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Conference Centers Uncovered

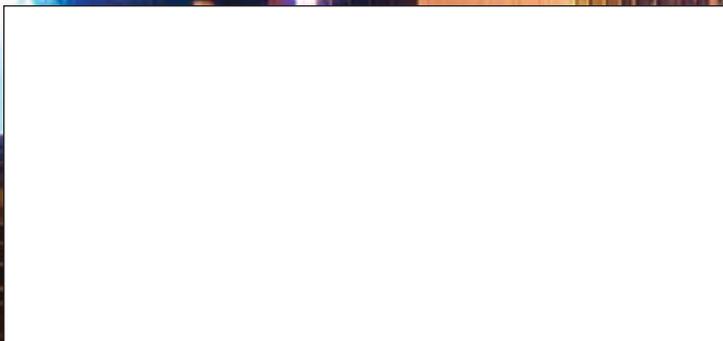
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Joan Orentlicher, CMP, assistant V.P., meetings, conferences and travel for LOMA & LIMRA, based in Buckhead, the uptown district of Atlanta (shown), favors the conference center experience for meetings.



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JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2014 Vol. 21 No. 1

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Publisher's Message

Optimism Is High

Two studies recently released show that optimism is high for group travel and incentive programs for this year.

The TravelClick North American Hospitality Review's 2014 forecast is optimistic despite a slow start to the year. "After strong group sales pace early in the fourth quarter of last year, it is a bit disappointing that group bookings have



lost some steam heading into the New Year," said Tim Hart, executive vice president, business intelligence, TravelClick. "That being said, the group segment is still ahead of where it was this time last year, and strong transient demand and ADR growth continue to drive a positive overall outlook for the first part of 2014."

The Site International Foundation conducts the Site Index Annual Survey to compile and compare data meaningful to the incentive travel and motivational events industry. This year, the study confirms that "incentive travel continues to be on an upswing and is predicted to grow significantly through 2016."

"After several years of intense scrutiny, companies are realizing the important role incentive travel and motivational events have played on their past success and are implementing new programs to elevate future performance," said Kurt Paben, president, Site International Foundation. "This can be attributed to an overall improving global economy, but also reflects the current state of bookings for programs that will operate within the next three years."

One of the key findings in the study confirms there is increasing pressure on planners to measure ROI and/or ROO. Three-quarters of respondents expect this requirement to grow in the next 12 months and beyond.

This is where *Insurance & Financial Meetings Management* steps in to help meeting planners make the grade. In this issue, planners share their reasons why conference centers are a planner's best friend. All-inclusive pricing at dedicated IACC-approved conference centers help planners rein in costs, meet their objectives and come in right on target. As Joan Orentlicher, CMP, assistant vice president, meetings, conferences and travel, LOMA & LIMRA, who graces our cover this month, suggests, "We often use a conference center because that means everything is in place from day one, and we don't have to worry about all those details, such as menus or the setup of meeting space."

Harvey Grotsky

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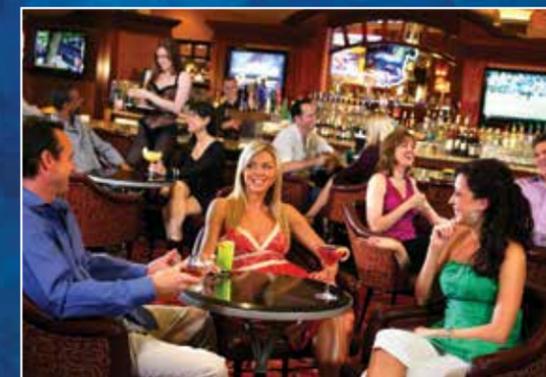
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Loews Portofino Bay Hotel at Universal Orlando Completes Renovation



Loews Portofino Bay Hotel at Universal Orlando.

ORLANDO, FL — Loews Portofino Bay Hotel at Universal Orlando announced February 3 the completion of a massive, \$22 million renovation. The 750 guest rooms were completely renovated with all-new furnishings, beds, window treatments and artwork. In addition, the hotel now offers the world's first and only Despicable Me-inspired hotel suites. Outside, the hotel's artistic façade has been completely refurbished in exquisite detail. Loews Portofino Bay Hotel is a re-creation of the quaint Ligurian seaside village of Portofino, Italy. As the first onsite hotel at Universal Orlando Resort, it features cobblestone piazzas, outdoor cafes and a nightly musical show. Hotel guests enjoy three themed swimming pools, seven restaurants and lounges, complimentary Wi-Fi, a world-class spa and an exclusive package of theme park benefits. www.uomeetingsandevents.com

Hilton Waikoloa Village Introduces All-Inclusive Group F&B Plans

WAIKOLOA VILLAGE, HI — Hilton Waikoloa Village announced on February 5 that all-inclusive dining and beverage plans for groups are now available. With 14 restaurants and bars, Hilton Waikoloa Village offers a variety of dining and refreshment options throughout the day — from Boat Landing Cantina's Mexican flare to fresh seafood and sunset views at Kamuela Provision Company or island cuisine at the Legends of Hawaii Luau. The all-inclusive dining plan is available for \$150 per person, per day and the all-inclusive beverage plan is available for \$75 per person, per day through December 31, 2015. The plan includes tax and gratuities.

The only resort in Hawaii to offer the all-inclusive dining option, Hilton Waikoloa Village, a 62-acre oceanfront resort on the Kohala Coast of Hawaii, boasts the most flexible meeting space in the Pacific outer islands, with more than 235,000 sf of meeting, convention and outdoor function space with an unparalleled selection of ballrooms, breakout rooms, boardrooms and scenic outdoor venues. To learn more about this new program, email sales@hiltonwaikoloavillage.com. www.hiltonwaikoloavillage.com

Dittman Incentive Marketing Wins Award for Incentive Program

NEW BRUNSWICK, NJ — Dittman Incentive Marketing received Site's Crystal Award for Most Outstanding Single Motivational Event within an Incentive Program for a gala event designed for Santander Bank. "Magical Madrid was envisioned as a festive celebration for Santander Bank's top U.S. performers — a final night flourish to their incentive reward trip to one of Europe's most culturally rich and vibrant cities," said Marty Doyle, Dittman's director of travel experiences, who accepted the award at the conference. "We created a unique, multi-faceted event to reflect the organization's brand and to recognize their top performers. The Magical Madrid gala provided excitement, entertainment and relaxation areas all in one venue." Guests were treated to a range of cultural experiences such as Spanish musical troupes, a branded laser show, regional food and drink specialties, and more. www.dittmanincentives.com

Las Vegas' South Point Reveals Arena Expansion

LAS VEGAS, NV — The South Point Hotel & Spa's Arena and Equestrian Center in Las Vegas recently announced a 100,000-sf expansion to be completed in the summer of 2014. The Priefert Pavilion will feature two new climate-controlled arena venues. With more than 30 weeks of equestrian events scheduled each year, the center is home to some of the world's largest and most unique equestrian events. The facility has an indoor practice arena and a 4,600-seat main show arena. The complex offers 150,000 sf of exhibit, meeting and banquet space. www.southpointarena.com



1 The FICP Hospitality Partner Advisory Council enjoys the 2013 FICP Annual Conference at the Sheraton Boston Hotel. **2** Nathan Boyd, president, Rocky Mountain Connections; Katie Weber and Carrie Scott, meeting planners for Principal Financial Group, connect at the FICP conference, which boasted more than 650 attendees including a record-breaking number of planner registrations such as first-time attendees, **3** planners Andrea Beveridge and Liz Luzier of FM Global. **4** Meetings industry leaders unveiled a new national campaign at PCMA 2014 Convening Leaders in Boston to showcase the substantial value derived from business meetings, conferences, conventions, incentive travel, trade shows and exhibitions. The "Meetings Mean Business" campaign will create an information and advocacy platform that highlights the industry's pivotal role in creating jobs, generating economic value and driving business success. **5** Dominican Republic Tourism Director Patricia Perez and Site Chief Staff Officer Kevin Hinton welcome 200 delegates to the Site Executive Summit in the Dominican Republic, January 31–February 4 at the Paradisus Palma Real Golf & Spa Resort in Punta Cana. The Summit takes the Site International Board of Directors to regions of the world that are interested in growing their share of the incentive travel and motivational events industry. **6** Event Service Professionals Association (ESPA) Past President Bob Desautels of Visit Indy, CSM of the Year recipient Zack Davis of the Louisville CVB and Julie Brakenbury of Visit Raleigh at the ESPA Annual Conference in Boston. **7** ESPA Manager Diane Haggerty (left) with Natasha Ross of the Association Air Medical Services — the ESPA Meeting Professional of the Year recipient.

Photo credits: 1-3, FICP; 4, Jacob Station Photography; 5, Site; 6, 7, ESPA



An Affair to Remember: Creating Memorable Events

The good news: Budgets for events in the insurance and financial industries are coming back. The challenge: With bigger budgets, event planners and DMCS are challenged with creating events that are stimulating, impactful, memorable, interactive and anything but stale.

Now, more than ever, clients are seeking what's new and unique and are turning to us to deliver the unexpected. In the financial and insurance industries, Access Destination Services is seeing an influx of these requests for 2014 events.

