same player every year," explains Tammi Schroeder, the Packers' partnership services coordinator. The event has been hosted for 12 years at Blackwolf Run, a 36-hole, Pete Dye-designed golf complex in Kohler, Wisconsin. "We have two premier players every year at the golf outing, and each of those premier players receives a donation to a charity of their choice," says Schroeder. "We have registration at 8 a.m., and we do a VIP autograph session with the two premier players for all of our clients who are golfing, so each person can come through with an item to get autographed. And Goodwill, who is our presenting non-profit sponsor, also receives a donation toward their nonprofit."

Branding Opportunities

Branding has always been integral to corporate golf tournaments, and the Green Bay Packers Golf Invitational features the event logo at each hole along with sponsor branding, e.g., "this hole presented by American Family Insurance." The leaderboard presents another branding opportunity.

At Mystic Rock, "they have a huge leaderboard because this is a championship golf course," notes Domanick, "and we bring a very large banner and they hang it up for us on the leaderboard. We offer our registrants the opportunity to get their name up on the leaderboard if they're one of the first eight to get their registrations in. So we have eight companies that get their name up there, and they like that."

Gift branding is yet another option.



The 7th hole at the Resort Course at La Cantera Hill Country Resort, San Antonio, Texas.

Kiawah Island Golf Resort is “more than willing to co-brand any item I want to purchase,” Malone says. “The Kiawah logo or Ocean Course logo would be in one place, and our Brookfield logo in another place, whether it’s a hat, shirt, sweater or accessory.”

Brookfield de-emphasizes the competitive aspect to tournament play by not keeping score or offering skills contests with prizes. “What happens on the course stays on the course,” Malone quips. “It’s not your traditional tournament. We just want them to have fun.”

Yet this approach is also founded in an understanding of what motivates participants. “They really just want to play the course,” she says. “And when you implement some of those (competitive elements like scoring and prizes) it might be a little distracting for them. To be out there on a beautiful, challenging course is their enjoyment.”

In contrast, the Green Bay Packers Golf Invitational is steeped in the competitive environment of professional sports and includes numerous skills contests, offering raffle prizes for the two longest putts and two longest drive holes, a closest to the pin, and a “beat the pro” contest.

Lasting Memories

At the end of the day, planners want a golf tournament to be a memorable experience, and scores and prizes tend to create that experience only for the winning players and teams. A simple way to promote lasting memories for all

players is through photography. Since the opportunity to tee off with a Packers player is one of the main attractions of the Invitational, the commemorative photography highlights that aspect. “We have a photographer that goes around and takes photos of each foursome with their current or alumni player,” Schroeder says. “We get those done as soon as we can and then go get them printed right away and put it in a photo frame. Prior to the players going out, each Packers player will sign four frames. So whatever foursome they join, we put that photo in the frame, and the participants get that as a keepsake.”

The Range Resources tournament is complemented by more extensive photography. “We take pictures all day, put them into a PowerPoint presentation that we run at dinner,” where the prize-winners are also announced, Domanick explains. Just like all aspects of a tournament, the approach to keepsake photography is tweaked over the years. “Two years ago I had a photographer come in to take shots of each foursome and frame them. And I found that some participants liked it and some didn’t; some didn’t even pick up their pictures,” she relates. “So we stopped doing that and instead started putting their pictures on slides and downloading all the PowerPoints onto flash drives. And then as soon as we get clear on the money that we’ve raised for charity, I have thank-you letters sent out to each company, giving them receipts of what they spent for tax purposes, and I include the flash drive

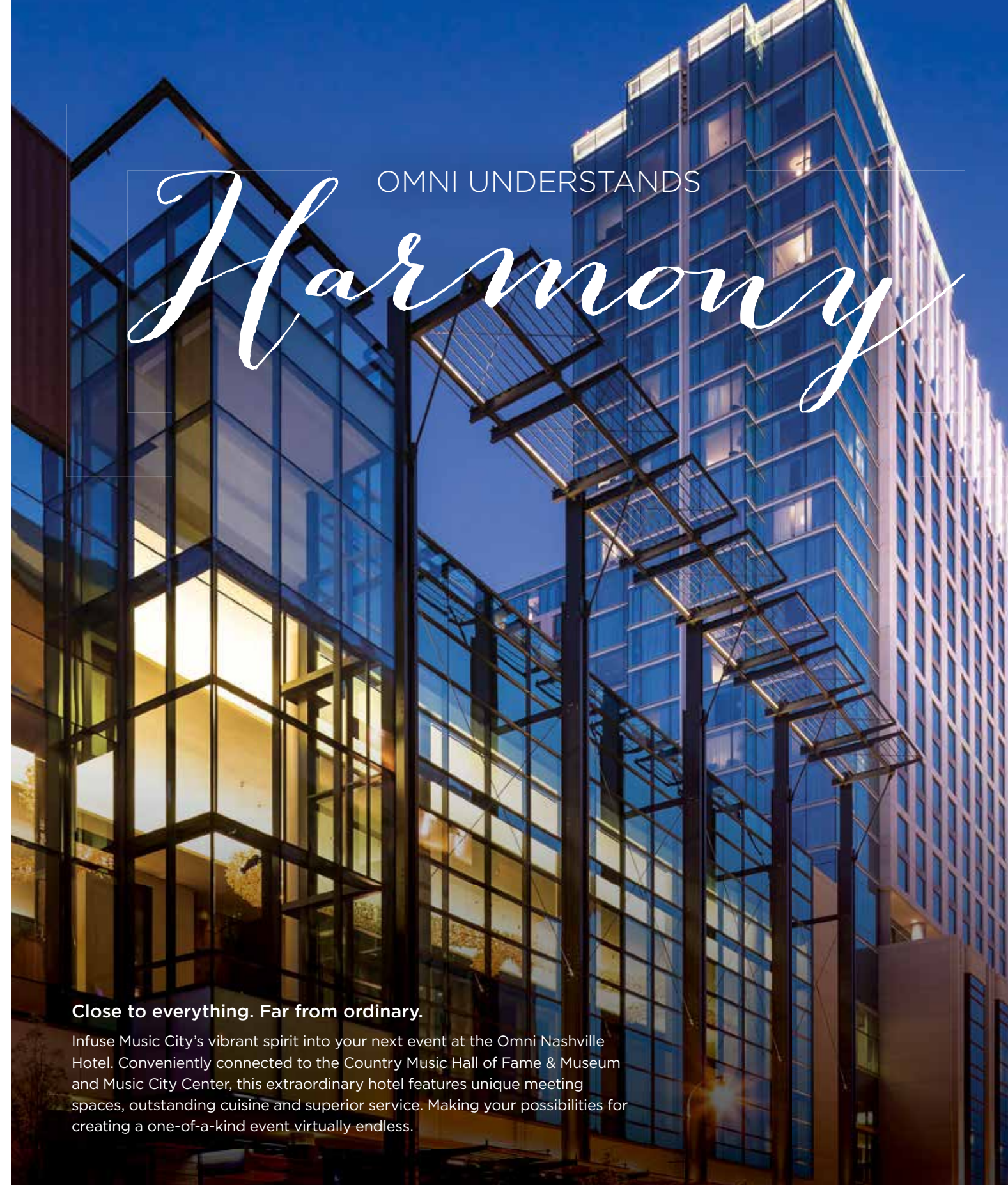
with all the pictures. They love it because they get to see their friends and random shots throughout the day of them taking swings and putting.”

When tournament participants are external to the host company, it is often especially important to impress them with a great experience. A top-level course, a tournament format suited to their skills and preferences, branded gifts and event photography all factor into creating that experience.

But there is a much more fundamental factor that determines the quality of the time on the greens, Malone suggests. “I think the key to having a successful golf tournament is to have golfers. I know that sounds odd, but when you have people who play sporadically, they don’t enjoy it as much. And when someone’s not enjoying it, it can make it a little frustrating for that player and those around them. But when everyone plays golf and enjoys it, and you give them a good course, they’re in heaven. It makes an impression that lasts a long time.”

Malone’s observation is an astute one from the perspective of ROI: Staging a tournament is an investment of money and time, particularly if done properly on an upscale course. And if attendees are not that serious about the sport, it’s best to think twice about whether to make that investment. There is no doubt that golf will appeal to a wide swath of attendees, but an elaborate tournament should arguably be reserved for groups who, like Brookfield’s clients, are true aficionados. **C&IT**

Credit: La Cantera Hill Country Resort



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Site Selection

Lakeside Resorts That Provide the Ultimate R&R for Distraction-free Executive Meetings and Retreats

For most meetings, a major flag hotel in a downtown setting in a good-sized city makes perfect sense. Among other things, such a selection brings convenience, familiarity and a range of nearby options that serve attendees well.

But there are some meetings that, by definition, require a more remote, serene environment, such as executive retreats or small leadership conferences.

And for those events, there is often no better destination than a spectacular waterfront location along one of America's pristine lakes, with a long list of enticing options spanning the country.

'Remote and Laidback'

When Honeywell Industrial Safety looks for a venue for its four-day mid-year sales and marketing conference held each July, office manager Judy Lewis prefers what she calls "a more relaxed atmosphere."

This year, she chose the 271-room Lake Lawn Resort in Delavan, Wisconsin. The locally owned, 130-year-old resort has a shoreline that spans two miles of

Delavan Lake and features 32,000 sf of meeting space, an 18-hole championship golf course, a full-service Calladara Spa, and three onsite restaurants.

Other amenities include a tennis court, lawn games and variety of water sports. Popular lakefront activities include yoga and volleyball.

In terms of R&R, Lake Lawn Resort fit the bill perfectly.

"For this particular meeting, which takes place in the summer, we always look for a hotel that is more remote and laid-back," Lewis says. Honeywell Industrial Safety wants a property "that is conducive to networking and getting to know each other. We also want a place where everything we need is on-property and our attendees stay on-property — not a hotel in downtown Chicago, where there are so many distractions," adds Lewis.

Free time for attendees is built into the meeting agenda in order to foster rest and rejuvenation. "We always have our meeting sessions end early in the afternoon," Lewis says. "Then we have dinner at 6:30, so people also have some free time in the evening to relax. On the

second day, we did a teambuilding event at the hotel, right on the lakefront so people could relax and be together as a group. And that event included a kayak relay race on the lake."

The hotel also built a lakeside bonfire every night. "Some attendees also participated in fishing off the pier, and others took boats out on the lake," Lewis says. "There were also some people who came in a day early and played golf. We also have runners in our group and there's a path along the lake that's very nice. And you can also ride a bike along the path."

For fun, Lewis hosted a casino night in a ballroom. "Everybody really enjoyed that," she says.

She also staged an outside dinner by the lake on the last night. "The hotel did a really nice job," she says. "That was definitely one of the highlights of the meeting."

After the meeting, Lake Lawn Resort generated very positive feedback from attendees. "Everybody really liked the ho-

The Resort at Squaw Creek provides year-round recreational opportunities for attendees, such as boating on Lake Tahoe.

By John Buchanan

Water, Water

Everywhere...



The 271-room Lake Lawn Resort in Delavan, Wisconsin, has plenty of R&R and teambuilding options for attendees including yoga, volleyball, kayaking, biking, shuffleboard, softball, basketball, tennis, horseshoes as well as boating and water sports on the lake.

tel,” Lewis says. “They said this was our best meeting ever. So based on that feedback, we’ll definitely consider going back.”

The Lakes of New York

Jessica Tamburrini, CMP, is senior meeting planner at Victor, New York-based Constellation Brands Inc., whose prestigious wine and beer brands include Robert Mondavi, Kim Crawford and Corona. When she wants a venue that is nearby but removed from distractions, she opts for the 134-room Inn on the Lake Resort & Conference Center at Canandaigua Lake, one of New York state’s fabled Finger Lakes. For small groups of management executives, Inn on the Lake offers eight luxurious lakefront jacuzzi suites. The property features two dining options, The Shore Restaurant and The Sand Bar Lakeside Bar & Grille, as well as a lounge and fitness studio. A special amenity is a lakeside tent for special events, such as receptions or lakeside dinners.

Nearby offsite venues include the New York Wine & Culinary Center, Finger Lakes Gaming and Racetrack, and Bristol Mountain Ski Resort.

In recent years, Inn on the Lake has become a go-to venue for Constellation Brands. “I am just one of the meeting planners for the company that uses it,” Tamburrini says. “A number of our other planners also use it as a venue. I person-

ally use it over the course of the year as many as a dozen times.”

Why is the hotel so popular?

In addition to meeting the precise requirements for a number of her smaller meetings, Tamburrini says, the old-school lakefront offers a unique and charming ambience. “It’s an inn rather than a hotel,” she says. “It has old wood finishes, for example. The rooms are very simple, but they’re very quaint.”

The fact that Inn on the Lake is a quaint, laidback resort in a fairly remote location is perceived as a clear benefit for a number of her meetings, Tamburrini says. “We want to keep people engaged in the meeting and

Yet another benefit of Inn on the Lake — and a feature that Constellation Brands requires for all of its meetings — is that the hotel’s restaurants and bars stock the company’s brands, such as Mondavi wines and Corona beer.

For her most recent meeting, Tamburrini used the nearby New York Wine & Culinary Center for a cooking-based teambuilding event led by a trained chef. For after-hours recreation, she bought out the upper deck of the Canandaigua Lady for a dinner cruise on the lake.

“Another unique aspect of the Inn on the Lake is a great outdoor bar/restaurant area that generates a lot of buzz for happy hour,” Tamburrini says. “They also



“We want to keep people engaged in the meeting and have fewer distractions, so it’s very convenient to have everything we need right there at the inn and be located on a nice lake.”

Jessica Tamburrini, CMP, Senior Meeting Planner
Constellation Brands Inc., Victor, NY

have fewer distractions, so it’s very convenient to have everything we need right there at the inn and be located on a nice lake. It’s a self-contained environment, so there’s really no need to go offsite.”

It also offers a serene setting with fresh air for attendees on their breaks. “You can take a walk on one of the paths around the lake,” Tamburrini says, and relax and enjoy the scenery.”

have a beautiful tent right on the lake that holds about 250 people. So we used the tent for some nice evening dinners, which we have done before.” The tent is perfect for refreshing lakeside receptions, she adds.

All in all, she says, Inn on the Lake offers the perfect mix of amenities for a relaxing, enjoyable meeting.

Another prized lakefront location in

New York state is Lake Placid, site of the 1980 Winter Olympics. A meeting planner, who wishes to remain anonymous, selected for her executive retreat the Mirror Lake Inn Resort and Spa. The locally owned property on Mirror Lake features three dining establishments: The AAA Four Diamond The View Restaurant; the casual Taste Bistro and Bar and the indoor/outdoor pub at the Cottage Café. Each afternoon, the hotel offers afternoon tea and chocolate chip cookies. It also features a world-class spa and salon.

Like the other planners we interviewed for this article, the planner chose a remote, quiet venue for her meetings because of their high-end nature and need for relaxation, since her attendees often work in a high-stress environment. Many of the 131 units spread among three buildings and seven acres feature stunning views of the lake. In addition, guests can enjoy the resort’s private beach or cruise on Mirror Lake in style using one of the boats that the resort provides on a complimentary basis.

‘A Spectacular Place’

Every year for the last eight years, Kimberly Egelhoff, meeting planner for Abercrombie & Fitch in New Albany, Ohio, has used the Basin Harbor Club on Lake Champlain in Vergennes, Vermont for one of the company’s most important meetings — its annual three-day retreat each October for about 300 regional and district managers from all over the world, with about 30 percent of attendees arriving from outside the U.S.

Set on 700 acres, the 128-year-old, family-owned Basin Harbor Club, which is open seasonally from early May through late October, features four guest houses and lodges, as well as 77 individual cottages that dot the scenic shoreline. The resort includes an 18-hole golf course, clay and Har Tru tennis courts, a fitness center, four restaurants, water sports and nature trails. It also boasts a Wine Spectator Award-winning wine list.

Like the other planners, Egelhoff says

a major reason for her use of the property is its peace and quiet.

“There are actually a lot of reasons why we like it so much,” Egelhoff says. “But one major one is logistical. We can take over the entire resort, which we do. And we can do anything on-property that we want. They are very accommodating. And no matter what kind of crazy thing we come up with to do, they accommodate us every year and make it happen.”

For example, as a teambuilding exercise, Egelhoff’s attendees have built soap box derby cars and raced them down a nearby hill. She also has staged a resort-wide scavenger hunt based on the TV show “The American Race.”

Boating on the lake is a particularly popular free-time activity. A number of attendees also manage to get in a round of golf.

The R&R aspect of the meeting in a secluded, relaxing location is very important to attendees, Egelhoff says, because immediately after the meeting comes the holiday season, the busiest and most stressful time of the year for attendees.

“They could not love the place more, because they really get away from everything right before a very stressful time,” Egelhoff says. “It also gives them a chance to be with their peers and relax and just enjoy how beautiful the place is, especially at that time of year.”

As a planner, Egelhoff also raves about the service she gets every year from Basin Harbor Club.

“In addition to the location, the people at the venue are the most important part of any event,” she says. “And the staff at Basin Harbor Club are the best, bar none. And that’s true of both the owners and the staff. I absolutely love them.”

In fact, the property is so spectacular that attendees often go back on their

(Top to bottom) The Basin Harbor Club on Vermont’s Lake Champlain; dining on the resort’s north dock. At the Mirror Lake Inn Resort and Spa, the possibilities are endless — including this atypical setting for meetings; a view of their private beach.





Credit: Jeff Dow, North Lake Tahoe Visitors Bureau



Credit: The Resort at Squaw Creek



Credit: Jeff Dow, North Lake Tahoe Visitors Bureau

From the scenic pleasures of the lake at dusk, to the amenities and services of the Resort at Squaw Creek, to the abundant recreational options, Lake Tahoe is an ideal waterfront destination for executive retreats and leadership conferences.

own. “We’ve even had people get married there,” Egelhoff says. “It’s just a gorgeous property that holds a special place in our hearts. It’s just an ideal setting for a meeting.”

‘A Well-Kept Secret’

For 25 years, Dallas, Texas-based Marvin F. Poer Company, a privately held property tax consulting firm, has been holding its most important annual meeting, a conference for its senior management and top salespeople from 14 U.S. offices that draws about four dozen attendees, in a resort setting. One reason: a golf tournament that has become a much-anticipated tradition.

For the company’s most recent meeting, Anne Lucas, executive assistant to the CEO, chose the AAA Four Diamond, 405-room Resort at Squaw Creek, located near Squaw Valley. The resort, operated by highly respected Destination Hotels & Resorts, features a golf course, tennis courts and spa.

“In the past, we have been to the south (shore) of Lake Tahoe and stayed at Harrah’s,” Lucas says. “So we wanted to go back to Lake Tahoe. Everyone loves the location. But nobody knew about the north shore. It’s a well-kept secret.”

The North Lake Tahoe CVB assisted Lucas in finding the property. “We worked with a gentleman named

Jason Neary, and he did a great job for us,” she says.

The site selection is especially important to this particular meeting, Lucas says. “One reason is that the average tenure with the company of attendees is probably 25+ years. And they are all of our senior leaders from around the country. The meeting only takes place once a year and part of it is a sort of reward. It’s also the only time of year where everyone gets together. It also includes our golf tournament and awards

of contemporary cuisine. It features a private dining room. “It’s known for its spectacular setting,” Lucas says. “You can watch the sun set over the lake. And we also chartered a boat for an hour-long cruise before dinner.” Garwood’s also catered the food for the cruise. We just had a great evening,” Lucas says.

The awards banquet, hosted at the hotel, was another highlight of the meeting.

Both Lucas and her attendees gave the Resort at Squaw Creek top marks for its performance.

“We do a post-conference survey on



“(The Resort at Squaw Creek) is known for its spectacular setting. You can watch the sun set over the lake. And we also chartered a boat for an hour-long cruise before dinner.”

Anne Lucas, Executive Assistant to the CEO
Marvin F. Poer Company, Dallas, TX

banquet, which are very significant events for us. So when we take all of that into account, we just want to do it in a very nice place.”

At Resort at Squaw Creek, about 30 of the 48 attendees played in the opening day golf tournament. Others went to the spa or just relaxed in the refreshing mountain setting.

A highlight of the meeting was a lakeside dinner at Garwood’s, an upscale restaurant serving a mixed menu

every aspect of the meeting,” Lucas says. “And the comments we got on Resort at Squaw Creek included things like ‘The accommodations and food were excellent,’ ‘Golf was superb,’ and ‘This was the best annual meeting I’ve been to in years with the firm — excellent choice.’”

Lucas’ positive feedback echoes the sentiments of most attendees who have had the opportunity to retreat to a serene waterfront destination for a healthy dose of renewal and reinvigoration. **C&IT**



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Experiential Meeting Design

How to Map an Eye-opening Journey to Greater Value and ROI

By Gabi Logan



We all know that meetings can achieve potent outcomes by bringing people face-to-face, whether the focus is learning, networking or strategizing. But figuring out how to outdo yourself year after year and meeting after meeting is a topic that keeps planners' eyes open at every event they attend and bookshelves full of the latest tomes on interactive education techniques.