Trends for 2014 include many facets — from incorporating technology and entertainment, to hosting an event at an unconventional venue, to highlighting regional tastes and smells at each event.



Photos courtesy of Access Destination Services

Authenticity is always a winner, and attendees will forever cherish the memory of this special event held in the dugout of a major league baseball team — all cleaned up of course.

Think Beyond the Expected

When it comes to seeking an event space, think beyond the traditional and expected venue. If you're hosting a corporate retreat or annual conference, consider a major league baseball park, a motor speedway or even a working



Food stations are all the rage as they encourage networking. The aroma from these sandwiches at the design-your-own-gourmet-grilled-cheese station brings attendees running.

military base! These out-of-the-box venues are inherently intriguing, will create conversation and stimulate a group beyond the boardroom.

After finding a venue that fits your needs, consider incorporating the locale. Guests want to experience tastes of the destination. Incorporate local ingredients into the menu or feature a guest chef who can share their innovative dishes derived from locally sourced ingredients. Attendees — especially those who have traveled for an event — want to experience local flavors. They want to eat local cuisine, taste local beers and sip local wine. As planners, we need to offer them what they can't have back home.

The aroma of local, farm-fresh cuisine is a crowd pleaser at almost all events. At a recent event, the rich smell of a design-your-own-gourmet-grilled-cheese station had guests clamoring for a taste. Alternatively, scratch-n-sniff stickers are making a comeback...in a unique way. The new version of this nostalgic technology offers interactive scratch-n-sniff wallpaper, which can be customized to showcase the scents of your choosing. At an event in

San Diego, Access Destination Services featured the local fragrances of fresh green grass, salty ocean waves and smoky beach bonfires in scratch-n-sniff wallpaper, which was a huge hit.

Teambuilding continues to be an important and successful component of corporate retreats and meetings. At Access, we like to add fun challenges and unique culinary options to the events we produce. For instance, Access hosted an event for a financial client at an indoor race-track, which featured an array of local food trucks as the F&B component. The fun, competitive challenge of go-kart racing was a hit on its own, but incorporating local specialty food trucks into the event after the race was a fantastic way to keep the group interacting with each other. "Ooh, you've got to try this!" was heard frequently.

Activate the Senses

Building events and experiences to awe your clients by seeking creative ways to activate all five senses will differentiate your meeting in a crowded market and give your attendees something to connect with through sight, taste, scent, sound and touch.

Sensory experiences are only as vivid as the memories



Specialized scratch-n-sniff wallpaper is making a comeback. This new version, which offers customization and interactive capabilities, truly offers an engaging experience for attendees.

they leave behind. Photo booths offer guests visual mementos of their fun, and we often recommend syncing your photo booth with social media websites so that guests can instantly upload their photos and videos to Facebook,

Instagram and Twitter. For a new twist on the photo booth, slow motion video is a visual treat. Guests can star in their own short films, with their antics heightened by suspenseful slow motion, capturing their reaction as a handful of colorful confetti rains down on them.

Further engage your guests by incorporating a pampering touch and give them a reason to relax. A VIP Green

Sensory experiences are only as vivid as the memories they leave behind.

Room, where guests are treated to makeup artists, manicurists, shoe shiners, hair stylists and old-time barbers offering straight razor shaves is a personal touch that will enhance their moods and provide an opportunity to unwind.

In finding creative ways to activate guests' senses, you'll see that the key to producing a truly great event is engagement. Whether you are planning a small VIP reception, or a large-scale gala, it's designing a number of different elements, that when all brought together successfully, become something much bigger and will truly engage attendees in what's going on around them. **I&FMM**

J.B. Ryan, DMCP, has been a destination management professional in Florida since 1993. He has managed DMC offices in both Orlando and Fort Lauderdale, and since 2009 he has held the position of vice president and general manager of Access Destination Services - Florida. Ryan is past president and current board member of Site Florida. When he is not working on events in Florida, you can find him at the Windermere Little League baseball fields coaching one of his three sons. Ryan is located at the Orlando office of Access Destination Services, an accredited destination management company, which is headquartered in San Diego. Access leverages its long-established talent and experience to design and deliver exclusive and unique group programs to satisfied clients from around the world. In 2013, Access made the Inc. 5000 list of Fastest Growing Companies in America and was ranked No. 28 among the Top 100 Travel and Hospitality Companies.



An inviting new space for networking at the Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa in Destin, FL.

Photo courtesy of Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa

The Beat Goes On

Planners Sing Praises of New & Renovated Facilities

By Derek Reveron

The advantages of holding meetings and incentives at new and renovated hotels and resorts are plentiful. New properties boast the latest in meeting and guest room accommodations, technology and service. The properties also provide additional value as they offer attractive deals to fill rooms upon opening.

But planners must carefully weigh the pros and cons to get the best value and experience for attendees. It can be a risky decision. That's why some planners avoid booking a new or significantly renovated property until after it has been up and running for awhile.

On the other hand, the allure of new properties can help to boost attendance. "There is always an element of glamour associated with the thought of bringing a meeting or incentive program to a new or newly renovated property," says Koleen Roach, direc-

tor, meetings and conference management at St. Paul, MN-based Securian Financial Group.

New properties offer attendees a unique experience. "It's always nice to go where nobody else has gone before," adds Roach. "The 'wow' factor is fantastic. I actually like the 'wow' factor of a renovation more than a new build. Your expectations are that the new build will be fabulous. But I've seen some renovated properties that

blow my mind with what they did to take the property to a new level."

Nearly all of Roach's experiences with new and renovated properties have yielded great experiences for attendees. But one booking, a five-day incentive for a sales group at a property under renovation, proved disappointing.

Roach says the U.S. resort property — a favorite among planners did not have enough time to complete the full

renovation. "I didn't find out until two or three days before my group was going to show up that basically they were still running Bobcats (construction machines) around the property, laying down sod and doing lots of landscaping. The pool wasn't complete. The spa wasn't open, and retail shops weren't going to be available," Roach explains.

Turning Lemons Into Lemonade

Roach, like all savvy planners faced with such a situation, turned lemons into lemonade. "I certainly had enough of the agenda programs and activities taking place off property. We just smoothed right over it and said, 'You know what, the pool deck isn't open, they're having a maintenance issue, so we are taking everybody to the beach. (Attendees) never really felt it. It was a small group, and it was easy to manage. I suspect that with a larger group it would be more difficult.'"

Roach says the resort didn't properly and regularly communicate construction progress. "Some people at the hotel thought that others were communicating with us, but they weren't. Make sure you have a close working relationship with your director of sales and convention services manager. The good news in this case is that the property had enough integrity to respond in a wonderful way and financially compensate us for the inconveniences," says Roach.

It also may be worth considering asking for at least some financial concessions from a DMC if it recommends a new or renovated property that doesn't complete construction on time. Hanson Ansary, president and CEO of AlliedPRA Chicago, believes in taking some financial responsibility for recommending new and improved properties that don't deliver.

For example, in one instance, Ansary's company recommended a property because of its promises of improvement. "The client took our advice. The contract stated that construction would be done by a specific

date, but they weren't done with one floor when we arrived. They gave everybody notice that, starting 9 a.m., there would be construction sounds."

And exactly at nine, jackhammers started. "There was also odor from new carpeting and paint," says Ansary. "Participants and planners weren't happy, and I made a huge fuss about it. I'm not contractually obligated to give a concession but I did. I have a moral obligation to somehow compensate clients if a recommendation doesn't pan out," says Ansary.



"I have a moral obligation to somehow compensate clients if a recommendation doesn't pan out."

Hanson Ansary, President and CEO
AlliedPRA Chicago

Planners can face construction delays for a variety of reasons. "This happens all the time," says Sheila Cleary, second vice president, recognition and conferences for Montpelier, VT-based National Life Group. "Sometimes the developer may make changes to the (construction) plan. It could be changes in the number of rooms, changes in terms of the parking lot or anything that causes a delay. Then, the developers have to go back before city or town officials for re-approval. That additional process can cause a delay."

Cleary suggests considering a hotel's owner or operator as one decision-making factor. "When you are going through the process of determining whether a newly built product is in the best interests of your event, a key piece of that is who is your hotel partner," says Cleary. She adds that planners should consider whether the hotel has a track record of building properties on time.

Roach agrees. "There are certain hotel brands you can go down that road with because they have a reputation for finishing builds on time and

for ensuring that, when a hotel's doors open, everything is in working order. Any experienced meeting planner will know who the hotels are and have a level of comfort working with them."

The No. 1 thing planners can do to protect themselves is negotiate an iron-clad contract. "Have a clause that covers major renovation, construction or new build and that outlines the scope of the project, the completion schedule, and the anticipated impact on the areas your group will utilize," Roach advises. "Have an absolute

'out' in the contract that gives you no financial obligation if construction is not completed by your program date, and that gives you at least 90 days' notice. If the meeting can't be conducted or guests can't enjoy their accommodations as promised, there should be a 'walk' clause or some form of compensation."

Site Visits Are Vital

It's also important to visit the property as construction proceeds. Planners typically don't have the time to make several site visits as construction progresses. That's why some planners depend on trusted local DMCs to pop over to properties and check on progress.

Some DMCs receive requests from planners to record a video of new and renovated properties. Lynn Lee, global sales director, AlliedPRA San Diego, has received a handful of such requests, including one from a financial firm to videotape a renovated property. The financial company wanted to hold a meeting for about 200 sales executives.



"There is always an element of glamour associated with the thought of bringing a meeting or incentive program to a new or newly renovated property."

Koleen Roach, Director, Meetings & Conference Management, Securian Financial Group, St. Paul, MN

Lee visited the hotel, with its permission, and recorded a detailed video. “I started out at the front entrance to give a sense of arrival and show the curb appeal as you drive up to the hotel,” says Lee. “I videotaped staff I encountered to see whether they said hello or looked me in the eye to get a feel for the property’s hospitality. I videotaped how a guest would walk into meeting rooms, ballrooms, guest rooms, a restaurant, golf course and spa. Those are the kinds of things planners look at.”

Lee also has videotaped a new property for another corporate planner. “The hotel was giving the planner a low rate, but the client thought it was too good to be true,” says Lee. “So he had me go over there and film



“I videotaped staff I encountered to see whether they said hello or looked me in the eye to get a feel for the property’s hospitality.”

Lynn Lee, Global Sales Director
AlliedPRA San Diego

stay on top as smaller competitors do likewise to compete for meetings and incentives.

The outlook for hotel construction and expansion is bright, partly due to the improving economic performance of properties. Revenue per available room (RevPAR) is expected to rise

within 43 meeting rooms including a separate upscale Executive Conference Center, the 13,768-sf Metropolitan Ballroom hosts up to 2,500 guests and opens into the Central Park Ballroom. One floor up, the 8,715-sf New York Ballroom holds an additional 1,200 guests. About 35,000 sf of event and prefunction space have been redesigned in a classic style similar to glamorous hotel ballrooms of the past. Located between Central Park and Times Square, the hotel also has a fitness center and VIP services.

- The 873-room Westin New York at Times Square has renovated 330 deluxe rooms and 24,000 sf of the property’s 34,000 sf of total meeting and banquet space, which includes three ballrooms as well as 32 meeting and breakout rooms.
- Another high-profile property, the 210-room Park Hyatt New York, will open in 2014 across from Carnegie Hall. The hotel, Hyatt Hotels’ first luxury property in the city, will be part of a 90-story mixed-use project that will include 5,000 sf of retail space.
- In Northern New Jersey, the 427-room Hilton Meadowlands Hotel & Conference Center opened in East Rutherford just in time for Super Bowl XLVIII. The hotel’s 30,000-sf conference center includes a 4,100-sf International Association of Conference Centers certified facilities, two meeting rooms and two ballrooms.

6.6 percent in 2014 and 7.5 percent in 2015, according to the December 2013 Hotel Horizons by PKF Hospitality Research (PKF-HR). As a result, interest in developing and investing in hotels, especially luxury upscale properties, is high, according to PKF-HR.

Here’s a rundown of some construction and renovation projects that are planned or underway.

- In New York City, the 1,781-room Sheraton New York Times Square Hotel has completed a property-wide renovation. With nearly 60,000 sf of flexible space



The redesigned Prairie Room at the Hyatt Regency McCormick Place in Chicago.

the property. It all worked out fine. It turned out that the hotel had holes in their dates and were able to offer a great rate because they wanted to fill them with business.”

Improving Economy Spurs New Builds and Renovations

New hotel construction and renovations continue to grow along with the resurgent economy. Development projects are popping up nationwide in first- and second-tier destinations. Large, established destinations are adding and expanding properties to



One of two nationally ranked golf courses at the new Streamsong Resort near Tampa.

Convention Center, the 484-room hotel will offer 20,000 sf of meeting space, including a 9,000-sf ballroom.

- In Indiana, the 407-room Wyndham Indianapolis West is renovating 35,000 sf of meeting and public space. The property offers some of the largest hotel ballrooms in Indianapolis including the 9,400-sf Hall of Champions, the 8,122-sf Golden Ballroom, the 3,840-sf Fortune Square Ballroom, as well as meeting rooms and dedicated exhibit areas.
- The Omni Nashville Hotel debuted last fall with more than 80,000 sf of meeting and event space, including 15,000-sf and 25,000-sf ballrooms. The 800-room property is adjacent to the 1.2-million-sf Music City Center. The Omni Nashville is connected on three levels to the recently expanded Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum.
- In Texas, the 1,012-room JW Marriott Austin is scheduled to open in early 2015 just two blocks from the Austin Convention Center. The hotel will offer more than 110,000 sf of meeting space. The JW Marriott Austin will seek LEED Silver certification and a two-star Austin Green Energy Building rating.
- Strategically located in the heart of the Art Deco district of South Beach, the Shelborne will be “reborn” this year as Shelborne Wyndham Grand South Beach. The resort’s pool and lounge area leads right up to the boardwalk and a long stretch of beach. The 200-room Shelborne Wyndham Grand will have more than 15,000 sf of meeting and event space, an onsite fitness center and luxury spa suites, as well as an exclusive nightclub. The renowned celebrity chef Iron Chef Morimoto will operate all F&B at the Shelborne Wyndham Grand South Beach including his first outposts in Miami Beach — Morimoto South Beach, the Bistro, The Grill.
- Also in Florida, the 598-room Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa, the largest beachfront resort on Florida’s Northwest Gulf Coast, has completed a \$5 million renovation. The property’s 32,000-sf meeting space features a new beachfront-inspired design. The resort also has the 9,504-sf Emerald Ballroom and 5,600-sf Coral Ballroom with new touchscreen lighting, carpeting, wall treatments and paint. The boardroom features new teleconferencing facilities.
- Located near Tampa, the new Streamsong Resort opened its main lodge in January. The lodge includes a conference center with 14,000 sf of flexible indoor meeting space — creating

- In Chicago, the 1,260-room Hyatt Regency McCormick Place completed a \$110 million expansion and renovation on the existing 800-room tower and added a new 400-room tower. The property has 50,000 sf of in-house function space including the redesigned 4,000-sf Prairie Room. The 25,000-sf Hyatt Conference Center also underwent a complete renovation, and the hotel added three new boardrooms along with a new business center.

- Another Hyatt property, the 2,018-room Hyatt Regency Chicago, also completed a makeover. The hotel now offers 228,000 sf of flexible meeting space, including a 25,000-sf ballroom, 70,000 sf of exhibit space and 15,000 sf of prefunction space.
- Also in Chicago, the Metropolitan Pier and Exposition Authority is building a 1,200-room headquarters hotel next to McCormick Place. Completion is scheduled for late 2016.
- In the Midwest, The Westin Cleveland Downtown, formerly the Crowne Plaza Cleveland City Center, will open in April following a \$64 million renovation. Located a half block from the newly rebuilt Cleveland



Four Seasons Resort Orlando at Walt Disney World Resort will open in 2014.

24,600 sf of total meeting space on the property — and 40,000 sf of outdoor venues. Also, there is 4,500 sf of banquet space in the clubhouse. The property is home to two nationally ranked golf courses, Streamsong Red and Streamsong Blue, which *Golf* magazine called “the best new courses you can play.” There also is a 7,000-sf spa, a lakeside pool and fine dining restaurants.

coverings, seating, light fixtures and carpeting. All ballrooms, prefunction areas, meeting rooms and boardrooms have been completely revitalized with new artwork and golf memorabilia reflective of the entire resort. The Villas at Sawgrass are also available for meetings and breakout rooms for up to

offer a total of 285 rooms. The property features 28,000 sf of indoor and outdoor meeting space, including 17 meeting rooms and the 7,000-sf Grand Ballroom.

- In Colorado Springs, The Broadmoor is completing the



The Broadmoor's renovated Golden Bee and Tavern features British pub fare and spirits, as well as outdoor rooftop dining.

second and final phase of renovations in its \$100 million, multi-year renovation and expansion project, which is slated for completion May 2014. Focusing on the extensive renovation and enhancement of the original Broadmoor West building, the second phase of renovations includes the addition of a new Adam D. Tihany-designed Italian restaurant, renovated and expanded guest rooms, and a new health-inspired restaurant.

- In California, The Ritz-Carlton, Rancho Mirage, formerly the Lodge at Rancho Mirage, will reopen in 2014 with 244 rooms and 16,000 sf of meeting space, including a 8,400-sf ballroom. Located less than 10 miles from Palm Springs, the resort also features 24,000 sf of outdoor meeting space and a 25,000-sf spa.

Competition among hotels and resorts will continue to boost the number of options for planners. As that happens, planners would do well to keep in the mind the following risks and rewards, as outlined by Cleary: “The risks are that the product may not be all it was cracked up to be. The rewards are excitement over experiencing the latest and greatest — being able to say you are the first. Undoubtedly, the rewards far outweigh the risks.”