"Anything that I read about that allows people to be more engaged in the discussion and part of it while getting instant feedback is so important," says Laurie Kemp, CMP, CMM, director of client events and marketing services at Dallas, Texas-based Essilor of America, a leading manufacturer and wholesale distributor of optical lenses in the United States. "The entire team is always looking to make our events more efficient and more productive."

In response, a new meeting design

trend is slowly making waves due to highly visible — and easily measurable — results, though it takes some time to implement. Based on the larger design thinking trend that crosses numerous industries, experiential meeting design offers planners a method of looking at their meetings and mapping their guest experiences to reliably provide laser-focused results.

Experiential Meeting Design Foundations

When experiential meeting design was first being codified, the time was ripe for planners to have a tool to consistently promote attendee engagement in meetings. According to the 2012 "American Express Spending & Saving Tracker" study, 48 percent of travelers seek more meaningful experiences when they travel.

Prevailing meeting goals once looked more at what the meeting or incentive

could accomplish generally or for the company. But today ROI is determined on many more levels. Driving greater value to meet attendees' individual needs is paramount in justifying the expense and inclusion of each individual.

"Many years ago, at another company, I wanted to measure how a customer event affected call rate," says Austin, Texas-based Tracey B. Smith, CMP, CMM, curator of education at the Hive Network. "Were people learning enough that they didn't need to call us for support? But people thought that was too complicated then."

To help meeting planners better meet increased expectations with limited resources while focusing on providing an outstanding experience for attendees, Maritz Travel developed its experiential meeting design program. "If everyone is delivering high quality, what else is there?" says Greg Bogue, vice president of experience design at

Fenton, Missouri-based Maritz Travel Company, who co-presented "Explore Best Principles for Experiential Meeting Design" at PCMA's Convening Leaders this year. "There aren't more destinations to take people to.

"Experiential meeting design evolved from a number of things happening in the meeting and travel space," he continues. "We looked at what we could do from an engagement perspective in areas like neuroscience to create tactics to drive greater engagement. We're beginning to employ the concept of design thinking where we change a strong view of the guest experience and get clients to think in terms of what their guests would want. What we've done is we've really begun to put together a very clear methodology we put our clients through.

"My specific history is in corporate marketing, and I've been in the creative business for years, blending a number of disciplines and an intense focus on people," Bogue explains. "I have a passion for engaging peoples' emotions, but from a business perspective, we usually focus on taking peoples' emotions out of businesses, but that's not how you elevate the experiences guests have."

Experiential meeting design evolved from design thinking, also known as human-centered design, because it is a type of design that puts people, and individual needs specifically, first. In neuroscience, it is called perspective-centered design, because the diverse viewpoints of each individual inform how they experience the world. As a result, experiential meeting design both engages guests in inherently personal ways and evolves over time.

The practice revolves heavily around management and meeting staff exploring the perspectives of other participants in their meetings and events. "Perspective-taking is putting yourself in someone else's shoes, but that means you have to take your own shoes off first," says Bogue.

"Sometimes I think we overthink things, or we do it over and over the same way without breaking it down to basics, without saying what do we want to communicate and how do we make

sure attendees are engaged and part of the overall outcome," says Kemp. "I was with the same company for 13 years, and I came here a year ago, and we have new leadership over our sales team and we're saying, 'Okay, let's brainstorm: how do we do this?'"

"To put yourself in the shoes of the guest, you have to remove the lens that you look through and look at it through their eyes," Bogue says. "When I ask people, 'When was the last time you registered for your event like a guest who had to register?' they have no clue what

with meetings and events: announcing, attracting, anticipating, arriving, entering, engaging, exiting and extending.

As part of the experiential meeting design process, planners and other stakeholders decide how they want the guest to experience each stage. For instance, rather than planning how to disperse the initial announcement about a meeting or event, experiential meeting design encourages planners to begin by thinking of how they want their future attendees to experience the announcement.

However, the road to creating this at-

"Sometimes...we do it over and over the same way without breaking it down to basics, without saying what do we want to communicate and how do we make sure attendees are engaged and part of the overall outcome."

LAURIE KEMP, CMP, CMM
Director of Client Events and Marketing Services, Essilor of America, Dallas, TX



that experience is like. You have to walk their journey to understand their journey." This "taking off your own shoes" is the first — and often most eye-opening — step in the experiential meeting design process.

The Design Process

One of the key ways experiential meeting design differs from other approaches is that it starts long before the meeting and also continues after it ends. Most events follow a natural course from initial conversations to post-event paperwork and survey reviews, but experiential meeting design incorporates several additional steps into their guest and host journey.

Starbucks, a fan favorite the world over, has mapped its guest experience into five stages: anticipate, enter, engage, exit and reflect. Experiential meeting design takes things further with an eight-stage guest roadmap that includes every interaction stage attendees have

tendee roadmap begins much earlier and more simply, with an exercise Bogue calls "one word." "In a lab-type environment in the sessions we do, we try to get a broad group of stakeholders, including the business owner, event planning team, a marketing person or two and someone involved in content, and we challenge them to define their program in a single word," he explains.

"To get a group to distill their program down to a single word is kind of fun, and once they get there, we guide them to the idea that this is their design standard," Bogue continues. "If they are doing things that don't line up with that, we say, 'Stop it! Don't do that!' Our event blueprint methodology allows you to dive in and understand an organization's purpose, values and brand, because every event experience is an expression of your brand and purpose."

As a result, the process can be time-consuming to implement the first time around. "You can get through it in min-



“If you’re working with a team, whether a department or a committee, you have to consider their thoughts, and it can slow you down, but once you come to consensus, the result is stronger.”

TRACEY B. SMITH, CMP, CMM
Curator of Education, The Hive Network, Austin, TX

utes if you’ve done it before, but it took us a while to first get through,” says Smith. “Then we said, ‘Oh, I see how to do this.’ It’s about formalizing how you think about it in the first place.”

Dana Weaver, CIS, senior manager of marketing services at Bloomington, Illinois-based Growmark Inc., a regional cooperative providing agronomy, energy, facility planning and logistics products and services, as well as grain marketing and risk management services in more than 40 states and Ontario, Canada, has applied some stages of experiential design to his meetings, but has yet to do the process for an entire meeting. “I sit on the client advisory board with Maritz, and Greg (Bogue) made a presentation to the board and it intrigued me,” he explains. “It was a perfect fit, and it seemed like we were missing an enormous opportunity to make meetings more meaningful, memorable and fruitful.

“Within the last year, we’ve started talking about the eight phases,” Weaver says. “We incorporated a phase or two in a meeting last year, and it resonated with me that we haven’t moved much since we began, so we’re going to really put some flesh on the bones this year. It’s time we quit saying what we want to do and actually do it.”

For his January program, a high-end sales and marketing meeting that has run every year since 1992, Weaver is focusing on improving the arrival section of his guest roadmap. “They just had a long day of travel, and we were just trying to get them off to the rooms before, but now we’re trying to make it so that as soon as they arrive, it’s not that we’re wearing them out any more, but we really want to energize them and make them see it’s going to be a great event.

“In Hawaii for 2015, we want to move beyond the lei experience as they get off the bus or the pineapple drink when they get to the hotel, and come up with the magic ingredient. When they arrive, how can we make it something they’ve never experienced before? Something unusual but pleasant. And how can we make it something they’re going to be talking about for months?”

“During January, when they’re attending, they’re four months into their current year, so while we’ve got them there, we have a prime opportunity not only to bait the hook but to reel it in to say, ‘Wouldn’t you love to be a part of

tical at first that this was going to be a worthwhile experience when we started on the first day on the unifying design principle,” says Bogue. “But he came up on the second day and said, ‘I really believe now that we have a process we can go through to create better meetings. I feel like I could stand up in front of the senior executives and say we now have a method for creating events.’

“At the end of the first day, it feels like hard work, and as we walk them through a process that drives communication, there’s an aha moment when they settle on a word that is a great experience,” he continues. “With one group, we took

“To put yourself in the shoes of the guest, you have to remove the lens that you look through and look at it through their eyes.”

GREG BOGUE, Vice President of
Experience Design
Maritz Travel Company, Fenton, MO



this next year?” and send them home thinking: I have eight more months, and I want to be back here next year.”

Results Come on Both Sides of the Table

While experiential meeting design is ostensibly focused on the guest experience, many planners and companies have experienced positive side effects for their own internal management.

“Eight weeks ago I was working with one of our clients, and the executive who owned the sales meetings was skep-

the whole idea of exiting and how we can make that happen in a way that is more profound, and what came out of it was so simple.

“We had the executive come to the airport, stand in front of the bus, and say thank you to each attendee individually before they left,” he says. “It’s profound. People did not expect it. They expect the executive sneaking out in the sedan late the night before, not sneaking ahead to the airport to wait for the guests.” Experiences like this heighten attendee experience, but also

touch upper management through the power their gesture has on attendees.”

The process of walking through the guest experience can be both one of the biggest game-changers and one of the best bonding experiences for event staff and management, according to Smith. “We struggled on what the stakeholder responses were or their issues were, and we started negotiating with each other,” says Smith. “It was kind of funny to say it could be this and it could be that, and it took us longer because we were doing that.

“If you’re working with a team, whether a department or a committee, you have to consider their thoughts, and it can slow you down, but once you come to consensus, the result is stronger,” Smith continues. “I tend to do things by myself, but when other people share their ideas, I often think, ‘Oh yeah, I could consider that.’ Some people had ideas I hadn’t thought of. It’s absolutely valuable to have a fresh set of eyes,” she says.

Smith also found that getting more people involved in the planning process has created extra buy-in from internal stakeholders. “It’s like fantasy football. You pick from what’s available to put together your team, and it creates a sense of ownership in what’s happening. In the modern world of peer-to-peer connections, whether at a staff meeting or conference, that sense of ownership gives another perspective.”

Applying These Principles in Your Meetings Today

While Bogue walks through an extensive program over a number of sessions with his clients, you can easily implement many experiential meeting principles and techniques on your own in the time frame that fits best for your group.

Weaver found working through parts of the program in bits and pieces more digestible for his group. “What worked for me and might for others is to do it in bite-sized chunks. Get one or two areas you need to beef up. One thing we have done is the exit, because that’s the last thing they’re going to remember as

they leave this great destination and program. The first year, pick one or two you want to focus on, and it becomes easier to incorporate into other parts of the guest experience.

“During the engagement stage, to get them more engaged during the awards, rather than have a gift sent to the room after the ceremony, they went to another area of the resort where they could choose from things like a laptop to Bose stereo systems to 42-inch TVs to sunglasses. Then, rather than have them

better understand where their attendees are coming from and seamlessly tailor the engagement portion of the guest journey to their needs. “When we did our national sales meeting last year, we did a survey ahead of time, because we’ve been B2B and we’re moving B2C so we focused training on our brands to our sales team,” she says. “You can have the same group and the same presentation and some people will always say it was too technical and others will think it wasn’t technical enough, so we sur-



“One thing we have done is the exit, because that’s the last thing they’re going to remember as they leave this great destination and program.”

DANA WEAVER, CIS, Senior Manager
Marketing Services
Growmark Inc., Bloomington, IL

have to haul it back home, we had it simply shipped to their house, so their gift was waiting for them when they returned home. Otherwise, when you give gifts, maybe they liked it and maybe they didn’t. It’s not as motivating.”

For this first time, Smith is experimenting this year with mapping her guest experience not through each of the eight experiential meeting design stages, but from a simplified approach for each kind of stakeholder in which you map what behavior they have before, what you want them to have after, and how you make changes to get there.

“It makes you walk through what is happening for host and the attendee,” she says. “What you get from that is a roadmap for measuring the return on investment. You’re looking at your cost as well as revenue, or if you don’t have revenue, how the business will be affected by behaviors. It’s a good way to set up ROI measurement because it’s not always measured in values and cents. It’s more how they feel and how you change their behavior.”

Kemp has used pre-event surveys to

veyed them ahead of time asking questions about our brands.

“We assigned them to breakouts based on the results on the survey, and they didn’t necessarily know how they were divided, but they were all able to get more out of the group,” she explains. “We have advanced individuals together, and groups that weren’t as familiar on the products do a deeper dive.” As her initial group of sales staff was nearly 500 strong, breaking that group into four groups of 125–150 people each allowed each group to zero in on its members’ knowledge base.

Moving Beyond the Hype

For now, experiential meeting design is a buzzword. But its goal — heightening attendee engagement and providing better and more measurable ROI — is clearly in line with what planners need and want, so it’s unlikely to stay just a buzzword for too long. With foundations in psychology and neuroscience, it’s likely to move quickly from the hot new thing to a standard strategic meeting management practice. **C&IT**

Recipe for a **Successful Event** Creative, Engaging Dining Experiences Leave Attendees Satisfied With More Than Just the Meal By Karen Brost

Denice Waldhuetter, vice president of PEC Meetings Company headquartered in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, never underestimates the power of keeping attendees well fed. “Food and beverage is such an engaging entity of every occasion,” she notes. “(We’re always asking) How can we make it unique? How can we make it different?”

One way her company makes meal functions stand out is by creating a series of interactive food stations where attendees can observe their meals being prepared, choose their seasonings and do a little sampling to help them decide what they would like to eat. She also says that placing food stations in strategic locations on an exhibit floor can help move traffic through the show floor. “They’ll head for the food,” she explains. “It is definitively the driver.”



A wine-tasting experience at Sunriver Resort in Oregon. Sunriver's executive chef Travis Taylor (left) notes that groups are focusing less on price and more on great food selection.

Waldhuetter describes another interactive element her company is using. “We are doing a coffee station where we’re having a barista at the station. We can’t have a barista preparing every single cup of coffee, but they’re there engaging people. They’re talking about where the beans are from and how they’re roasted, and people are absolutely loving it.”

She’s also seeing a trend toward chefs making themselves available to interact with guests. She says the chefs may engage the customers by leading them to one of the food stations and describing how the dish is being prepared. “People love having the ability to speak one-on-one with the chef.”

Waldhuetter says that groups are moving away from having formal sit-down dinners unless there’s a specific reason for it, such as a presentation by a keynote speaker. She notes that this is especially true when a goal of the event is networking. In that case, having a series of food stations makes it easier for attendees to interact.

As the foodie trend has taken off with the proliferation of celebrity chefs and popular television cooking shows, attendees have become savvier and more health-conscious than ever before.

Travis Taylor, executive chef at Sunriver Resort, A Destination Hotel in Sunriver, Oregon, explains. “We’re seeing group requests focus on dishes made from healthy foods that cater to a range of dietary needs. (We’re offering) more diversity, more options on a buffet, more snack-throughout-the-day options vs. a 30-minute lunch window. We’re also seeing groups putting food selection vs. price as the primary driver of their menu planning. In years past, groups were very price sensitive and would care less about the food they were offering than the price. Today, that’s changed, and we see meeting planners and group heads selecting a menu based on diversity and their groups’ dietary needs.”

Thinking Outside (the Meeting Room) Box

Andrea Strauss, president of Classic Conferences in Hackensack, New Jersey, came up with a creative setting for an opening night reception she planned for a pharmaceutical company’s national sales meeting in February. The event had 1,800 attendees and was held at the Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin Hotel in Orlando. The group bought out the 758-room Swan as well as two-thirds of its sister property, the 1,509-room Dolphin.

Strauss worked with the hotel to have her event on the causeway that runs between both properties. “The property is

really big, and I felt that it was a great way of tying both properties together so they’re treated as one property,” she says. She wanted to hold the event outdoors since the attendees would be spending their days indoors in meetings. “The hotel was great in working with me on this,” she added, noting that not all properties would have been up to the challenge of bringing in the power, lighting and other elements that would be required to host the event. The theme she chose was a wine and art festival, and since the group was so large, they also arranged to use the Lakeside Terrace at the Swan for additional seating.

She notes, “This was not an inexpensive evening, but it was so worth it. I basically had one big, clean canvas, and that’s what I had to work with, so I had to bring everything in. We had all kinds of food stations and highboy tables, and the food and the wine was indigenous



Denice Waldhuetter
Vice President
PEC Meetings Company
Milwaukee, WI

“People love having the ability to speak one-on-one with the chef.”

to Florida. It was really nice.” She also booked a variety of “walk-around entertainers,” including musicians, caricature artists, palm readers and a stilt-walker. Strauss did another event for the group at Disney’s Hollywood Studios, which she said was fantastic, but with the causeway party, she was able to avoid the cost of arranging ground transportation.

Proof of the success of the causeway party came on the group’s evaluation forms. “It was the highlight of the trip,” Strauss notes. “I honestly thought it would be Hollywood Studios, and it wasn’t. That’s a really big endorsement. I think they should do them more often.”



Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin Hotel's award-winning pastry chef Laurent Branlard works a dessert station, while the libations flow at a Causeway Party bar.



Credits: Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin Hotel

The Local Focus

Waldhuetter says that the farm-to-table (also known as farm-to-fork) concept continues to be popular. "I don't think it's anything new, but it's trending in an upward way. People love to know that their food items at a specific location have been grown and prepared locally. They like to learn a little bit more about these artisans that have prepared these foods, and it just makes it a much more engaging experience."

"It has been taken to a new level," explains Rick Shell, executive chef at Suncadia, A Destination Hotel in Cle Elum, Washington. "Today, many of our conference diners are travelers and desire and demand local ingredients. Staying true to local growing seasons goes a long way with ensuring menu continuity. If possible, onsite gardens, no matter how small or large, add a strong presence to ensure that food practices and quality are adhered to. Having your fingers in the dirt gives you more respect for the product that you work with, and in return, gives the guest a great dining experience and memory."

Josh Berry, executive chef at Stowe Mountain Lodge, A Destination Hotel in Stowe, Vermont, puts a unique twist on locally sourced foods. "Here at Stowe Mountain Lodge, we are

experimenting and seeing success with 'globally local' menu items. Guests come to Stowe Mountain Lodge to experience the best in Vermont cuisine. We provide a unique dining experience by using products from Vermont purveyors and farmers, but then making them interesting with the addition of an exotic, far-away spice blend."

He shared an example. "I love seasoning New England venison with Ras el hanout, a Moroccan spice blend. The warming spices in the Ras el hanout (cinnamon, clove, cardamom, ginger, mace) foil the gamey flavor of the venison, and it works perfect! (We do) the same for our local cheese displays with our groups. We also grind fennel into our mustards for

that little something special. Star anise is blended into our fruit chutney, or Italian white truffle is added to Vermont Mac & Cheese. This is not the fusion cuisine of the '90s; this is the enhanced local cuisine of our times."

The Balancing Act

While the trend is toward offering more healthful menu choices at meetings, not all attendees are on board with that idea. "Our company has found that we do have to offer healthier items," Waldhuetter notes, "but on our evaluations, people are still going to complain if they don't have their bacon-wrapped water chestnuts. We certainly want to meet all the needs of our attendees, and one of the things we're looking at, too, with the less healthy options, particularly on breakfast buffets, is that we're requesting that the hotels cut the doughnuts and pastries in half. Individuals that are more health conscious, but don't necessarily want to cut out a nice jelly-filled dough-

nut, can have an option of tasting it or having a little morsel of it."

Tom Garcia is vice president and general manager of Eaglewood Resort & Spa in Itasca, Illinois, an IACC-certified conference center that is part of the Benchmark Hotels & Resorts portfolio. "The experience that we try to create is unique, creative, memorable and thoughtful," he says, adding that for coffee breaks, for example, they are using fewer processed or prepackaged foods. We're putting things out that are warm from the oven that are good for you, that are creative, such as vegetables that are grilled. We're doing fun pizzas with beet crusts, or tamale crust pizza. We're trying to give our guests a little bit more excitement when they come to the break." His team is now developing a concept for fruit sushi to be served at breaks. "Instead of it being fish in the sushi, we're going to put things like papaya or kiwi for color, or maybe banana. They'll be wrapped up in our seaweed and laid out just like sushi, and we'll maybe add a strawberry coulis or some type of coulis that will add the flavor so that it not only looks good to your eyes but you feel good about eating it."

"What we try to do is that thoughtfulness, like the superfoods or the antioxidants. We try to make sure the proteins are there and the healthy fats. There's a lot of labeling that we do here. We want to be very transparent to our guests and keep up with healthy trends. We want foods that are healthful and high in flavor. For locally sourced, sustainable food, we try to bring the story to the table: "This is our region. It's a local item. Here's how we're preparing it." He noted that in the future, Eaglewood would like to take this transparency a step further by labeling items with their nutritional content.

While offering healthful choices is undeniably important, Garcia also acknowledges that some groups still want their sweet treats. "We still have fun stuff. If somebody says 'We've really got to have

M&Ms or we really need to have some gummy bears,' I tell our chef, 'Just make it small.' They're still there, just not in large containers."