I&FMM

- 12 people. The resort's use of Marriott Red Coat Direct program ensures that meeting planners have a seamless event.
- In Arizona, the Hilton Sedona Resort & Spa has begun phase one of a \$6 million renovation of the resort lobby, which will include a redesigned layout with additional social and work spaces, the addition of a spa concierge, and new furnishings and finishes from the ground up. The second phase of renovations will include the resort's 219 guest rooms and suites.
- In Colorado, the Sheraton Steamboat Resort & Villas is undergoing an \$8 million renovation that includes 56 new luxury Mountain Suites. The resort will

- In Lake Buena Vista, FL, Four Seasons Resort Orlando at Walt Disney World is under construction in the residential community of Golden Oak, near the Osprey Ridge Golf Course. Slated to open in summer 2014, the 444-room property offers more than 37,000 sf of meeting space, including grand and junior ballrooms with 14,000 sf and 6,000 sf, respectively.
- In Ponte Vedra Beach, FL, Sawgrass Marriott Golf Resort & Spa unveiled the results of a multimillion-dollar, resort-wide renovation project, which involved every aspect of the 63-acre oceanfront resort. The 56,000 sf of flexible and dynamic function space includes new wall

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Conference Centers Uncovered

A Best-Kept Secret No More



Photo courtesy of Cheyenne Mountain Resort

In addition to the IACC-approved 40,000-sf conference center with 38 meeting rooms, the 316-room Cheyenne Mountain Resort, Colorado Springs, CO, boasts 18 holes of championship golf, swimming pools, tennis courts and a 35-acre lake.

Not many meeting industry suppliers would cite the long recession as having benefited their business. But one entire category can — and that is conference centers.

And that doesn't mean traditional hotels that have added "conference center" to their name as a way of attracting more meeting clients. It means dedicated conference center facilities certified by the International

By John Buchanan

Association of Conference Centres (IACC). There are just 350 member facilities in the Americas, Australia/Asia-Pacific, and Europe combined.

During the recession, more and more meeting planners sought out bona fide conference centers as venues because by definition, a significant majority of their total business comes

from meetings — and they offer an all-inclusive pricing model and lower costs that help companies adhere to tight budgets.

Now that the economy has recovered, however, the appeal of conference centers is more universal than ever before, says Mark Cooper, CEO of the Chicago-based IACC.

"Coming out of the economic downturn, we've seen companies in-

vesting more in people and investing more in training," Cooper says. "And conference centers are the perfect facilities for those kinds of meetings."

In fact, he adds, many of the biggest users of conference centers are now Fortune 500 companies that have seen the light.

The distinction between a hotel that simply calls itself a conference center and a facility that meets IACC's certification standards is important.

IACC properties must generate at least 60 percent of their total revenue from meetings, and a minimum of 60 percent of its meeting space must be dedicated, single-purpose space used only for conferences. Very few traditional hotels meet those requirements, including even the most successful major-flag hotels in A-list meeting destinations.

In addition, IACC facilities must offer a package plan rate that includes guest rooms, meeting space, three meals a day, continuous refreshment breaks throughout the day and conference-related technology such as AV.

Because that specific model has proven so popular with planners in recent years, both Marriott and Hilton have developed IACC-approved properties. "They recognize that hotels are not the same as conference centers, so that for those specialized facilities they take IACC certification to reinforce the branding of those properties as legitimate conference centers," Cooper says, noting what he says is the most critical point.

"The single biggest issue for any conference center — the one that I think is more important than any of the others — is the expertise and the skill sets of the people who are supporting your meeting. Conference centers are specialists. And the example I always use in terms of com-

paring them to hotels is that of someone who wants to go buy a laptop computer. Are you going to walk into a Walmart, or are you going to buy from Hewlett-Packard or Apple? Most people today would want to buy from a specialized seller whose entire business is built around a core product. And that scenario is no different when you compare a conference center to a hotel. With a conference center, you're walking into a specialized facility that has a team of people who are completely focused on meetings and conferences."

Susan Murphy, senior program manager at Washington, DC-based International Finance Corporation (IFC), an affiliate of The World Bank, is a loyal, longtime user of conference centers who corroborates Cooper's assertion. Simply because of a conference center's different business model, she believes they are better by definition at hosting meetings and conferences than a traditional hotel.

"The staff at a conference center just typically better understands your needs and the goal of your meeting," Murphy says. "They just get it. And that means that you and your attendees have a superior experience."

The expectation of such an experience from planners is no accident, Cooper says. "At a conference center, you have people that are absolutely passionate about your meeting and who are determined to do everything in their power to make it a success," he says. "And that is also true because

at a conference center, the team understands that their own success is strictly based on putting on exceptional meetings time after time. That's also because unlike hotels, which generally get a lot of different meeting clients over the course of the year, a confer-

"We often use a conference center because that means everything is in place from day one, and we don't have to worry about all those details, such as menus or the setup of meeting space. And AV planning is included."



Joan Orentlicher, CMP
Assistant Vice President, Meetings, Conferences and Travel
LOMA & LIMRA
Atlanta, GA

ence center relies on clients that keep coming back time after time for years and years because of the experiences they've had."

And that describes Murphy to a tee, she says.

Dedicated Meeting Space

One of the things Murphy likes best about genuine conference centers is their truly dedicated meeting space.

"The fact that a conference center has dedicated meeting space, as opposed to using the same space for different functions during the same day or that night if you're not actually holding a session, is a big, big factor for me," she says. "In a hotel, they want to also book that space for other things on the same day or night if you're not using it. And you're never told in advance that another event is going to also be held in your meeting

room. So as you proceed, the sales manager will come up and say, 'Oh, you know, we have a dinner booked in your meeting room for tonight, so you need to clear out.' And that means you have to pack up all of your materials and move out so someone else can have a dinner or event in the same space. When I experienced that for the first time after moving a meeting into a hotel after making a lot of use of conference centers, I was flabbergasted. I said, 'Look, I booked this room for a week.' And they said, 'No, actually you have to put a 24-hour hold on it if you want exclusive use of it.' And let me tell you, that is a problem for me in terms of how hotels do business. If you're holding a real meeting, a real training session, there are a lot of materials and miscellaneous items in your meeting rooms and you don't want to have to tell people we need to clear out of there because there's another event in here tonight."

And the more intensive the meeting, Murphy says, the more important that distinction is.

By comparison, IACC certification requires that multi-day meet-

"With a conference center, you're walking into a specialized facility that has a team of people who are completely focused on meetings and conferences."



Mark Cooper
CEO
IACC
Chicago, IL

ing clients "can safely store materials and equipment overnight in dedicated conference rooms."

But there are other "environmental" factors that are just as important, says Murphy, who is a longtime and frequent user of the 111-room College Park Marriott Hotel and Conference Center located at the University of



The 25th session of the Credit Training Course, a six-week training program offered for IFC's new investment officers and analysts from all over the world, was held at the newly renovated College Park Marriott Hotel and Conference Center.

Maryland. The state-of-the-art facility recently completed a comprehensive one-year renovation.

"We like that particular facility so much because for one thing, it's located on a major college campus," Murphy says. "It's located at a major center of learning. So when you're bringing people in for meeting, it's a very serious meeting, because you're on a college campus. And I just like the feel of that."

Another advantage, she says, is tight security. She often brings in international attendees for her meetings and a safe, secure campus is another perceived benefit of the UM facility.

In addition to that are unique perks, such as attendee use of the state-of-the-art gym facilities. "A lot of our attendees are young and they're into fitness," Murphy says. "So Marriott bought passes for our people to use at the UM athletic complex, which is just unbelievable. It's the same facility Michael Phelps used to train for the Olympics. Our attendees, who come from all over the world, are just amazed by it."

UM also has world-class performing arts facilities, which means easily available entertainment on the weekends.

The Pricing Model

Another key distinction for Murphy is a conference center's pricing mod-

el and billing practices. There is no doubt in her mind, she says, that the all-inclusive pricing of a conference center generates significant bottom-line savings over the cost of a hotel.

But differences in billing are equally as important to her, she says.

"Hotels usually want to separate food and beverage from accommodations," Murphy says. "And that means I am totally bombarded with a lot of separate invoices and constantly being asked to verify all of the charges, particularly for meals. By comparison, when you go to a conference center, everything is built into the price you pay, so you don't have to worry about any of that."

Because she sometimes uses hotels for meetings, Murphy says, she has talked to hotel salespeople about her issue with their billing. "I have said to hotels, 'Just go ahead and put everything on one bill, because that makes things a lot easier for me,'" she says. "But then they say, 'Well, we need that (broken down) information for our purposes, because we track everything by the profits we make.'"

Part of the reason for that is the ever more powerful role of hotel revenue managers, whose primary responsibility is to analyze and maximize the bottom-line profits to be generated from every aspect of a meeting.

Joan Orentlicher, CMP, assistant vice president, meetings, conferences and travel, at Atlanta-based LOMA & LIMRA, which represents

the interests of insurance companies and offers research and educational services to financial companies, is another frequent user of a particular conference center — the Atlanta Marriott Buckhead Hotel & Conference Center, which added the only IACC-certified conference center in Buckhead and features 25,000 sf of IACC-certified conference space.

Like Murphy, Orentlicher says that the primary benefit she sees is knowing the exact total cost of a meeting, per attendee, in advance. That's important to Orentlicher because her attendees typically pay their own way to the meeting and are looking for a fixed cost that also delivers good value.

"And for me, as the planner, that means that because everything we want is streamlined into a single price, that is just very convenient," says Orentlicher, adding that she also finds the contracting process simpler and easier with a conference center.