Addressing Special Requests

Waldhuetter says that there is a growing need to address food allergies. "It is definitely something we have to pay attention to every day now. There were always food allergies, but this has really

In response to the high demand for gluten-free menus, PEC recently did a buffet that was all gluten-free. She said that it spared the expense of having to prepare two versions of each dish, and they were able to do it without compromising the quality of the food.

As Shell explains, "With today's busy lifestyles and work schedules, food preferences, diets and food allergies must be on the forefront of menu writing and



Executive chef Josh Berry offers "globally local" menu selections at Stowe Mountain Lodge, A Destination Hotel in Vermont.

escalated in the last three to four years." She says that her company learned how to handle this issue the hard way. When they were working on a convention for 3,000+ attendees, the registration form asked attendees if they had any food allergies. What PEC got back, instead, was a list of every food item the attendees didn't want to eat. "So what we do now is when we're asking for a food allergy, we term it better." They now ask attendees if they have a doctor-diagnosed food allergy and list the top five, such as peanuts, lactose, gluten, etc.

They also ask attendees if they want a vegetarian option. "Otherwise, we will be inundated at the time of the event," she describes. "If we're going to do a food buffet or do passed hors d'oeuvres or a food station, we are going to have meatless options." As for any attendees who may have any other special dietary requests, it is up to them to make their needs known.

development. We pay attention to these diets and dining habits when writing our culinary menus. We also take it a step further...by creating special dietary and allergy menus for our guests to order from. This creates a sense of respect and confidence for guests in their dining requests and shows that we are comfortable and equipped to handle such requests."

Keeping It Fresh

Garcia stresses the importance of keeping menus fresh and exciting for the benefit of repeat guests. "We've got about a 60 percent return rate on our guests that come back. They want to see new things. You have to keep thinking of the next thing."

"Our key is really putting thought into the food and giving creativity back to the chef. My chefs study. We read a lot of literature. We attend shows. This



Raw bar on ice at The Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin Hotel.

year, we're doing the James Beard in December. In our company (Benchmark), we've created what's called the Culinary Council. It's a group of five chefs that brainstorm." He explains that the chefs come from different regions of the U.S., so they represent different types of cuisine. "(We tell them) 'Let's see how we can put all of this together and share it with our other properties throughout our portfolio.'"

I'll Drink to That!

Trends in cocktail receptions also change with the times. Waldhuetter likes to make cocktail receptions interactive and engaging by creating a specialty drink that is indigenous to the area where the meeting is being held. "For instance, if we were in Arizona, we might do something with cactus juice. In Wisconsin, we're known for what's called an Old Fashioned. We also create 'sippers' — they're just in a smaller glass. It's more of a taste, and if they enjoy that type of cocktail, they can have the bartender make them one." She

Andrea Strauss
President
Classic Conferences
Hackensack, NJ



"We had all kinds of food stations and highboy tables, and the food and the wine was indigenous to Florida."

adds that it's a good way to reduce waste because attendees won't get a full-sized drink unless they really want one.

Waldhuetter notes another trend that ties in with the popularity of locally sourced products. "Another thing we're doing is highlighting a local distillery. There seems to be more and more distill-

eries and craft beers, of course, that are popping up. So we will oftentimes have the brewer or the distiller on hand who will be doing a tasting also talk to them about the process of distilling. However, we are finding that in more and more states that you can't free pour the liquor. You've got to mix it with something." She adds that she has done this at offsite venues, but that it would be up to the hotel as to whether they would allow a vendor to bring outside liquor in. "It depends on the depth of the contract."

Waldhuetter also notes that martini luges (ice sculptures used for dispensing drinks) also are trending back. "We do a lot more lately with hyping the brand of the company (sponsoring the event). What we are also doing tons of now is an ice beer wall. It could be any dimension, but it's carved, but in sections that are put together, and the beer goes into holes. People can self serve, pull the ice cold beer out of this bar, and there you go, once again engaging them. It's such a unique way to bring people together."

She explains that there's a side benefit to using a company-branded martini luge or ice beer wall: People love to post photos of it on social media. "You can even have an interactive occasion through Instagram where people upload their picture of them at the ice beer wall with their beer bottle and everybody that participates can be put into a raffle to win a prize. It gets the company name out there in this particular city at this particular venue. It ties into the branding."

F&B Minimums

Waldhuetter also is passionate about

protecting her clients' bottom lines by paying particular attention to how the hotel's contract terms for food and beverage minimums are handled. She explains, "Many hotel contracts have a food and beverage (F&B) clause that requires a group to generate a minimum amount of food and beverage revenue through the course of the meeting. The F&B

clause goes on to state that if the minimum amount of revenue is not generated, the group is responsible for making up the difference. The F&B clause will require the shortfall plus the tax."

She advises how to handle this clause. "Do not agree to a contract that requires monetary damages based upon lost revenue. In the case of a breach, F&B damages should be based upon lost profit. If a group signs a contract with a \$50,000 minimum, but only realizes \$40,000, the hotel has lost the benefit of the \$50,000. However, it does not make sense to pay for the full amount of \$10,000 (difference between the minimum and the actualized expenditures). Despite the shortfall, the hotel never had to order the food, pay any staff to prepare it, or serve it.

"Calculations for damages should be based upon the amount the hotel did not realize minus any expenses that would have been incurred if the minimum had been met," she continues. "A large number of hotels agree that 35 percent is the profit margin on food and beverage. Therefore, a group should only agree to pay 35 percent of the shortfall."

The Taste of Success

The food choices offered can have a significant impact on an attendee's satisfaction level with an event "There is no doubt that our conference diner is a much more savvy and food-educated individual," Shell notes. As Garcia explains, "We want them to leave feeling good about everything that happened (while they were here), including the food and beverage experience. He adds that the concept of people gathering together to share a meaningful dining experience dates back for years, if not centuries. "It's called breaking bread."

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A 6-foot ice wall dispenses frosty brews for a corporate event.

Credit: Kristin Lisak, PEC Meetings Company

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Paradise Next Door

The Nearby Bahamas and Caribbean U.S. Territories Are Enjoying a Renewed Demand

By Gabi Logan

As more and more corporate groups are staying close to home either out of concern for optics, budget or flight schedules, the white sands and dazzling emerald waters of the thousands of Caribbean islands couldn't beckon any louder.

However, for planners who are having to deal with hotels that are gaining the upper hand in most markets as business picks back up, Caribbean hotel rooms and meeting spaces are increasingly harder to come by.

"A lot of hotels won't give up space for groups because they want to keep it for leisure travelers," says Kathleen Krawczyk, CMP, event planner at Chicago, Illinois-based Lawson Products, an industrial distributor of maintenance and repair supplies. "They're outpricing themselves. Prices

have gone out of control. I've seen hotel prices rise \$300 more a night in two years. They're so full with leisure travelers, if they didn't get the group business, it doesn't really hurt them, so they're either telling us these are their rates or they don't have the space."

But while meetings and incentives have long whisked attendees to more exotic Caribbean isles such as Aruba, St. Lucia, Jamaica, Barbados, and Turks and Caicos, a string of property openings and renovations in the nearby Bahamas

and the U.S. territories of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands are benefiting planners in many ways.

Emerging Opportunities Closer to Home

Overall travel to the Caribbean islands bounced back to pre-recession levels as early as 2012, when 25 million visitors flocked to the islands. The destination has grown its arrivals at a rate that outpaces the world average, but the U.S. territories are actually some of the best faring of the bunch. Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands experienced a 7 percent increase in visitors in 2012, when the global average was 5 percent, and Puerto Rico has been growing its meetings business at a significantly higher rate.

Though some of the main traffic to the Caribbean comes from North America, many planners find that when they do a site visit or plan meetings in non-native English-speaking areas, the language barrier is higher than they'd like.

"I was pleasantly surprised by (Spanish-speaking) Cancun and the Dominican Republic," says Donna M. Walker, CMP, meeting planner at Batesville, Indiana-based medical technology company Hill Rom. Walker primarily plans one or more incentives per year in the Caribbean. "They've really turned those destinations around with some of the new restaurants and hotel upgrades, so when I went to site and I hadn't been there in a few years, I was really impressed, but the language barrier is huge."

"It's challenging, because the properties are beautiful, but you can't really venture off of the property because there's not really anything to do outside, like a so-called town, where on the other islands there's a shopping area," she explains. "It's one of the things we mentioned to our contacts when we were down there. When they're trying to recruit U.S.-based customers, they need to keep that in mind."

Beyond the language barrier, despite the fact that Caribbean islands cater to Westerners, whether from nearby North



Bluewater adventures abound at Sandals Royal Bahamian, Nassau, Bahamas (left and above); and spectacular links golf awaits at Sandals Emerald Bay, Great Exuma, Bahamas (top).



Rendering of the Baha Mar Casino Hotel, which will encompass 1,000 guest rooms and suites, 23 private residences and a 100,000-sf casino. The hotel is part of the massive Baha Mar development in Nassau that will offer 200,000 sf of convention facilities.

America or the various European countries that oversee different island groups, meeting planners do not always find the experience as they would expect back home.

Unlike many meeting planners who stick to the Caribbean for incentives, Darrieux Harvey, CMP, meeting planner at Chantilly, Virginia-based Internet service provider Arin, oversees the board and advisory council meetings for her company's territory in the Caribbean as well as North America, so she plans several meetings there each year.



"We try to offer something people wouldn't book themselves; something I feel comfortable with that has a wow factor."

Kathy Krawczyk, CMP, Event Planner
Lawson Products, Chicago, IL

"The Caribbean islands are a little bit difficult to plan a meeting in, because they don't plan as far in advance as we do here," she continues. "If I send an RFP a year out, they look at it like, 'Why are you sending this so far out in advance?' I think it's key for organizations to send planners on a site visit, because I know that when I first started going to the Caribbean, I would say I needed 200 set like this, and they would say absolutely, but I would get down there and see that you couldn't even get 50 in the room."

"I've been all over — Jamaica, Barbados, Nassau, San Juan — and the American territories are easier to plan meetings in because it's America," she says. "You don't have to deal with some of the things you usually deal with in the Caribbean, like a lack of air conditioning."

For meeting planners, the islands of Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands and the Bahamas, where English is widely spoken, offer the beaches, tropical food and weather you come to the Caribbean for, but with the level of meeting services you expect at home. And a new wave of hotel openings and renovations, focused on a Caribbean sense of place with modern luxury, are creating a sleek new style for island meetings.

Big News in the Bahamas

With a mix of polished resorts and easy-to-visit towns, the Bahamas have been a top choice for corporate meetings and events for decades, but a new development opening in stages from the end of this year through the end of next is changing everything.