Tech Savvy

In addition to pricing and overall service benefits, Cooper says, conference centers also provide superior technology support — again because meetings are their core business.

Because hotels now typically farm out technology services such as AV to third-party vendors — and also mark them up significantly — conference centers are designed to do a better job, often at a lower cost.

"And our members not only deliver leading edge technology, but they include that in a complete meeting package, which means that everything that is necessary for a productive meeting is included in a single price," Cooper says. "Planners know exactly what they're paying. And unlike with a hotel, they're also not paying anything for basic adjustments to what they require if their needs change a bit."

Murphy agrees that the tech-savvy staff members at the College Park Marriott Hotel and Conference Center

are among the reasons she keeps going back. "And for me, it's really about the support more than the actual technology," she says. "And part of that is, because AV and related technology is so expensive now, both at hotels and conference centers, we will often bring our own equipment. And we get beautiful support from conference centers. Everybody knows what they're doing and what we want. But when you go to a hotel you don't always get that level of support."

In addition, because conference centers have the equipment and staff in-house, it is billed out at a fixed cost, rather than being marked up, which means cost savings. "These days, when we do use a hotel, we find that they farm out their AV," Murphy says. "And boy is it pricey. So that is just another big, big difference between conference centers and hotels."

Although Orentlicher concurs with Murphy's assessment of the basic benefits of a conference center, she adds



The newly named College Park Marriott Hotel and Conference Center's library and business center are two of the many new and updated features of the property, which is adjacent to the University of Maryland and convenient to metro Washington, DC.



Eaglewood Resort & Spa, located in the suburbs of Chicago, completed a renovation of its conference center and upgraded to accommodate up to 100 Mbps of bandwidth.

one more that is of particular importance to her — planner peace of mind.

“We do about 200 meetings a year and we have eight staff members to manage those meetings,” she says. “And of those 200, about 60 are the kinds of small meetings we do, the ones we often hold at conference centers. Small meetings can be as labor-intensive as a large meeting. So to reduce the demand on our internal resources to do these small meetings, we often use a conference center, because that means everything is in place from day one and we don’t have to worry about all those details, such as menus or the setup of meeting space. And AV planning is included, and that something that can get very complicated.”

So, she says, in the end, the biggest benefit of a conference center is simply a streamlined and more efficient, worry-free planning process.

The Future Is Here

Precisely because conference centers got a boost for their business model during and since the recession, there has been some new construction, as well as recently completed renovations at some major facilities.

Last year, Dolce Hotels & Resorts added a new property to its highly-respected conference center portfolio, the 146-room The Alexander in downtown Indianapolis. The property — the first LEED-certified and IACC-sanctioned hotel in Indiana — also features 10 junior suites, 36

one-bedroom residential studios, 16 two-bedroom residential suites and a presidential suite.

Meanwhile, Benchmark Hospitality International — another leading operator of major conference centers — completed renovations at a trio of its properties: the 316-room, extremely popular Cheyenne Mountain Resort in Colorado Springs; the 199-room The Chattanooga Hotel in Chattanooga, TN, the only AAA Four Diamond property and IACC-certified property in town; and the 294-room Eaglewood Resort & Spa in Chicago.

As physical improvement of IACC facilities continues in 2014, the industry is also now aiming for even more innovation designed to generate even more interest and loyalty from meeting planners, Cooper says.

“For example, one of the biggest trends we’re seeing is demand for more innovation in terms of setting up rooms and creating environments,” he says. “By that I mean new ideas in terms of how the rooms are set up or the style of the meeting. That means planners want more flexibility now in terms of how the experience is created for attendees.”

And, Cooper says, that in turn goes to the larger trend of so-called meeting architecture and new research into brain science and learning. As a result, he says, no longer is there a narrowly defined sense of how to set up meeting rooms or execute sessions.

“Nobody wants their meeting to

be exactly like the last one anymore,” Cooper says. “They want something different. They want something new. And our members are always willing to work with a planner to develop and deliver that. They don’t just say, ‘Well, here are our four- or five-room configurations. Pick one.’”

A debate has also begun recently about the time-tested and fairly standard conference center pricing model.

A new survey released in December by PHG Research, a division of Pompan Hospitality Global, reported that many conference center managers now perceive a need to adjust meeting packages to better reflect evolving customer preferences.

For example, facility managers cited growing interest from meeting clients in a modified meeting package (MMP) that would provide more flexibility than the longstanding complete meeting package (CMP) currently in widespread practice.

One reason: Almost half of responding properties in the PHG survey said that the complete meeting package (CMP) represents less than 10 percent of the packages they sell.

As a result, a number of major conference centers had already made an adjustment to their pricing structure long before the new survey was released.

For example, Orentlicher has for some time opted for a package that includes only breakfast and lunch, because attendees at her meetings prefer to have dinner at some of Atlanta’s acclaimed local restaurants as an amenity that makes the meeting more fun.

Meanwhile, Orentlicher says, she is a little bit dismayed that conference centers have recently become such an increasingly popular option for meeting planners. “It used to be very easy for us to book the Marriott Buckhead facility,” she says. “But now it’s getting harder to get space when we need it. So that’s why I wasn’t sure I wanted to talk about it, because of until now it’s kind of been our little secret. But now it’s getting very busy. It’s not our little secret anymore.”

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Photo courtesy of Eaglewood Resort & Spa



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No tie (or shoes) required for beach events like this one at a Sandals resort. The Sandals Luxury Meetings & Incentives Collection offers nine all-inclusive luxury resorts in six Caribbean countries.

Amber Finken, is incentive trip coordinator for the Missouri Valley, IA-based insurance marketing organization Western Marketing, a company that has sponsored many incentive trips to sunny destinations. She says that the best one yet was the six day, five night agent trip to St. Thomas she recently planned for approximately 100 attendees.

U.S. Virgin Islands

The program got off to a strong start. “We had a very positive reaction overall to the announcement of St. Thomas as our 2013 incentive trip destination,” she explains. “The majority of our attendees prefer to travel to warm weather/beach destinations, and we had several people tell us the Virgin Islands were on their travel bucket list. A lot of people were also intrigued by the fact they would be able to island hop to other islands nearby and have

the chance to explore several different destinations in one trip.”

She described other factors that made St. Thomas a good choice for the program. “First of all, St. Thomas is very easy to get to with a plethora of flight options available.

We were able to get almost all of our attendees to the Virgin Islands and back with only one flight connection or less, making individual travel very quick and easy. Secondly, St. Thomas and the Virgin Islands offered an endless array of activities for our attendees to enjoy. From golf to deep-sea fishing to shopping to island hopping over to nearby St. John or the British Virgin Islands, there were plenty of opportunities available for everyone. And last but not least, both the scenery and cuisine of St. Thomas are unmatched throughout the entire Caribbean.”

Western Marketing chose the 450-

room Frenchman’s Reef & Morning Star Marriott Beach Resort as the site of the program. Finken explains why. “Having just recently finished a \$48 million renovation, Frenchman’s Reef was an easy choice to host our event.

The completely remodeled guest rooms and common areas made our guests feel like they were staying at a brand new resort. The event space offered at the Marriott was exactly what we were looking for, and our cocktail party on Morningstar Beach was a huge hit among our attendees. The onsite destination management company (Adventure Center) was a welcome convenience for anyone wanting to book excursions or tours, and the hotel shuttle and water taxi made nearby downtown Charlotte Amalie easily accessible.”

The Frenchman’s Reef renovation project took six months and was completed in late 2011. In addition to trans-

forming the resort’s exterior and all guest rooms, the construction project included the 4,000-sf Lazule Sea Spa. The beachfront resort, which is located just six miles from Cyril E. King Airport, offers stunning views of Charlotte Amalie Harbor. The property’s accommodations are divided into two areas: the Frenchman’s Reef Tower and the Morning Star Beach Club.

Western Marketing’s agenda for the St. Thomas trip offered a balance of free time and group events. “As a reward for their hard work and dedication to earn the trip they’ve qualified for, we allow our attendees to spend plenty of time at the destination on their own,” Finken notes. “However, we typically host at least two mandatory events: a welcome cocktail party (usually on the beach), and a farewell dinner accompanied by a short awards presentation. Our cocktail parties on the beach are always a big hit as we keep both the dress and the mood very light and casual. We also usually set one day or night aside and plan some kind of optional event our guests can either choose to attend or decline, whichever they prefer. In St. Thomas we arranged for a group to take the ferry over to the neighboring island of St. John for the day. We also had groups take night kayaking tours, play a few rounds of golf and even do a little deep-sea fishing.

“St. Thomas was our best trip yet for many reasons,” she concludes. “The weather was beautiful the whole week, travel arrangements were all made smoothly and on time, and our overall attendance was the most we’ve ever had. All of our events were 100 percent attended by our guests, and we were given rave reviews by several of our attendees. The Virgin Islands turned out to be a home run for us, and we definitely wouldn’t hesitate to go back!”

The Bahamas

Kevin Dern, operations manag-

er for Lexington Group, is planning a springtime incentive trip to The Bahamas for a large insurance and investment company. He cites “easy airlift” and “great weather” as two of the factors that make this island nation a great incentive destination. He adds, “The currency is tied to U.S. currency, so one U.S. dollar always equals one Bahamian dollar, which makes it easy and affordable for travelers.”