Set on 3,000 feet of beach on Nassau's Cable Beach, Baha Mar, branded as the new Bahamian Riviera, will incorporate four separate but adjoining luxury resorts: Rosewood, SLS Lux, Grand Hyatt and The Baha Mar Casino & Hotel. The \$3.5 billion venue spreads over 1,000 acres and is just 12 minutes from the airport.

The headliner of the show, the Baha Mar Casino and Hotel, will encompass 1,000 guest rooms and suites, 23 private residences and a 100,000-sf casino. Second in size, but in many ways more intriguing for meeting planners, the Grand Hyatt includes 700 guest rooms and a 200,000-sf convention cen-



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Atlantis Paradise Island, Bahamas, known for having the largest open-air marine habitat in the world, boasts 21 outdoor event spaces totaling 300,000 sf.

ter. The flexible space, outfitted with state-of-the-art AV, will include three ballrooms and 16 breakout rooms.

The Rosewood will feature 200 beachview rooms and suites along with five beachfront villas along with state-of-the-art event spaces for meetings and catered events. The SLS Lux will comprise 300 high-design guest rooms and event spaces for small, high-end events.

In addition to the entertainment options in the hotels, the resort will feature an 18-hole championship Jack Nicklaus Signature golf course, which will become the highest-level course in Nassau when it opens. After the initial stages of the resort launch, in addition to adding future hotels, Baha Mar plans to open a second golf course.

While this addition to New Providence, home of the capital Nassau, has drawn many eyes and press, neighboring resorts and resorts on nearby islands continue to provide superior service to meeting planning clients.

Sandals' two Bahamas locations, the Sandals Royal Bahamian, also in Nassau, and Sandals Emerald Bay on Great Exuma, are long-time planner favorites. "I've been using Sandals every other year," says Krawczyk. "We try to offer something people wouldn't book themselves; something I feel comfortable with that has a wow factor. We don't like to repeat if we don't have to, and I don't mean to keep coming back to Sandals, but I love that property."

"The first thing we look at is something that is truly all-inclusive," she says. "With Sandals, everything is included from transportation to a welcome reception for two hours and a private cocktail hour. Our coffee break is even included. We look for the most we can get with the dollars that we're spending."

Krawczyk has found that the CSR component of her meetings is also easy to check off with Sandals events. "Whenever we do Sandals, we make it into a group thing where we donate to the Sandals Foundation. This year everyone brought



Credit: Atlantis Paradise Island

schools supplies and some medical stuff down, and donations. We matched the donations and presented them with a check, and the kids who received the school supplies came to the banquet that evening."

Across the bridge from New Providence island is Paradise Island, which boasts the mega ocean-themed and gaming resort Atlantis, known for having the largest open-air marine habitat in the world. Atlantis offers 3,400 guest rooms including The Cove, a resort within a resort that features 600 oceanview suites. The conference center can accommodate up to 4,000 attendees and includes the 50,000-sf Imperial Ballroom, 40,000 sf of prefunction space, 30 breakout rooms and three boardrooms. There are 21 outdoor event spaces

— totaling 300,000 sf — that take advantage of tropical settings including, of course, the beaches, lagoon, waterscapes, marine habitats and more. And with 21 great restaurants on-property (including chef Bobby Flay's Mesa Grill and Chef Nobu Matsuhisa's Nobu), planners can stage an exceptional dine-around program without ever leaving the resort grounds.



"I've found on the other islands that I have to do a lot of legwork on my own. In Puerto Rico, I have support so I can get around and deal with the hotels or if I need to travel."

Powerful Connections in Puerto Rico

For meetings where you want to dip your toe in the Caribbean but keep the meeting element front of mind for attendees most days, Puerto Rico offers a mix of Caribbean sensibility and North American business sense.

"The CVB in San Juan is very good," says Harvey. "What I do generally when I send my RFPs for meetings in the Caribbean is that I partner with the convention bureau to send them. They're good at making sure my RFP goes out. I've found on the other islands that I have to do a lot of legwork on my own. In Puerto Rico, I have support so I can get around and deal with the hotels or if I need to travel."

The 580,000-sf Puerto Rico Convention Center is the largest facility of its kind in the Caribbean and features the largest ballroom in the region at 39,500 sf. A 152,700-sf exhibition hall and 54,949 sf of meeting rooms, which can be broken into 28 breakout rooms, round out the center's indoor space, but the growing convention district has much more to offer.

Spread over a 113-acre area formerly used as a U.S. Naval and Coast Guard base, the convention district is one of the largest waterfront development projects in the U.S. The adjacent 503-room Sheraton Puerto Rico Hotel and Casino with its own 35,000-sf conference center is currently the main hotel in the conference district, but the Hyatt House San Juan, with 126 studios and one- and two-bedroom suites is set to open this month.

In addition to the big wave in the conference district, two major renovations in other parts of the island are revamping Puerto Rico's meeting hotel offerings. In Rio Grande, the Wyndham Grand Rio Mar Beach Resort & Spa is completing a multimillion-dollar renovation at the end of this year that will enhance its 48,000 sf of meeting space, 10 dining establishments, 400 guest rooms and suites, and public areas. Uniting all the new elements is a renewed focus on Puerto Rico's indigenous history and architecture, from its rain forest to characteristic cobblestone streets.

El Conquistador, a Waldorf Astoria Resort in Fajardo, has just completed an overhaul of all public spaces and meeting levels. While its ballrooms and terraces already afforded visitors views of the ocean and El Yunque rain forest, the resort has refreshed all carpeting and furniture on the meeting levels and added new windows, paint, curtains and lighting in the ballroom to better unite the spaces with their surroundings.

Darrieux Harvey, CMP, Meeting Planner
Arin, Chantilly, VA

The resort's 100,000 sf of meeting space includes 16 breakout rooms, two adjacent conference centers and a private island for outdoor events.

In San Juan, Hilton has recently brought another property into the fold, The Condado Plaza Hilton, with 571 rooms and 41,000 sf of indoor and outdoor meeting space, including a 24,480-sf ballroom. Uniquely positioned as the only hotel in the city overlooking both the Atlantic Ocean and Condado Lagoon, the hotel is the fourth Hilton property on the island.

A \$38 million investment in upgrading Puerto Rico's airports and an increase in scheduled flights from major mainland carriers has also made arriving in Puerto Rico even more convenient for corporate travelers. Delta added daily non-stop service between Chicago and San Juan, and expanded its daily service between JFK and San Juan.

JetBlue matched Delta's daily Chicago-to-San Juan initiative, expanding from its previous U.S. non-stop routes departing from



An outdoor banquet setup at El Conquistador, a Waldorf Astoria Resort in Fajardo, Puerto Rico. The resort also features a private island for events.

Boston, Fort Lauderdale, Hartford, Jacksonville, JFK, Newark, Orlando, Tampa, Washington, DC, and West Palm Beach.

USVI — the Best of the Islands

While Puerto Rico is a large enough island that you can almost forget you're on an island when not in view of the beach, in the U.S. Virgin Islands — comprised of St. Croix, St. John



Credit: The Westin St. John

The Westin St. John Resort in the U.S. Virgin Islands will complete a \$50 million refurbishment in January 2015.

and St. Thomas — it's nearly impossible to get far from the shore, and the islands' group activities offer unique ways to take advantage of the area's connection to nature.

Though St. John often looks like the wild, unpopulated island next to cosmopolitan St. Thomas, The Westin St. John Resort has long added an air of sophistication. It has upped the ante with a \$50 million makeover, which started last January and continues through January of 2015 when the resort will debut complete refurbishments of all 96 guest rooms and suites, the addition of 146 Starwood Vacation Ownership villas, and updated public and meeting spaces.

On all three islands, local groups are launching new outdoor activities ideal for teambuilding with a strong sense of place. On St. Croix, Mount Victory Camp ecolodge runs sustainable living workshops teaching attendees how to build a fire and make a bow and arrow from scratch in the wild, while Ridge to Reef Farm, focused on providing the USVI with local produce, offers naturalist-led ecology and agroforestry tours.

St. Thomas' Ritz-Carlton has partnered with Jean-Michel Cousteau's Ambassadors of the Environment program on special ecological explorations of the island, and thrill seekers

can get an entirely new perspective on the island with Iron Man-style flyboarding 30 feet above the waters of St. Thomas' Lindbergh Bay. On St. John, the Adventure Center now offers night kayaking with clear-bottom kayaks affording a clear view of the turtles, sharks and sting rays that inhabit the bay.

While Puerto Rico has experienced a sharp uptick in non-stop flights over the past couple years, the USVI is now taking its turn. Beginning in December of this year, Delta will offer a new non-stop route to St. Croix. American Airlines also has entered into an interline agreement with Seabourne to offer easier access between St. Croix, St. Thomas and Puerto Rico.

Final Thoughts

As airlines are now increasing airlift to the Bahamas, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, and hoteliers are increasing available rooms and meeting space, planners have a window while supply outpaces demand. But as the siren's call of short, non-stop flights to pristine white sand beaches is heard by more groups seeking to lock down prime meeting space years in advance, it surely won't be a very big window. **C&IT**