The property chosen for the program is Atlantis, Paradise Island, a sprawling, ocean-themed resort with 2,917 guest rooms including the 600-room Cove Atlantis resort within the resort; a



Amber Finken, Incentive Trip Coordinator
Western Marketing, Missouri Valley, IA

497-key condo-hotel; and the largest open-air marine habitat in the world. It also is home to Aquaventure, which is described as a “non-stop water experience” featuring multiple waterslides and a mile-long river ride. Atlantis also is a culinary destination offering restaurants by world-renowned chefs such as Nobu Matsuhisa, Jean-Georges Vongerichten, Bobby Flay and Todd English. Atlantis provides more than 500,000 sf of indoor and outdoor meeting space.

Dern’s program has so many qualifiers that they will arrive in two waves of 350 attendees each. “Atlantis resort is perfect for big groups,” he notes. “Without Atlantis, we wouldn’t have considered The Bahamas for a group this size. Guests can spend most of their time at Atlantis, which cuts down on the need to find activities and the cost of offsite activities.”

The attendees will stay at The Cove Atlantis. All rooms at The Cove are oversized and feature step-down living spaces. “I definitely want to provide our group with all the perks that come with being at a large resort —

variety of restaurants, activities, pools and beaches, as well as experience handling large groups. Being at The Cove allows us to offer the Atlantis experience to our guests and still have the feeling of a luxury hotel. Each room is a mini-suite with a sitting area, and all rooms have a water view, so all of our guests will feel like VIPs.”

They’ll also have plenty of free time. “I find that at a sun and fun destination, people just want time on their own to relax,” Dern states. “We have group dinners planned for three of the five program nights, and breakfast is provided daily. Other than that, guests are on their own.”

Dern says that for groups consid-

“The Virgin Islands turned out to be a home run for us, and we definitely wouldn’t hesitate to go back!”

ering Atlantis, doing a site inspection is a must. “Atlantis is enormous, and there’s a lot to see, and there’s quite a difference between the various Atlantis towers.

“Transportation in Nassau (and Paradise Island) is a little different than in most other destinations,” he continues. “Although there are a few full-size coach buses available, they are older vehicles, more expensive to confirm and less reliable. Most group transportation in Nassau is in 22-passenger minibuses. There are a ton of these on the island, and the best providers have vehicles that are relatively new (luggage travels in separate vehicles). In a destination like this, I would definitely recommend using a DMC to manage transportation.”

The Sandals Luxury Meetings & Incentives Collection includes nine properties, two of which are located in The Bahamas. The 245-room Sandals Emerald Bay in Great Exuma is set on 500 acres and is fronted by a mile-long white sand beach. The 403-room Sandals Royal Bahamian in Nassau has its own offshore island. In 2012,

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the property completed a \$17.5 million renovation of its Balmoral Tower, which included all new rooms and suites with oversized balconies. The project also added new walkout suites and a state-of-the-art penthouse gym.

Lynette Owens is president of Lynette Owens & Associates, a hotel representation, site selection, meeting and incentive company based in Rancho Santa Fe, CA. Her firm helped its client Baltimore Life book the Sandals Royal Bahamian for an upcoming program in 2015. "I'm a big advocate of that Sandals property because it's so nice," Owens says. "It's so all-inclusive, literally, that you don't even have to leave the property. It doesn't have golf, but you can certainly get to golf. The beach is beautiful and they have butler service. It's over the top and yet it's affordable."

She explained that Sandals has several different room categories and that not all come with butler service. "I have experienced the butler service rooms and they are affordable." She added that since Nassau is so close to Miami and has good airlift, it's more affordable than other Caribbean destinations that are farther away.

Baltimore Life used another Sandals property, the 524-room Sandals Grande Riviera in Ocho Rios, Jamaica, for its 2013 program. Laura Moser, sales support coordinator who plans the incentive programs for Baltimore Life, describes what she likes about Sandals resorts. "The service is phenomenal, and a lot of options for dining and activities are included. You get so much more for your dollar." The company's incentive programs typically have around 100 attendees.

Moser said that she also looked at another Nassau property for her 2015 program, but that the all-inclusive nature of Sandals Royal Bahamian won out. "It's in a beautiful location, and in your price per person, you get your transfers, you get your meals, you get



Western Marketing attendees enjoy a cocktail reception at St. Peter GreatHouse & Botanical Gardens in St. Thomas, USVI.

different water activities. It also has its own private little island, so it's almost like you get two (destinations) in one." She explained that the private island is just a short boat ride away and offers dining and spa treatments.

Sandals Royal Bahamian has 404 guest rooms and suites, and more than 14,000 sf of meeting space.

The Bahamian Riviera

The end of 2014 will mark the opening of the largest single-phase luxury resort project in the history of the Caribbean when the \$3.5 billion Baha Mar makes its debut. Being touted as "the Bahamian Riviera," the oceanfront complex will include Baha Mar Casino & Hotel offer-



Kevin Dern, Operations Manager Lexington Group Inc., St. Louis, MO

ing 1,000 guest rooms, the 200-room Rosewood at Baha Mar, the 300-room Mondrian at Baha Mar and the 700-room Grand Hyatt at Baha Mar. The nearby 694-room Melia Nassau Beach Resort will undergo a complete makeover that will be completed by the

end of 2014. The resort, which will remain open during the renovation, will be renamed Melia at Baha Mar. The Baha Mar development also will include Royal Blue Golf Club at Baha Mar, a Jack Nicklaus Signature Golf course; The Racquet Club at Baha Mar; and a destination spa called ESPA at Baha Mar. "Baha Mar is really going to put (the Bahamas) on the map when they're finished. It's going to be amazing," Owens states.

Owens adds that Nassau has an "incredible" airport (Lynden Pindling International Airport). "You clear customs in Nassau (on the way home), so that's another really good feature. You just get there early enough and you clear customs, so when you get back to the U.S., you don't have to do that

"Most group transportation in Nassau is in 22-passenger minibuses. ...In a destination like this, I would definitely recommend using a DMC to manage transportation."

at whatever gateway you're going to or your final destination."

Dominican Republic

Top achievers generally love to be treated like rock stars when they earn an incentive trip, and the Hard Rock

Hotel & Casino Punta Cana makes that easy. This all-inclusive beachfront resort offers 1,787 rooms, a 65,500-sf convention center, nine restaurants, 19 bars and lounges, 12 pools, a casino, spa, Jack Nicklaus golf course and Oro, the top nightclub in the Dominican Republic. Every room is a suite that includes a Jacuzzi, a premium liquor dispenser and 24-hour room service. Attendees will be happy to know that any calls they make from their room to the U.S. and Canada are free of charge.

For groups that like to pack a lot of outdoor activities into their programs, the luxurious Casa de Campo resort in La Romana will fit the bill. Set on 7,000 acres, this all-inclusive resort offers a choice of private villas or hotel accommodations, three Pete

The Ritz-Carlton, Aruba opened in November. Set on the island's beautiful Palm Beach, the hotel offers 320 guest rooms all offering private balconies and views of the Caribbean; a 7,500-sf ballroom; multiple outdoor event venues; and 24-hour casino.

Puerto Rico

Puerto Rico also is reaching out to planners, touting its 1.3 million sf of meeting space, more than 14,000 guest rooms and world-class Puerto Rico Convention Center. In December, Meet Puerto Rico, the island's CVB, welcomed 86 planners to its second annual four-day Puerto Rico Showcase & Travel Expo. The event included site visits to several properties

"I'm a big advocate of (Sandals Royal Bahamian). ...It's so all-inclusive, literally, that you don't even have to leave the property. It's over the top and yet it's affordable."



Lynette Owens, President Lynette Owens & Associates, Rancho Santa Fe, CA

Dye-designed golf courses, tennis, polo, horseback riding, water sports and a 245-acre shooting facility. For memorable cocktail receptions and dinners, the resort offers Altos de Chavon, a replica of a 16th century Mediterranean village complete with cobblestone streets and spectacular views from its cliff-top setting.

Aruba

After a four-year, multiple-phase overhaul, Aruba Marriott Resort & Stellaris Casino has enhanced its property with a \$1.5 million revamp to its 8,435-sf Grand Ballroom. The updated ballroom is divisible into four salons and can accommodate up to 800 guests. The property boasts 411 guest rooms, each with large, private balconies, seven F&B options, the largest casino in Aruba, a 6,500-sf spa, free-form swimming pool, the new H2Oasis adults-only pool and high-energy health club.

and an educational seminar on using social media to promote meetings.

The 580,000-sf Puerto Rico Convention Center (PRCC) is the largest facility of its kind in the Caribbean, and groups have a wide choice of hotels nearby, including the city's largest hotel, the 910-room Caribe Hilton, which offers 65,000 sf of meeting space. In 2012, the property completed the first phase of an \$8 million renovation project. The second phase of the project includes a kosher banquet kitchen, renovated ballrooms and upgrades to the hotel's Condado Lagoon Villas.

The 126-room Hyatt House San Juan is expected to open in 2014, making it the first Hyatt House to open in the Caribbean. A 252-room Courtyard by Marriott is currently in the planning stages.

The first phase of the Bahia Urbana project, which links the PRCC District to Old San Juan, was completed in

May. It includes a park-like promenade along San Juan Harbor, an open-air restaurant, an amphitheater and water taxis.

The Puerto Rico Convention Bureau reports that five of its member properties were named to Cvent's list of the 100 Most Popular Meeting Resorts in 2013. They are Caribe Hilton; El Conquistador, A Waldorf Astoria Resort; Gran Melia Golf Resort Puerto Rico; Wyndham Grand Rio Mar Beach Resort & Spa; and The Ritz-Carlton, San Juan.

Set on a cliff-top on the northeastern tip of Puerto Rico, the 750-room El Conquistador Resort, a Waldorf Astoria Resort, is located just 31 miles from San Juan's Luis Muñoz Marin International Airport. The resort offers views of both the Atlantic and the Caribbean, as well as a wide range of amenities, including the award-winning Arthur Hills golf course, the 2.5 acre seaside Coqui Water Park, seven pools, a private marina and the 26,000-sf Waldorf Astoria Spa. Guests also can enjoy water sports and horseback riding on Palomino Island, the resort's private, 100-acre getaway. Excursions to the nearby El Yunque rainforest, a popular destination for hiking and viewing the island's rich biodiversity, also can be easily arranged.

El Conquistador also contains an enclave of private villas called Las Casitas Village, a collection of 157 one- to three-bedroom luxury casitas that offer ocean views and personalized butler service.

Delectable Destinations

Island destinations offer an endless number of ways to reward top achievers and leave a good taste in their mouths: "Definitely check out the Fish Fry in Nassau," Dern advises. "I (also) recommend Twin Brothers and suggest getting conch fritters, fried grouper with peas and rice, fried plantains and macaroni! Best meal in the Bahamas!"

I&FMM



The New Orleans skyline.

Photo by Alex Demyan/NewOrleansOnline.com

Rediscover

New Orleans

'There's No Other Place Like It in America'

By John Buchanan

By now, there aren't many meeting planners who are not familiar with the formidable reputation New Orleans enjoys as a singular and spectacular destination for both meetings and incentive programs. And it is particularly popular with insurance and financial planners — so much so that FICP will come to town again this year when it hosts an educational conference there this summer.

The primary reasons why the Crescent City is so wildly popular are its people and hospitality, says Emily Coia, conference director at Metairie, LA-based Jefferson Financial, which has been hosting its annual New Orleans Investment Conference for about 1,000 attendees there each October for 40 years.

"New Orleans is a unique city," Coia says. "When you're there, you just know you're in a place that's not like any other city. It feels totally

unique because it is." And playing major roles in that uniqueness equation are the city's legendary local food and music scenes.

Diane Lyons, CMP, DMCP, owner and president of top local destination management company Accent on Arrangements, a DMC Network company, notes that New Orleans also delivers a big helping of something harder and harder to find these days — authenticity. "We are the real deal," Lyons says. "The culture of New Orleans is unique to New Orleans. There's no other place like it in America. We also have the best food and music in the country."

The city's temperate climate is also a key factor in its success, Lyons says. "We are a year-round destination that

offers a good alternative to places like Florida and Southern California in the winter," she says. "Our 'winter' season, which is October through April, is really spectacular, because we have warm, sunny days so often. The weather has been a huge factor in our success as a meeting destination. And we don't talk about that enough."

Shane Watkins, CMP, SMMC, di-



"New Orleans is a unique city. When you're there, you just know you're in a place that's not like any other city. It feels totally unique because it is."

Emily Coia
Conference Director
Jefferson Financial
Metairie, LA

rector of travel at Alfa Insurance in Montgomery, AL, is another loyal long-time user of New Orleans. He cites a benefit not usually associated with the city. "One of the things that is often missed about New Orleans is that it is a family destination," says Watkins, who has been using the destination for at least one meeting each year for the 12 years he has been on the job. "There are a lot of things to do there for families. It gets more attention for its nightlife scene and that's great, too. But we take families there all the time and they love it."

Watkins adds that in the tight-budget, post-recession era, the value proposition New Orleans offers is another big factor in Alfa Insurance's loyalty. "The hotel rates," he says, "are consistently better than we get in other major destinations we go to."

Hotel Inventory

Aside from the value it offers, New Orleans also boasts a broad and diverse hotel inventory built to accommodate the many major citywide association conventions it hosts each year.

"We have a lot of great hotels," Lyons says. "And like the city itself, a number of them are unique to New Orleans. And they're all within walking distance of the French Quarter. That's one of the things people like best about the city. You can walk ev-

erywhere. So for planners that means you're not putting people on a bus and incurring those costs or making attendees travel anywhere. That's another huge factor in our success."

Among the most important hotels to return from the severe damage done by Hurricane Katrina is the AAA Four Diamond Hyatt Regency New Orleans, which reopened in late 2011 after a \$287 million rebuilding.

Among the city's most unique properties are the Hotel Monteleone, located in the heart of the French Quarter, and The Roosevelt New Orleans, a Waldorf-Astoria Hotel and another famous landmark located just outside the French Quarter off Canal Street.

"The Hotel Monteleone is not only spectacular," Lyons says. "It's one of the few family-owned hotels left in the country." The hotel completed a major renovation in 2012.

The Roosevelt debuted a new dining room and bar last year.

The fact that New Orleans hosted the 2013 Super Bowl at the Mercedes-Benz Superdome prompted a citywide wave of hotel renovations that meant virtually every major hotel in town has undergone a facelift within the last 18 months. In addition to the Hyatt

Regency New Orleans, other significant redos include a \$20 million renovation of the Hyatt French Quarter; a \$38 million renovation of the Marriott New Orleans; a \$15 million renovation of the Omni Royal Orleans; a \$30 million renovation of the W Hotel New Orleans; and an extensive renovation of the Royal Sonesta Hotel New



"We are well known for our dine-around programs in New Orleans. It's one of the best places on earth to do a dine-around program."

Shane Watkins CMP, DMCP
Director of Travel
Alfa Insurance
Montgomery, AL

Orleans, one of the most cherished properties in the French Quarter. The Loews New Orleans Hotel will complete a major renovation this year.

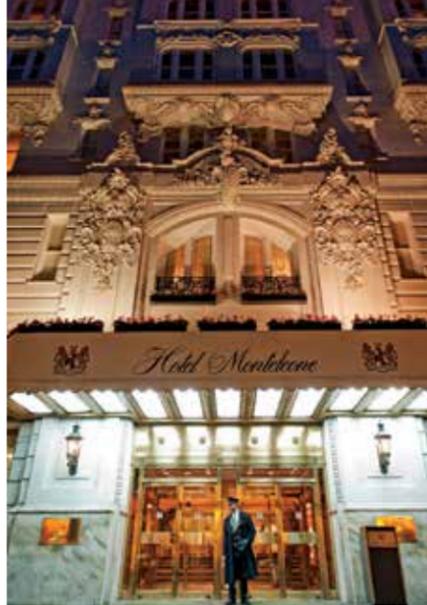
As his hotel of choice, Watkins has favored the Hilton New Orleans Riverside for more than a decade. "That's our favorite hotel in the city," he says. "And we've used it for 90 percent of our meetings in New Orleans over the 12 years I've been planning them."

Why so popular? “The hotel has great sleeping rooms and great meeting space,” Watkins says. “And the room rates we get there are also very competitive. The riverboats are parked on the Mississippi right outside the hotel, and Audubon Aquarium and the French Quarter are in walking distance.”

Coia has used the property for the last four years for her annual conference. “The size is perfect for us,” she says. “And the staff is very familiar with our event. We also have a lot of repeat, and they’re really familiar with the hotel and know their way around, so that’s another plus.”

The hotel, which completed a \$20 million renovation in 2012, also has just the right configuration of meeting space for Coia’s event, she says.

Wendy Powell, assistant director of marketing at Medical Assurance Company of Mississippi in Ridgeland, MS, has hosted the last three of the company’s biannual continuing medical education conferences in New Orleans in 2009, 2011 and last year.



The Hotel Monteleone completed a major renovation in 2012.

Photo courtesy of Hotel Monteleone

She used the landmark Windsor Court Hotel in 2009. “I give it an A+,” she says. “We picked it because in addition to being able to do a good educational meeting, we wanted a nice boutique hotel that would appeal to our physicians. And they all know the reputation of the Windsor Court, so it was an easy sell to our attendees. And we also got a very good room rate.”

Windsor Court completed a \$22 million renovation in 2012.

In 2011, Powell used the Hotel Monteleone. “We had outgrown the Windsor Court, and we needed to move to a hotel with larger meeting facilities,” she says. “But we still wanted a ‘boutique’ feel so we could feel like a small group. And Hotel Monteleone was great.”

Last year, she opted for the Sheraton New Orleans. “For the third meeting, as attendance grew, we said, ‘OK, if we’re really going to do this meeting in New Orleans for the third time, we really need to do it right,’” Powell says. “So we decided on a corporate-level meeting hotel. We wanted a bigger hotel that could accommodate a bigger meeting. And the Sheraton also offers a great location, on Canal Street right by the French Quarter. It’s right in the middle of everything. And people can walk everywhere.”