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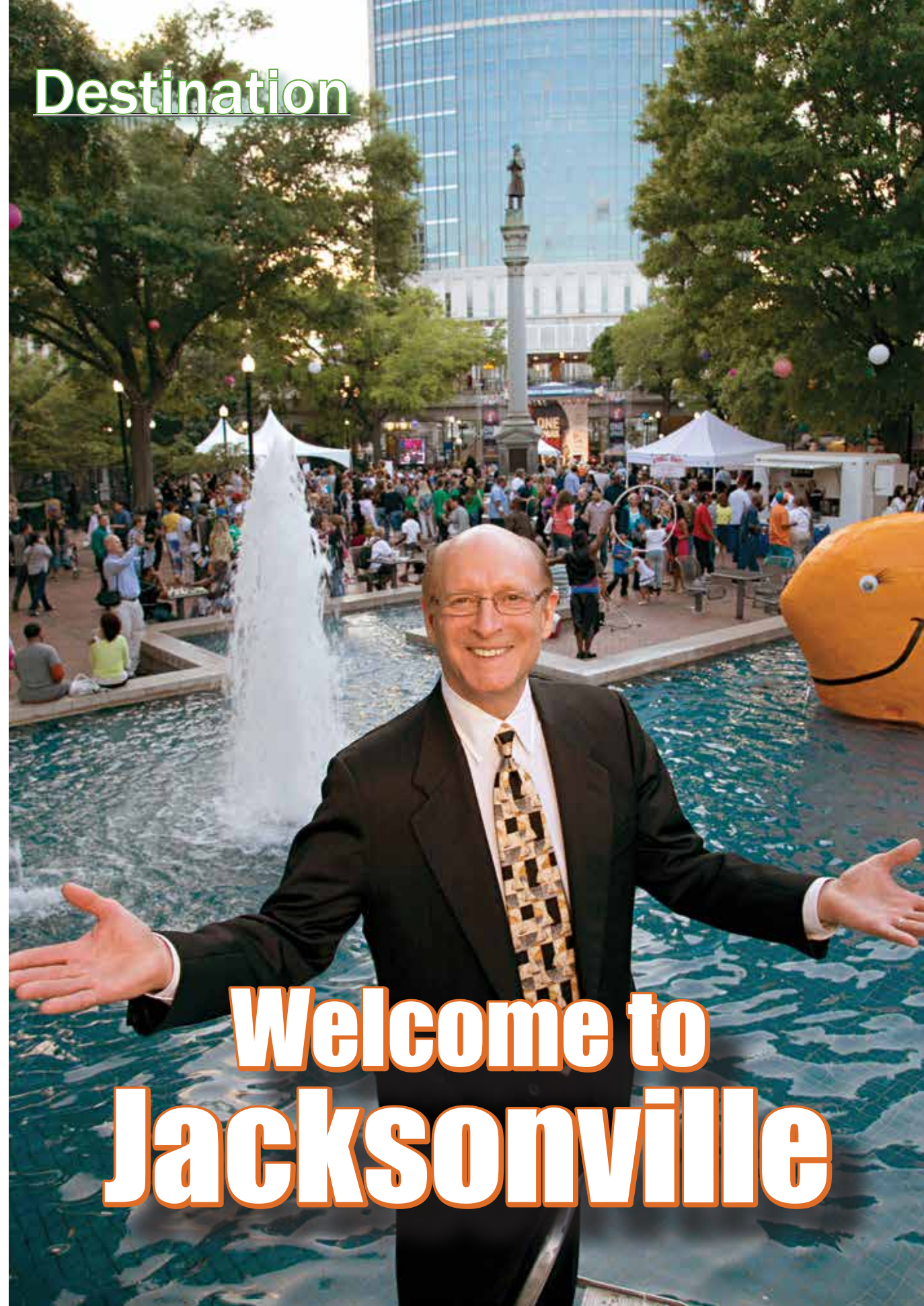
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Destination



Credit: Ken McCray/Visit Jacksonville



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(Opposite page) Visit Jacksonville President and CEO Paul Astleford in Hemming Park, downtown Jacksonville. (Above, l to r) Amelia River Cruises and Charters; the Players Championship at TPC Sawgrass; and Jacksonville Landing on the St. Johns River.

By John Buchanan

Paul Astleford, president and CEO of Visit Jacksonville, is on a mission to convince more and more meeting planners that his destination — located on both the St. Johns River and the Atlantic Ocean in Northeastern Florida — offers a unique and important set of benefits in today's market.

"Jacksonville offers a unique and vibrant side of Florida where a group can have that 'big fish in an intriguing pond' experience

'The Premier North Florida "Comfort Zone" Experience for Meeting Professionals'

Paul Astleford, President and CEO
Visit Jacksonville

without breaking the bank," Astleford says. "Our 'river city by the sea' is the ideal value destination for memorable waterfront meetings. Both the return on investment for planners, and the return on experience for

attendees, makes the overall return on investment more than worth it while meeting in Jacksonville. Also, our city has the right meetings infrastructure, business community, service groups, natural beauty, food scene and attractions to be a competitive and dynamic location for meetings of all sizes."

“Most of the feedback I get is that meeting planners are usually surprised by everything that Jacksonville has to offer, all in one place.”

Anne Urban, Owner and President
Destination Planning Corporation

Astleford and his team currently work with more than 400 groups annually, many of them enthusiastic repeat customers.

“Our dedicated convention sales and services staff strives to create a more personalized relationship with new and repeat customers,” he says. “From attending industry shows across the nation, hosting FAM tours for planners, working closely with the local convention and select service properties in the city, we make sure we are all reaching out to the right groups and planners, and customizing our delivery to meet their expectations in the most professional way.”

The most important “news” that Astleford wants to get out, he says, is that Jacksonville is “the premier North Florida ‘comfort zone’ experience for meeting professionals. Our primary convention hotels have undergone recent renovations to stay on top of the latest technology and esthetic trends.”

Full of Pleasant Surprises

Meeting planners who experience Jacksonville for the first time are often quite surprised by its appeal, says Anne Urban, owner and president of local destination management company Destination Planning Corporation, who has been booking meetings in Jacksonville for 20 years. “Most of the feedback I get is that meeting planners are usually surprised by everything that Jacksonville has to offer, all in one place,” she explains. “We have the gorgeous St. Johns River, but we also have the ocean. And not many cities have both. And our river is unique, in that there are only five in the world that run from south to north. And it flows directly into the ocean. So our waterways provide a great list of activities, from kayaking to sailing to deep-sea fishing and bird-watching.

“Planners are usually very surprised by how wonderful our airport is. It’s very easy to get into and out of, and we have a good amount of flights coming in and

going out. So planners are often surprised by how easy the arrival and departure process is here.”

And that process has been made even easier with the increased airlift that has come from the addition of new direct flights and more connection options to get to Jacksonville International Airport.

And a related surprise for planners, Urban says, is the classic Southern hospitality that visitors receive. “They are also surprised by how welcoming we are, from the time you get off the plane,” she says.

Pat Weyand, executive assistant at CSX Transportation, which is headquartered in Jacksonville, uses her hometown for an average of two meetings a month that draw attendees from regional offices across the country. Those meetings include team meetings, board meetings, executive conferences and customer meetings. The company’s national sales meetings are for 700-800 attendees.

“Our people think Jacksonville is a super place to have a meeting,” Weyand says. “One reason is because of the weather. We have a lot of customers from up north and they love coming here in the winter. But people also tell us how friendly Jacksonville is and how easy it is to get into and out of through the airport. They also enjoy our local dining scene.”

As a planner, Weyand particularly likes the city’s value proposition. “The cost of the same meeting in other destinations is quite a bit higher than it is here in Jacksonville,” she says. “With the value we get here and the quality of what you get, Jacksonville is just a great destination.”

For Vicky Woodley, senior manager, meeting services, at the Jacksonville-based, 1,000-employee ear, nose and throat division of medical device company Medtronic, familiarity with



Crowds gather at Jacksonville Beach where the Blue Angels perform at the Sea and Sky Spectacular Air Show.

Credit: Ryan Ketterman/Visit Jacksonville



The Hyatt Regency Jacksonville Riverfront on the city’s Riverwalk offers 110,000 sf of meeting space and 963 guest rooms.

Credit: Visit Jacksonville

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the destination she uses for about a dozen meetings a year is a big factor.

"We know the city," Woodley says. "We know which venues to use. We have access to the resources of Visit Jacksonville, our CVB, whether that's help with finding the right transportation or a teambuilding activity. And every time I have worked with them, they have been quick and helpful in getting me what I need. They are a great resource."

Hotel Inventory

Jacksonville is home to more than 200 hotels and resorts with a total of close to 18,000 rooms. Its hotel inventory offers a wide range of options, from downtown major-flag properties to modern suburban hotels, elegant riverfront accommodations and oceanfront boutique resorts.

The downtown properties, such as the Hyatt Regency Jacksonville Riverfront (963 guest rooms; 110,000 sf of meeting space) and Omni Jacksonville Hotel (354, 14,000), are ideal for groups that need a lot of meeting space, Urban says. Both are located along Jacksonville's Riverwalk on the St. Johns River.

"The downtown area is also now the hub of all the things that are related to meetings, including dining and entertainment," she says. "And there's a whole cluster of hotels down there now, including properties like the Hampton Inn for planners that are looking for that type of hotel product. And all of the downtown hotels have great access to the river and great views. There are also walkways along the river and there are lots of things to do."

The hotels that Weyand favors most often include the Hyatt Regency downtown, One Ocean Resort & Spa in Atlantic

"The cost of the same meeting in other destinations is quite a bit higher than it is here in Jacksonville."

Pat Weyand, Executive Assistant
CSX Transportation

Beach, and two properties south of the city in Ponte Vedra Beach that both boast acclaimed golf courses — Sawgrass Marriott Golf Resort & Spa, home of TPC Sawgrass and the Players Championship, and Ponte Vedra Inn & Club with its seaside links.

Woodley also finds a good mix of local hotels for her meetings. "The hotel inventory works well for us, because a lot of the meetings we do are smaller meetings," she says. "For example, we do a lot of training meetings that usually have about 15 attendees." For those meetings, she particularly likes the Homewood Suites property. "For our training meetings, we like it because attendees are here for a week or two and the property allows them to easily get out to the Town Center complex and have things to do in their free time. They don't need any transportation."

Jacksonville's historic and stately former train terminal houses the Prime F. Osborn III Convention Center, which offers 275,000 gross sf of meeting space.

Offsite Venues

Jacksonville also can claim a long and diverse list of unique offsite venues. Among those most frequently touted by Visit Jacksonville are the Epping Forest estate, Foxy Lady Cruises, the Atrium at the Jacksonville Main Library, Tap Room at Aardwolf Brewing Company, the rooftop at the Museum of Science and History, the Skyline Dining and Conference Center on the 42nd floor of the Bank of America building, the Karpeles Manuscript Library Museum, The University Club of Jacksonville, The River Club, The Jacksonville Equestrian Center, The Ritz Theatre and Museum and the grounds at the Beaches Museum & History Park.

Another unique venue is the Malone Aircharter Hangar at Craig Field. Urban is hosting an evening there soon for an 800-attendee meeting. "It's a really unique venue," she says. "And the group I'm using it for wanted something different. They didn't want to use a typical hotel ballroom. They wanted something interesting and fun."

Urban also favors the Times-Union Center for the Performing Arts, which has three theaters with capacities ranging from 600 to nearly 3,000 attendees.

Among her absolute favorites is the Florida Theater, where Elvis held his first public concert in 1956. "It's a beautiful, historic venue that is perfect for general sessions," Urban says. "The architecture is just breathtaking. And it's only a block



Credits: Visit Jacksonville/Inset Ken McCray



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Credit: Visit Jacksonville/Inset Ken McCray

The Times-Union Center for the Performing Arts is home to the Jacksonville Symphony Orchestra and has 20,000 sf of meeting space. Three theaters are used for meetings and performances.

Jacksonville Landing on the riverfront is a popular venue for dining, shopping and entertainment. “And in the last year or two, we’ve also had an influx of new restaurants, cafés and bars, so there are now a lot of good options for planners in the downtown area, which also makes it very convenient,” Urban says.