The Sheraton New Orleans Hotel completed a \$50 million renovation last year.

The Fabled Dining Scene

Although the city is also famous for its music — it was the birthplace of jazz — its renowned roster of local restaurants is the big draw for meeting planners and attendees.

“When you go to New Orleans, you go to eat,” Powell says with a laugh. “The quality of the restaurants is always a great excuse to go there.”

The extraordinary quality of New Orleans food is another major reason why Watkins and Alfa Insurance go there so regularly. “The restaurants are absolutely off-the-chart good,” he says. “And there’s an endless list of options.”

Watkins often creates dine-around programs. “We are well known for our dine-around programs in New Orleans,” he says. “It’s one of the best places on earth to do a dine-around program. But if it’s an incentive program, we allow people the opportunity to go out on their own and find a good restaurant they like. We also recommend restaurants so people know the very best places to go.”

Lyons strongly recommends dine-around programs for planners who want to deliver the penultimate New Orleans experience. “We do a dine-around for almost every program we do,” she says. “It’s just the best way to really take advantage of the city’s dining scene. And you can choose hot and trendy new restaurants, or classic places.”

The hottest new restaurant at the moment is Tableau, located near the Royal Sonesta Hotel, Lyons says. “It’s classic New Orleans food and it’s really spectacular,” Lyons says.

Another super-hot and spectacular new restaurant is Restaurant R’evolution, which opened in the Royal Sonesta 18 months ago. It specializes in sophisticated modern interpretations of classic New Orleans fare.

“We love R’evolution,” Coia says. In fact, Jefferson Financial held its 2012 Christmas party there.

A longtime favorite of meeting groups is Commander’s Palace, in the Garden District, where a number of future celebrity chefs including Paul



Chris Burke & His New Orleans Music entertained attendees at Jefferson Financial’s New Orleans Investment Conference.

Photo by Pat Garth Photographer

Prudhomme and Emeril Lagasse got their starts.

And perhaps the most famous local eatery of all is legendary Galatoire’s Restaurant on Bourbon Street in the French Quarter. “I adore Galatoire’s,” Lyons says. “It’s my favorite place. It’s so New Orleans.”

She also highly recommends Drago’s Seafood Restaurant, in the Hilton New Orleans Riverside, for its take on a New Orleans specialty, chargrilled oysters. “They do chargrilled oysters that are to die for,” Lyons says.

Sunday jazz brunches are also popular for groups that are in town for the weekend. “And Commander’s Palace offers one of the best,” Lyons notes.

Offsite Venues

New Orleans also can claim a robust and eclectic assortment of offsite venues, ranging from small and intimate to large enough for thousands of attendees.

One of Lyons’ favorites is Mardi Gras World, a vast complex where Mardi Gras floats are actually created. “You can do events there for up to 4,000 people, but it’s also a great

venue for small groups,” Lyons says. In the Mardi Gras Den, attendees can see where floats are made.

Watkins experienced the venue last year when he worked with Lyons and Accent on Arrangements, which has been Alfa’s DMC for more than 20 years, to stage a spectacular evening. “We set up a Mardi Gras parade with a marching band and our people on floats, and we marched from the Hilton Riverside to Mardi Gras World, where we had dinner, and then back



“Once you discover (New Orleans), you love it. That’s always been true. And it’s truer than ever now.”

Diane Lyons, CMP, DMCP
Owner and President
Accent on Arrangements
New Orleans, LA

to the hotel,” Watkins says. “It was just an amazing experience. Our attendees loved it.”

Watkins used that experience to also characterize the creativity and support he gets from Lyons and her



The scene on Bourbon Street during the 2013 Super Bowl.

Photo by Kathy Anderson Photography/New Orleans CVB



team. "I've been working with them for the entire 12 years I've been here," he says. "They just do a fantastic job for us."

Lyons offers some additional recommendations on the offsite venues she considers the most unique and exciting in the city.

"The World War II Museum is another great one," she says. "And it's great because it offers so many options. It's also a unique venue. And the food is fabulous. It's a truly unique complex."

Another of her favorites is the Louisiana State Museum complex at Jackson Square, which includes the historical landmark where the Louisiana Purchase

was signed and an adjacent building known as the Presbytere, which sits next to famous St. Louis Cathedral. "That was originally built as a house for the priest," Lyons says. Both individual venues and the entire complex are available.

The Old U.S. Mint on the edge of the French Quarter is another unique



A New Orleans-themed event created by Accent on Arrangements DMC.

Photo courtesy of Accent on Arrangements

tions there with cocktails and hors d'oeuvres and live music before heading out to dinner.

Another excellent option is one of the historic homes in the French Quarter. "There are fabulous homes that are museums today that can be used as offsite venues," Lyons says. "One is Madame John's Legacy, which is small but spectacular. It's one of the oldest buildings in the Mississippi Valley."

The Old Ursuline Convent is another fantastic, little-known venue that Lyons often uses.

Making It Easy to Meet in the Big Easy

Yet another advantage of doing a meeting in New Orleans is its highly respected convention and visitors bureau, which garners rave reviews from planners who work with it.

"When we decided to use New Orleans for the first time back in 2009, I thought I'd have to get on the phone and start doing some work," Powell says. "But I contacted the CVB first, and within a few days, I had a response back that they were following up. And within a matter of days, I started getting responses from hotels and restaurants saying,

'Please come to New Orleans.' So that just made the process very easy for me."

The immediate support she got from the CVB played a major role in her decision to go back in 2011 and again last year.

"They just made it so easy to come to New Orleans," Powell says. "They went out of their way to give me a variety of hotels to choose from. And any question I had, I would just email them, and they would reply immediately. The service I got in 2009 was unmatched by any experience I've ever had. I couldn't believe how easy they were to work with and what

a great job they did. And especially how quickly they responded when I needed help. They also made me feel like my meeting was the most important meeting going on in New Orleans, even though I only had a couple of hundred attendees."

Better Than Ever

When Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans in August 2005, many experts questioned whether the city itself — much less its meeting and convention industry — would ever recover.

In 2014, the message for meeting planners, Coia says, is that not only is New Orleans back, but it is better than ever.

Lyons wholeheartedly agrees. "For example, before the storm we had about 700 restaurants," she says. "Now we have 1,400. And dining is an integral part of the New Orleans experience. Music is, too. There's live music everywhere, whether that's in restaurants and clubs or out in the street. And you won't find friendlier people anywhere. So we're back and things are better than they've ever been."

Any meeting planner who has not yet discovered the joys of New Orleans should come for a visit, Lyons says. "Once you discover it, you love it. That's always been true. And it's truer than ever now." **I&FMM**



Wendy Powell
Assistant Director of Marketing
Medical Assurance Company of Mississippi
Ridgeland, MS

and spectacular venue, Lyons says. "It's a fabulous building with a beautiful jazz theater in it and also an entire exhibit about the history of jazz."

Yet another superb venue is historic Preservation Hall, where catered events can be hosted before or after dinner and include the legendary Preservation Hall Jazz Band. Lyons likes to do pre-dinner recep-

The CVB "made me feel like my meeting was the most important meeting going on in New Orleans, even though I only had a couple of hundred attendees."



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GAETA

Gus Tejada was named director of resort sales for The Omni Grove Park Inn, Asheville, NC. He most recently was the vice president of group sales for Atlantis, Paradise Island, Bahamas.

Colleen Brzozowski was named Midwest regional director of sales at KSL Resorts. She was director of sales at Grand Traverse Resort and Spa, Traverse City, MI.

Nicole Decocq was promoted to director of sales at Kiawah Island Golf Resort, Kiawah Island, SC, responsible for the mid-Atlantic market. She was small meetings manager for the resort.

David Friedberg was named director of sales and marketing for Bonaventure Resort & Spa, Fort Lauderdale, FL. He was most recently director of sales for The Kalahari Resort of Sandusky, OH.

The Sheraton New York Times Square Hotel, New York, NY, has appointed **Jesse Suglia** as director of sales and marketing. He was director, travel industry and international sales, at Omni Hotels & Resorts, Kempinski Hotels and The Global Hotel Alliance.

Joyce M. Martinez was appointed vice president, business development and sales for Meet Puerto Rico. She was director of research and business development for the organization.

The Westin Hilton Head Island Resort & Spa, Hilton Head Island, SC, has named **Mike Drinkwalter** as sales manager responsible for the Northeast region and Canada. He was a national sales manager with Peabody Hotels.

Tina O'Keefe-Holly was named sales manager responsible for the Midwest region. She was sales manager for

the Sheraton Nassau Beach Resort & Casino, Nassau, The Bahamas.

Melia Hotels International has named **Brandi Ronk** as director of group sales for their global collection of hotels and resorts. She formerly was director of operations for Maritz Travel.

The InterContinental New York Barclay, New York, NY, has named **Joseph Gaeta** as director of sales. He was general manager of the Benjamin Hotel, New York, NY.

Alvin Wong was appointed director of sales and marketing for the Wailea Beach Marriott Resort & Spa on Maui and the Waikoloa Beach Marriott Resort & Spa on Hawaii Island. He was the director of sales and marketing for the Sheraton Princess Kaiulani Hotel in Waikiki. **I&FMM**

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