Jacksonville also features an award-winning local brewery scene. It has more than doubled in the last few years and now claims some of the state’s most popular craft beers. Popular spots include Intuition Ale Works, Bold City Brewery and Aardwolf Brewing Company. Each offers daily tours, and at Engine 15 in Jacksonville Beach, groups can arrange a special session for brewing their own craft beer.



from the Hyatt hotel.” Group capacity is 1,900.

Another great venue recommended by Urban is Jacksonville Memorial Arena.

“And all of the venues are within easy walking distance of the downtown hotels,” she says.

Particularly for smaller groups looking for a spectacular environment, Urban suggests the Cummer Museum of Art and Gardens. It houses an extensive art collection and also offers spectacular riverfront gardens with the best views in the city.

The Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens is considered one of the top 10 animal attractions in the U.S. It has just debuted a new exhibit called “Land of the Tiger,” a state-of-the-art animal exhibit where tigers roam (safely) and interact with visitors.

EverBank Field, the home of the NFL’s Jacksonville Jaguars, is now also home to the largest scoreboards in the world and a VIP area that includes new cabanas, special dining options and even two swimming pools — a great place for a special retreat or group event, Urban says.

Dining and Entertainment

Jacksonville also offers a dynamic dining scene.

“We have fantastic restaurants,” Urban says. “And what is different is that within a five-mile radius of the major hotels, instead of just finding a bunch of chain restaurants, we have very, very interesting local restaurants that have great food.”

Urban says the three areas that most lend themselves to dine-arounds are downtown, Riverside and the historic San Marco District. Among Urban’s favorite dining spots are Indochine and Taverna in San Marco, and Medure in Ponte Vedra Beach. Weyand’s favorite restaurants include Medure, The Wine Cellar downtown and Bistro Aix in San Marco.

Woodley favors Maggiano’s a legendary Italian eatery in Town Center. “They have excellent space,” she says. “They also have excellent food and pricing.”

Activities

For obvious reasons, the most popular activities in Jacksonville are water-related. Top among them is fishing. “That’s by far our No. 1 activity,” Urban says. “Everyone loves to go fishing in Jacksonville.”

And that includes both deep-sea fishing in the Atlantic and freshwater fishing on the St. Johns. The most common fishing charters can accommodate from 12 in

two six-passenger boats up to 45 on fishing party boats. Foxy Lady Cruises offers private yacht charters for up to 149 for corporate events.

Kayaking is also very popular. “That’s No. 2 in popularity,” Urban says. “And what’s so amazing about it is the wildlife you see, and especially the bird-watching. We offer one of the best opportunities for bird-watching you can find anywhere, because this is where a lot of the birds from up north, including

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“Every time I have worked with (Visit Jacksonville), they have been quick and helpful in getting me what I need. They are a great resource.”

**Vickey Woodley, Senior Manager, Meeting Services
Medtronic**

.....

Canada, migrate to in the winter. So you see more varieties of birds here than just about anywhere else in the country.”

Airboating on the Intracoastal waterway is another highly popular activity. “It’s like being in a swamp without really being in a swamp,” Urban says. “But you can see alligators and lots of other wildlife. It’s a great experience that’s another example of the great things there are to do in Jacksonville.”

Astleford says many of the city’s most popular attractions offer teambuilding options. Examples include kayaking with Kayak Amelia on nearby Amelia Island; car racing with



Credit: Ryan Ketterman/Visit Jacksonville

The Jacksonville skyline and the St. Johns River.

Autobahn Indoor Speedway; Jacksonville History Scavenger Hunt with Gary Sass of AdLib Tours; painting class with Yes You Canvas; a PGA Tour Experience golf day at the World Golf



Credit: Ken McCray/Visit Jacksonville

Village south of Jacksonville; an “Amazing Race” style activity at Adventure Landing; Jacksonville Beach Shipwreck Island Waterpark; and multiple dining and entertainment experiences at Latitude 360.

“There are a lot of great options for teambuilding,” Urban says. “And one trend we’ve seen over the last several years is that companies want to do a teambuilding activity that contributes to the community. For example, we had one group recently that wanted to do something for the military, because Jacksonville is such a large military community. So we bused a couple of hundred people to a location where they created care kits to be sent to troops in Iraq.”

Given all its attractions and amenities, it’s not at all surprising that Jacksonville is finding its way onto the radar of more meeting planners. The essential message that Visit Jacksonville wants to communicate, says Astleford, is, “We want you in Jacksonville, and we’ll do everything possible to make you desire to return. Our city has the perfect meeting venues and accommodations for your group, and you need to come here to see it. Jacksonville’s business community is eager to welcome you and have you experience our vibrant city and all that it has to offer, from our rich cultural scene, to our natural wonders including 22 miles of beaches, the largest urban park system in the nation, and the beautiful St. Johns River. We want you to come and explore a new side of Florida.”

C&IT

The Florida Theatre, built in 1927 as the largest movie palace in Jacksonville, is one of only four of its kind still operating in Florida. The historic venue accommodates 1,900 for events.

On The Move



The Wigwam, Phoenix, Arizona, has named **Patrick Connors** as vice president of resort sales and marketing. He most recently served as director of sales and marketing at Riviera Palm Springs, California.

Jasper Yun was promoted to director of group sales for The Fairmont Kea Lani, Maui. He formerly served as group sales manager responsible for the West Coast market.

Paul Bashaw was appointed corporate director of global sales for Benchmark Hospitality International. He was most recently director of sales for Scottsdale Resort and Conference Center, Scottsdale, Arizona.

Jamie Bruce was named vice presi-

dent of sales and marketing at Trump National Doral Miami. He was senior vice president of sales and revenue management at Atlantis, Paradise Island, Bahamas.

The Broadmoor in Colorado Springs, Colorado, has named **Jeff Johnson** as vice president of marketing and sales. With more than 30 years of experience in hospitality brand management, marketing and sales, he most recently served as a chief strategist at HyperDisk Marketing, which creates marketing solutions for hospitality brands such as Starwood Hotels & Resorts, Hilton Hotels & Resorts and Trump International.

Omni Rancho Las Palmas Resort & Spa, Rancho Mirage, California,

has named **Colleen Pace** as director of sales and marketing. She formerly was director of sales and marketing at Cheyenne Mountain Resort in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

The Meritage Resort and Spa, Napa Valley, California, has promoted **Ashley Thomas** to group sales manager. She most recently served as catering sales manager for the resort.

The Westin Hilton Head Island Resort & Spa in South Carolina has named **Mike Reich** as director of group sales. Bringing more than 30 years of experience to his new position, Reich was regional director of sales and marketing for The Westin Baltimore Washington Airport and Sheraton Baltimore Washington Airport Hotel. *C&IT*

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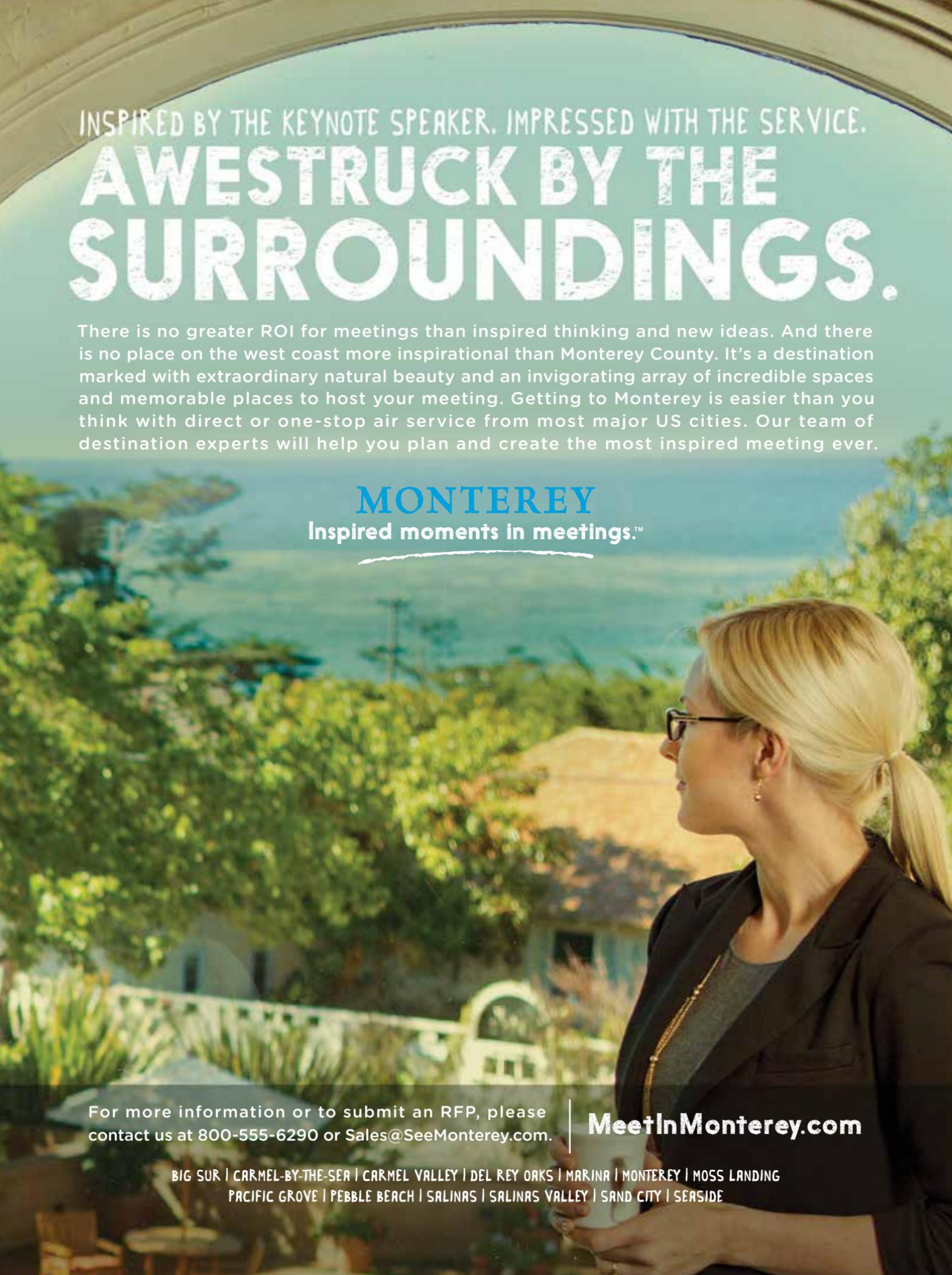
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